

Who Walk in Fear



NEIL BELL

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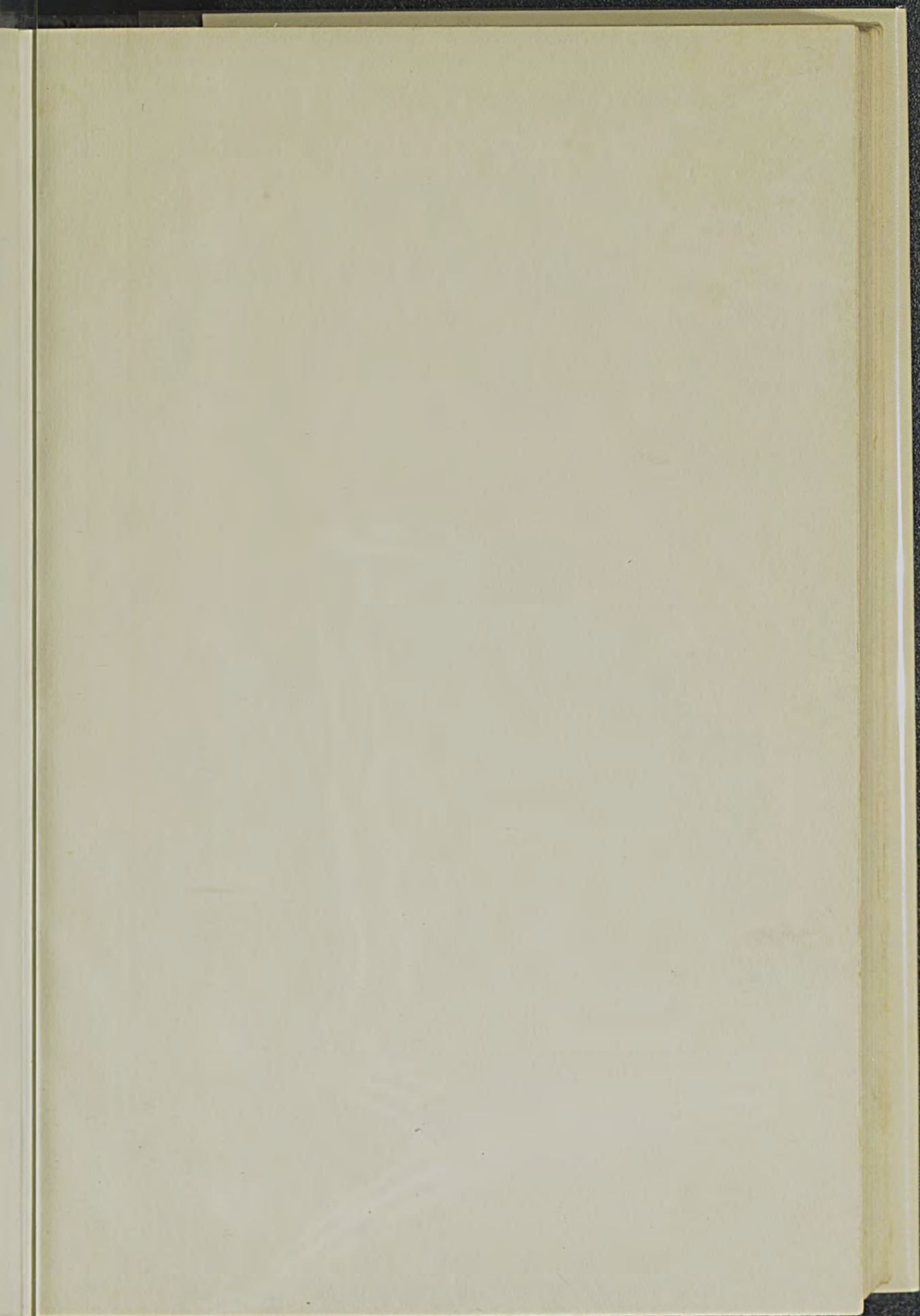
WHO WALK IN FEAR

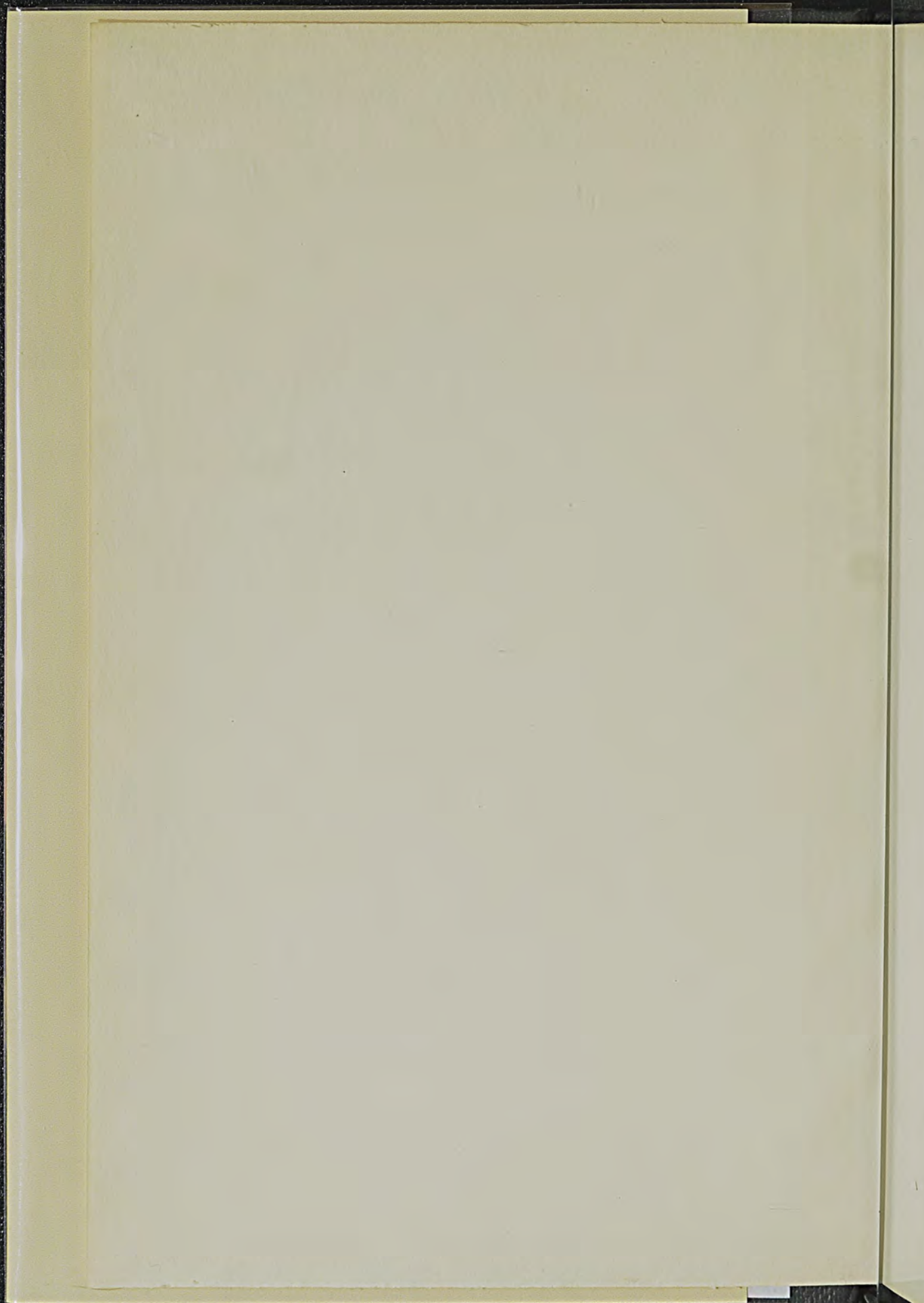
These three novels were specially written for this volume and are variations on a single theme: terror. CULVER ISLAND, the terror of a small community; THIRTY-SIX HOURS, the terror of one single person; and THE MATE OF THE S.S. VEGA to some extent combines the two, being the terror of a whole countryside centred round the terror of one individual.

Neil Bell has a tremendous gift of characterization which is particularly impressive on a vital theme such as this one. The characters in this book really live and it is this feeling of actuality, together with the author's economy of words, that heightens the tension and excitement of the whole book.

WHO WALK IN FEAR is a brilliant example of a master storyteller at work and in setting out to stir the reader with terror, horror and excitement, Neil Bell has undoubtedly succeeded.

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WHO WALK IN FEAR

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WHO WALK IN FEAR

By

NEIL BELL

*"Like one that on a lonesome road
Doth walk in fear and dread,
And having once turn'd round, walks on,
And turns no more his head."*

The Ancient Mariner.

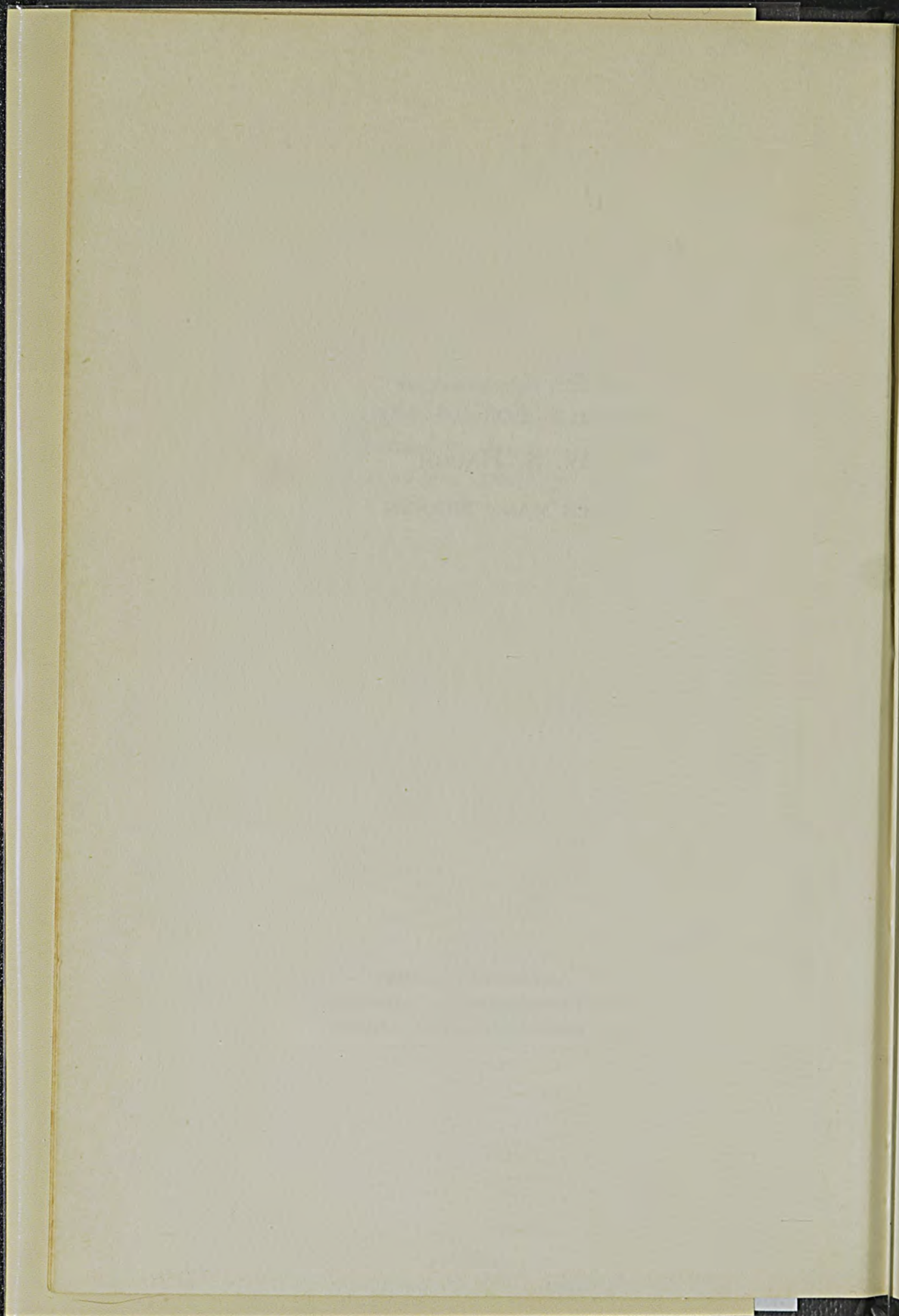


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W. S. HAUGH
WITH MANY THANKS



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PREFACE

These three novelas are variations on one theme: terror. *Culver Island* is the terror of a small community; *Thirty-six Hours* the terror of one single person; and *The Mate of the S.S. Vega* to some extent combines the two, being the terror of a whole countryside centring round the terror of one individual.

Terror and horror are so closely allied that they may be said to merge; or to be two aspects of the same emotion. They are closely allied because one rarely, if ever, exists without the other. I do not think one can experience horror without feeling terror; nor be terrified by anything which does not arouse horror. The horror precedes the terror: we are first horrified and then terror follows. But I do not want to labour the distinction, which is a very fine one. Perhaps it is near the truth to say of tales of this kind that while the people in them, the characters, are terrified, the reader is horrified: that, at least, is the writer's aim. It is then equally correct to call them tales of terror or of horror.

The literature of the world is rich in such tales. They go back in time to the early days of the human race, the days of myth and legend. The story of the Flood (a story common to all races) is

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a story of terror, and its earliest recorded version dates from about 1960 B.C.

In a short preface I have only space to deal with English literature, and that but briefly and cursorily, omitting the treasury of folk-tales and ballads in this kind and jumping ahead to what is generally considered to be the forerunner of all horror stories of the past two hundred years: Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, which was published, by nice timing, on Christmas Eve, 1764. Whatever emotions this fantastic rigmarole evoked among its first readers, it cannot be read today without laughter: that engulfing pit always threatening the writer who attempts to freeze the blood and chill the spine. The slope leading from pathos to bathos is not so slippery or steep as that from horror to hilarity.

The acclaim accorded to *Otranto* encouraged other writers to attempt the terror story. Most of them wrote much better stories than Walpole's. Here are a few of them with, in parenthesis, their most successful story: Mrs. Radcliffe (*The Italian*); M. G. Lewis (*The Monk*); C. R. Maturin (*Melmoth the Wanderer*); William Beckford (*History of the Caliph Vathek*), William Godwin (*The Adventures of Caleb Williams*), and Mary Shelley (*Frankenstein*).

Most of the Victorian novelists tried their hands at the genre, and while Bulwer Lytton, Dickens,

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and Wilkie Collins had some success, it was Harrison Ainsworth, a minor novelist, who, during the period wrote the best terror stories: *The Tower of London*, *Old St. Paul's*, and *Windsor Castle*, which are superior in their kind even to the much belauded tales of his contemporary, Sheridan le Fann. I omit Emily Brontë's masterpiece *Wuthering Heights* (perhaps the greatest novel of the 19th Century) for in it horror is merely a small tributary to the great torrential river.

In America, during this period, the macabre story was almost entirely in the hands of Edgar Allan Poe. He is a prolix writer and his stories take so long getting under way that few readers in these days of immediate audile and visual appeal (the radio and T.V.) have patience to persevere with them. His method is outmoded. It is that of the old writers of melodrama: shrieks, howls, ghostly noises and horrid apparitions from the first word (although the "first word" in Poe's case means after one has waded through his interminable pseudo-scholarly preambles). And he can't keep it up: the reader is soon wearied of this piling up of factitious horror and what was meant to be spine-chilling becomes rib-tickling: we laugh and away go all the horrid troupe of ghosts and vampires, with something of the effect of a spook appearing with his fly-buttons undone. Writers since Poe have become more artful, more subtle. Their stories open

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in familiar surroundings with ordinary, everyday people going about their ordinary, everyday affairs; and it is only very gradually and almost imperceptibly that the note of terror gently edges its way in. Once in, however, it is never allowed to be lost sight of, and the tension mounts steadily until the climax.

Poe's tales always seem too consciously contrived. One feels all the time that he is making a careful pattern of horror, methodically fitting the pieces into place with the nicest calculation and checking everything with a shudder-gauge. He has his successes, e.g. *The Premature Burial* and *The Facts in the case of M. Valdemar*. Poe is an over-rated writer, perhaps because he was the only one of any stature to appear in America during his time. Absurdly over-estimated as a poet, his metrical writings never rise above the level of mediocre, if fluent, verse. We are, by the by, apt to forget that Poe spent five years of his boyhood in England and went to school at Stoke Newington, where some hundred years earlier Defoe had lived while writing his bogus *Journal of the Plague Year*, itself a terror story of considerable power.

The only other American name of note in this period and in this genre is that of Washington Irving; but he blended levity with his horror and the mixture is unpalatable—to the modern taste almost nauseating. It is true that some of Nathaniel

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Hawthorne's stories have an element of terror in them (e.g. *The House of the Seven Gables*) but it is, as in *Wuthering Heights*, a mere tributary to the main stream of the narrative.

To come nearer to our own times, the outstanding horror story is generally conceded to be Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*. I entirely disagree with this judgment, and for sheer horror (not for literary excellence) would put above all other stories of the last fifty or sixty years, Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. I should place *The Turn of the Screw* well down the list, making it give place to H. G. Wells's *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, and his short story *The Cone*; to W. W. Jacobs's *The Monkey's Paw*, and his story of the four men who sit up to watch in a haunted house; to H. de Vere Stacpoole's *The Pools of Silence*; to Algernon Blackwood's *Dr. John Silence*; to Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*; to Conrad's *The Shadow Line*; and even, perhaps, to Arnold Bennett's forgotten novelette, *Hugo*.

Arthur Machen did not, I think, quite bring it off in *The Great God Pan* and *The Inmost Light*; nor did Conan Doyle and Kipling, although they made many attempts: the latter's *The Mark of the Beast* being perhaps the most notable.

Other contemporary writers who have handled the horror story with varying success are Richard Marsh, G. F. Atherton, Andrew Marvell, Daphne

du Maurier, Guy Endore, R. Hammond-Innes,
W. F. Harvey, J. D. Kerruish, G. Marlowe,
Virginia Swain, and E. L. White.

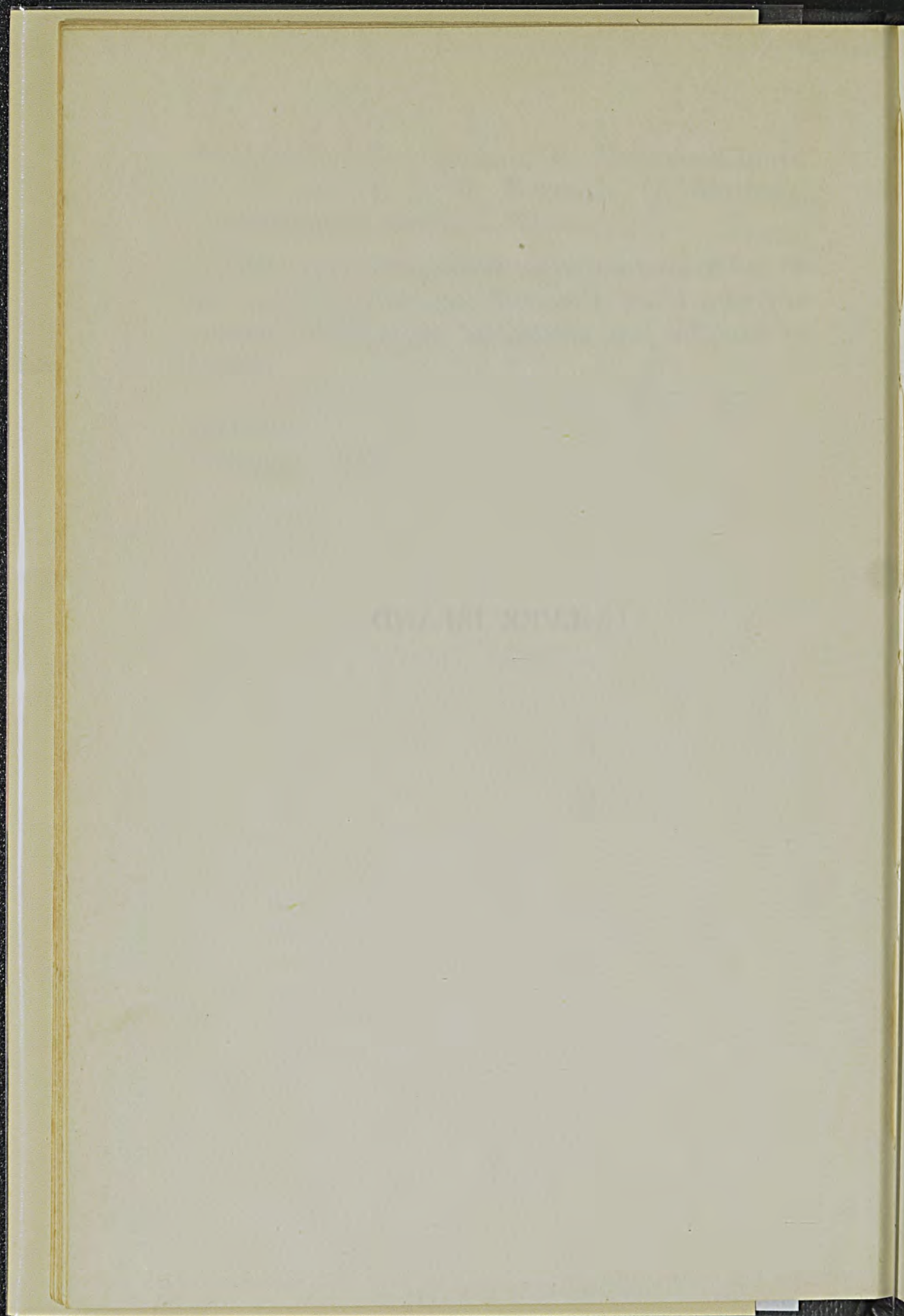
The most authoritative writer on tales of horror
was the late Montague Summers, and I refer the
curious to his many fascinating and informative
books.

NEIL BELL.

Brixham.

February, 1953.

CULVER ISLAND



CULVER ISLAND

“YOU shouldn’t accept these commissions that take you away from home.”

Cyril Rayner smiled across the breakfast table at his wife. “Nice of you, darling. And after five years married to me. I must have a few good points I’ve not noticed.”

“I didn’t mean that.”

“Don’t spoil it.”

“I mean that too. I hate your being away. But what I meant was that people ought to come to your studio if they want their portraits painted. You’re too big to go trailing round the country at anyone’s beck and call.”

“Not very big, darling. But anyway, I couldn’t have a horse in the studio. Couldn’t get him upstairs. Much simpler and more obvious my going down to *Churt Court*.”

“But why do equestrian portraits? ”

“I like gees. They’re a pleasant change from human beings now and again. And anyway, I couldn’t refuse Churt. He’s such a decent old cock.”

“He’s not very old, is he? ”

“Well, no; fiftyish. But he seems old to me. I suppose because I knew him when I was a boy.

He hadn't come into the title then and there didn't seem any chance that he would. And he hadn't twopence in the world."

"And now he's Sir George Churt, baronet and millionaire."

"And all because some young fool took a drink too many and drove too fast round a bend to show off to his girl. Odd how things happen. I'll have another cup of coffee and then I must get cracking. I've promised to be there for lunch."

"You don't think you'll be away more than a week?"

"Positive. Five days at the most, I should say. Why don't you come? Sir George made a point of saying I was to bring you."

"No. I don't want to. I hate being in a strange house when you're painting. I feel—O I don't know—a sort of interloper; or anyhow, I feel that's what they think I am. And when you're painting you're so absorbed and—and, well, shut away, and I feel at a loose end."

"It's your morbid imagination. And we have had some good times together when I've been painting."

"I know. And we've had some horrid ones. Or I have. You wouldn't know whether they were horrid or not."

"You'd enjoy *Churt Court*. And Sir George is a grand chap."

"I wonder why he's never married."

Cyril Rayner laughed. "I remember my mother asking him that. He would have been about thirty or so then. She used to treat him as if he were one of the family—another of her sons. She said to him: 'Isn't it about time you found a wife, George' and he said, 'I think too highly of women ever to marry one'."

"Was that all he said?"

"All I remember."

"I wonder what he meant. Or what was behind such an odd remark."

"Probably nothing. He was just joking. He was always joking. That's why we kids liked him so much. We didn't really see a lot of him. He wasn't very often in England. He'd only something less than a couple of hundred a year, left him by an aunt, but he'd travelled over most of Europe and a great deal of Africa and the Americas. Sometimes on foot and sometimes on a push-bike. Never happy unless on the move. And he's the same now. He's been in England only six weeks and he's off again as soon as I've finished his portrait. I haven't seen his yacht. But I'm sure she's not very big. Nothing of the millionaire's floating Ritz about her. But then he's not the ordinary sort of millionaire. Hasn't any of their tastes or habits. He is in fact a very simple sort of bloke and I imagine completely unchanged from the days when he was pedalling or tramping across Europe and living on the equivalent of about half-a-crown a day. Money

doesn't bother him at all. I don't think he'd care two straws if he woke up tomorrow and found himself penniless. Well, I must make a move. Sure you won't come? "

"Positive. You won't forget to ring me."

"Do I ever? "

June Rayner smiled. "You're rather a darling. But I wish ——"

"I know. That I'd a bigger conceit of myself."

"Yes. I do. Who is painting better portraits than you today? Or as good? "

"I could name you half-a-dozen. And shall I tell you something? "

"Please."

He bent over and kissed her. "And not a man jack of them thinks he's any good."

"Nonsense."

"Fact. In their secret hearts. It's the canker in the rose, darling. Think of something extremely posh you'd like for a present and let me know and I'll buy it in town on my way home."

"I won't encourage your extravagance."

"Not with Sir George's seven hundred and fifty of the best in my pocket." He laughed. "You can go as high as seven forty-nine."

* * *

It was a week later. Rayner and Sir George had just finished dinner and were sitting smoking and chatting in the lounge. The portrait was finished

and Rayner was leaving immediately after breakfast the following morning.

Presently Sir George said: "Are you tied to England for the next two or three months? I mean in the way of commissions or other business."

"Nothing I could not put off," Rayner said.

Sir George said nothing further for a long moment. He seemed to be weighing the pros and cons of something with great care as he regarded the end of his cigar. And then, as if his mind were suddenly made up, he got quickly out of his chair and said: "Come up to my study; I'd like to show you something."

A few minutes later Rayner was sitting before a large desk with Sir George leaning over towards him and dabbing with his finger at a small yellowish piece of parchment on which was roughly drawn a map. Printed very crudely at the top were the words CULVER ISLAND in capitals, and underneath: 'about 180 deg. E. 20 deg. N.'

"That's Culver Island," Sir George said, "and it's supposed to be roughly about midway between Wake Island and Honolulu. I say supposed to be because it's not marked on any of the charts I've consulted, and in fact I have been told by the most eminent authorities that it does not exist and never has existed." He smiled. "I have also been told by equally eminent authorities that there are scores of small uncharted islets in the Pacific and that Culver Island is doubtless one of these. Other authori-

ties, also eminent, inform me that in all the world's oceans, but especially in the Pacific, islets come and go like migrating birds."

"You mean suddenly appear, remain above the surface for a time, and then disappear."

Sir George nodded. "The time above the surface may apparently be as brief as a few days, or as long as fifty or sixty years, or longer still."

"Then Culver Island may have vanished."

"Precisely. But let me tell you a little more. When I first came to live here there was above the chapel a muniment room which had apparently not been entered for years, possibly for over a hundred years. I had to force the door, for the lock was rusted and the wards eroded. In the room were several old chests containing a dusty and faded litter of mainly rubbish—manor rolls, bills of sale, household accounts, and so forth. But there were several finds: for example, a diary of a Sir Henry Churt covering the years 1625 to 1650, and giving a lively account of the Civil War and the trial and execution of Charles I." Sir George smiled. "But that is by the way. The main find was this map and a memorandum of half-a-dozen or so pages written in October, 1669, by Sir Francis Churt and giving succinctly but luridly an account of the life and adventures of Captain Culver. Sir Francis does not say how he learned the facts, if they are facts, or how he came into possession of the map.

"Briefly, Culver was a pirate and as thorough a

scoundrel as ever sailed the seas; a monster of cruelty and depravity; yet with it all a fantastic ruffian with a grim sense of humour. He used to boil his captives alive or flay them and from their skins make gloves and shoes and dagger sheaths." Sir George prodded the map with his finger. "This is drawn on the skin from someone's belly and, a nice touch, the navel marks the spot where Culver's treasure is buried. According to the memorandum it's worth about a million—mostly in stones. Probably all my eye. But we shall see."

"You're going treasure hunting?"

Sir George nodded. "We sail in *Astarte* from Southampton next Wednesday. *Astarte's* my boat. She's a four-hundred-and-fifty-ton diesel-engined craft, pleasantly roomy for our number, yet cosy. She's a grand little ship and fast—cruises at fifteen knots and can do twenty. I've been everywhere in her. Plugged across the Atlantic in a real January blow, crossed the Pacific during the monsoon, and weathered typhoons in the China seas. What do you say to join us? We'll be all men aboard."

"Then I'm afraid that rules me out. My wife is aggrieved at the number of commissions I accept away from my studio. What she'd say if I were to be away for three or four months I leave you to guess."

Sir George pinched his lower lip and frowned at the map of Culver Island. "You'd get some won-

derful pictures," he said, glancing at Rayner out of the corner of his eye.

Rayner said nothing for several moments and then he said: "I'm pretty good with anything up to ten tons—and all sorts. I ought to be. I might say I was weaned afloat. My father built boats on the Suffolk coast—small sailing-craft of all types, and my brothers and I practically lived in them when we were not at school. And my wife's as good as I am. We spend our holidays afloat. We've a five-tonner and my wife's sailed her from the Thames to Algiers in December."

Sir George nodded his head slowly several times and said "M'mm." He was silent for quite a while, drawing gently at his cigar. Then he said, "I don't see any insuperable obstacle to our having a woman with us, if she's game. It might turn out tough."

"June is tough, although that's the last thing a man would say about her on sight."

"She'd come if you asked her?" "Like a shot."

"Then we'll consider it settled. There'll be twenty of us, including the captain and crew. James Ferguson's the captain. He's a Scot, a huge fellow, about six feet four and weighing sixteen stone and all bone and muscle. There's Ronson the engineer and his two assistants Bates and Evans; six deck-hands and a pantry-boy; a bo'sun, Frank Cooper; Peters, a steward; and my manservant Crouch. For the rest there'll be my doctor Arthur

Forde; Michael O'Neill an Irish novelist; and Basil Milton a barrister. With your wife and you and myself a total complement of twenty." He smiled. "If everything is according to the book and we pull it off that will be fifty thousand apiece. Don't look so startled. I'm running the expedition as a sort of sweepstake—something new in sweeps—no one pays anything and everyone wins something. Equal shares. Something new in communism. That is, *if* we pull it off." "And if we don't?"

"Then we've all had a pleasant holiday."

"At your expense."

"At my pleasure. I've far more money than any man ought to have; more than I can get through in a lifetime, unless I chucked it into the sea. Well?"

"I really don't know what to say, except that we'll come and that ——"

"You've said enough. We shall sail at dawn on Wednesday and rendezvous for dinner the previous evening at the *Polygon*, Southampton. They'll put us on a nice little celebration dinner."

"I'm sure they will. I know the *Polygon*."

"Good! Then that's settled. And now if you'll come into the library I'll show you some of my treasures."

* * *

Two months later, in the cosy saloon of *Astarte*, somewhere in the Pacific, four men were at cards. One of them, Dr. Forde, a short, rotund, red-faced

man, stifled a yawn and looked at the clock. "That's the rubber," he said. "Shall we go on?"

Basil Milton, a hatchet-faced greying man of middle age, knocked out his pipe and said sleepily, "Not unless Rayner and O'Neill insist. It's up to them."

"O good Lord no!" O'Neill said. "Cards bore me. I only played because I'd done every other item of the daily routine of deadly dullness. I've lost count of time. Is this the fortieth day or the forty-thousandth? And Sir George called it a pleasure trip when he inveigled me into coming. I've had to put aside my wretched novel. I can't even write I'm so damned bored."

Rayner laughed. "O it's not too bad, is it? The weather's fine, the grub and booze first rate, and the sunsets magnificent. And all gratis. This can go on for ever as far as I'm concerned. If Sir George is a lunatic then there's more to be said for the moon than ever the poets have thought of."

"You know," Milton said, "I'm prepared to believe anything about the moon. The tides alone make it one of the marvels of the universe. Without the tides it is probable there would never have been human life on the earth."

Rayner smiled. "If the tides are responsible for human life they've also been responsible for countless human deaths."

"Possibly," Forde said, "that's the origin of the word lunatic; for anyone who messes about at the

foot of a cliff without allowing for the tide is plumb crazy. As for Sir George's being crazy, I should say, at a physician's guess, that a psychiatrist would class him as the sanest man aboard. If we assume he is serious, and we're bound to do that, is his belief, his very positive belief, very much out of the ordinary? There have been pirates by the hundred, the thousand. That is historical fact. Many amassed fortunes. Many were hanged or shot or drowned. Many buried their loot and went back and recovered it, and in not a few cases retired from the sea and lived and died in the odour of sanctity and philanthropy. Two at least are known to have built churches, and several founded schools. And some hid their treasure and died before they could reclaim it. There are dozens of such cases fully authenticated. And some left maps to prove it and now and again their treasure has been found. Then why should we doubt Sir George's Captain Culver and his map of the island where he hid his loot and which he honoured with his name, although it doesn't happen to appear on the official charts. It's true, according to Sir George, that Culver was a fantastic monster who boiled his captives alive or flayed them, and even drew his map of the island on the skin of some poor devil's belly with the navel to mark the spot where he'd buried his loot. A gruesome and macabre ruffian but not an impossible one; and certainly not inhuman, or rather unhuman, if we may judge

humanity by things done in the last war. I'm prepared to believe in Culver and his island and his treasure."

"That's more than Captain Ferguson is," O'Neill said.

"Isn't that just professional scepticism," Milton said, "because Culver Island's not on the charts. But there are scores of islands or islets scattered about the Seven Seas that are not on the charts. Hello, Sir George! have you come to tell us we've raised the island?"

Sir George Churt laughed. He stood, hands on his hips, looking down on the group at the card table. "No," he said, "but we shan't be long now. It's a wonderful night. Visibility's astonishing. I've never seen such starshine. Enjoyed your game? It's an interest I've never been able to cultivate. Games of chance bore me." He chuckled. "You'll be thinking this comes well from me, out on what Ferguson dourly contends is a wild-goose chase. And Crouch is even less encouraging. When he brought me my shaving-water this morning he looked so glum I asked him if he was feeling under the weather. But it was only another of his dreams. You'll have to prescribe a stomachic for him, Forde."

"And he'd decline it, with a text. When I made him a lotion for his eczema he told me the body could heal itself without the assistance of poisons and capped the snub with a quotation from the

Book of Chronicles: 'And Asa in his disease sought not to the Lord but to the physician and died in the one and fortieth year of his reign'."

"He's not always so felicitous," Churt said. "I tell him he's suffering from a surfeit of *Revelation*. It's his favourite reading, that and the more gloomy of the prophets."

"What was his dream?" Milton asked.

"Oh, straight from *Revelation*. He dreamt he was standing on deck, when there was a tremendous clap of thunder and the sky opened in a mouth of fire (I'm quoting his word) and a mighty voice said: 'At eventide behold terror and before morning they are not.' I asked him what he'd had for supper and he said solemnly, 'You may laugh, sir, but this ship sails under an evil star.' An odd fellow, Crouch. And the best manservant I've ever had. I told him he was down for a twentieth share in any treasure we found, and what do you think he said?"

"That's easy," Rayner said. "'Lay not up for yourself treasure upon earth'."

"No. Crouch's quotations are rarely the expected ones. He said, 'A golden bit does not make a better horse,' and when I asked him where that came from he said from his mother. What do you say, O'Neill?"

"It's horse sense, anyway. Perhaps it's from Tupper. Tupper wasn't a fool all the time." He

laughed. "Here's Captain Ferguson. Perhaps he'll know."

"Not his strong suit," Sir George said quietly; and then, "Come and have a drink, Captain."

Ferguson, whose huge muscular figure dwarfed all the other men in the room, shook his head. "No thank you, Sir George," he said—and in his tone and in his glance at the bottles and glasses there was almost a hint of reproof—"I'm just going on duty."

"And where are we?" Sir George asked.

"Roughly 180 deg. E., 20 deg. N."

"And that's about five hundred miles from Honolulu?"

"Near enough, Sir George."

"Honolulu was the last place where Culver was heard of. We know that. What's the nearest land on the chart?"

"Wake Island, sir."

"H'm. Nothing, I suppose, that might be Culver Island?" "Not now, sir."

Churt smiled and snapped his finger against the ball of his thumb. "And what precisely does that mean?"

Something of a sullen look came into Ferguson's eyes. He would have made two of any of the men present and there was the faintest trace of contempt in his expression as his glance went round the smiling faces. He knew, as the others did, that he was being baited. But only he knew he was a

dangerous man to bait. "It means," he said, omitting the "sir" he invariably used in speaking to Sir George "that there might have been an island hereabouts in Culver's time. That's nearly three hundred years ago. And a lot can happen at sea in three hundred years. Aye, or in three years if it comes to that. These islands come and go and so are never charted. And so ships bump into them. And that's the explanation of all the mysterious disappearances at sea. By the time all ships are fitted with radar there won't be any more mysterious disappearances. Or any more fairy tales." He turned away and said curtly, "Well, good-night, gentlemen."

"I think I'll turn in too," Milton said.

Sir George laughed. "Ferguson would hardly appreciate that 'too.' What! are *you* going, O'Neill? Now Rayner I can understand. Well, if you must, good-night. If we do raise Culver Island before dawn I'll see you're called. And now what about a drink, Doctor? Good. Two large whiskies, Peters. Sorry you joined this wild-goose chase, eh, Doctor?"

"Not in the least. I'm enjoying every minute of it."

"But you think it's quite mad?"

"Not a bit. Can anything as enjoyable as this be quite mad?"

"Well, that's diplomatic, Doctor, anyhow. Thank you, Peters. Er . . . O Peters!" "Sir?"

CULVER ISLAND

"What do *you* think of it? "

"Think of what, sir? "

"Come, Peters. You're not trying to tell me you don't hear everything that's said in the bar."

"I gave up listening years ago, sir."

"And why was that? "

"Nothing ever worth listening to, sir, It's like marriage. No married man listens to what his wife's saying after they've been married a year. By then he knows all the records off by heart. What do I think about what, sir? "

"About this trip. Do *you* think we shall find Culver Island and the treasure? "

"Can't say I've really thought about it, sir."

"O come now, Peters. Culver's loot might be worth a million, and one-twentieth of a million is fifty thousand. Do you mean to tell me that fifty thousand pounds isn't worth thinking about. What are you smiling at? "

It was rare for a smile to light up Peters's saturnine, sallow face. "I was thinking, sir," he said, "that I'd take a tenner for my chance."

"You would, eh? Your name is Thomas, I believe? "

"That's right, sir."

"And would your middle name, if you have one, be ——"

Sir George did not finish his sentence. The noise of a tremendous explosion seemed to engulf the ship. She shuddered from stem to counter, from

CULVER ISLAND

keel to wheelhouse, stopped dead momentarily, and then plunged forward with a terrifying list. All the lights went out. A clamour broke out everywhere, with shouts and cries, the spatter of running feet, and the cracking and rending of timbers.

* * *

It was six hours later. Dawn had just broken. Sir George Churt and Captain Ferguson stood talking together on the sandy beach of a small island. Behind them, in every shade of green, was a massed confusion of trees and bushes, above which scores of gaudily coloured birds swooped, their strident calls, save for the faint plash of tiny waves, the only sounds breaking the silence—a silence disturbing in its very completeness. For all the sun was but a few degrees above the horizon it was already hot, and the clothes of the two men smoked on them as they talked, looking out to sea as if they watched and waited.

Presently Ferguson said: "Not the ghost of a chance, Sir George. I'm sure of it. No one else has survived but the eight of us. Mr. Milton and four of the crew were killed by the explosion and the others went down with her. The boats were blown to smithereens. It was a chance in a million that one of the big rafts was blown clear, and a miracle the eight of us managed to scramble on. Why we weren't attacked and capsized by sharks during the hours we were paddling I just don't know. It's one

of those things one can't explain. It doesn't make sense. The water is alive with them. And they're mostly tiger sharks."

"And you still think it was a mine?"

"It couldn't have been anything else. One of the few still floating around. The very few. Perhaps the only one left. And the Pacific's about sixty million square miles. Another chance in a million. Or a billion. Another of those things there's no explaining, that's not worth arguing about, and doesn't bear thinking about, if you're a religious man, as I am."

"And where are we?"

"I don't know."

"It might even be Culver Island?"

Ferguson smiled grimly and gave Sir George an odd, swift glance. "It might. We're right out of the shipping lanes and the normal air routes. We do know that. But being off the beaten track doesn't mean what it did once. As soon as we're known to be missing ——"

"Which will be quite a while," Churt interrupted. "We weren't reporting anywhere and our trip wasn't publicized. There's no reason that I can see why we should be missed for months, perhaps a year. Ours was just, ostensibly, a pleasure cruise. But go on, Ferguson. Are the others still asleep?"

"Except Mrs. Rayner. She's gone off to doll up. Women'll doll up for the Last Trump. She's a pretty little thing."

Sir George looked quickly at Ferguson and away again. He seemed about to say something but changed his mind, and then, after a pause, said, "Glad to hear she's so sensible. We'll need all our sanity if we're going to be perched here on this pimple of a rock for a year—seven men and one woman. A year. Or for ever. You know, Ferguson, it might be for ever. Have you thought of that?"

"For ever's a long time, Sir George. It won't come to that, not these days with regular air routes."

"Which we're off, as you said yourself."

"Only a few hundred miles. That's nothing in the air. And when they really begin looking for us they'll quarter every inch."

"Every inch in sixty million square miles. Aren't you forgetting our last port of call was Manila?"

"I'm not forgetting anything, sir."

"You'll agree it *might* be a considerable time before we're found."

"Possibly."

"Even a year."

"Hardly, sir."

"But it's possible."

"So is our being spotted before today is out."

"Well, Ferguson, I haven't your optimism or, I admit, your specialized knowledge. Meanwhile, the only point worth discussing is how we're going to survive *if* the worst comes to it. Dr. Forde and Mr. O'Neill are now awake and Mr. Rayner, I

think, is coming along over there with his wife. If you'll wake Peters and Crouch that will complete the company, unless some others come ashore ——"

"You can rule that right out, sir—no hope of it at all. We were the only raft that got away. The others were killed by the explosion or the sharks got them."

"I shall go on hoping. But please wake Peters and Crouch and we'll discuss ways and means. As captain of *Astarte* you're still in charge, I believe. That's the position in law, isn't it? In sea law."

"I'm not sure about that, Sir George."

"Oh, well, Ferguson, we'll assume it. You're the only man among us with any real practical knowledge, unless some of the others have been hiding their lights under bushels. Have you anything that will make a noise?" "I've a bo'sun's whistle."

"Then for God's sake sound it and drown those infernal birds. Splendid. So that's what a bo'sun's whistle sounds like at close quarters. I'm not sure I don't prefer the birds. However, it seems to work." He raised his voice, calling, "Come along you people. Captain Ferguson has something to say."

"Don't you think it would come better from you, sir?" Ferguson said, as the others sat down on the sand.

"I don't. You're the Captain. We're the crew now. That's how I see it."

"All right, sir." Ferguson's glance went round the faces of the small group of people squatting or lying on the sand. It was some time before he spoke. To more than one of them there he looked a forbidding, a threatening figure. And into the minds of some of them, of perhaps all of them except Sir George and Mrs. Rayner, there crept the thought that they really knew nothing about this huge fellow who would make two of any of them and in a fight would probably be a match for all of them, even if he were not armed. But was he armed?

There was nothing threatening or forbidding in Ferguson's voice when he began to speak. There was even a slight hesitancy, a diffidence, and his heavy, rocky features were smoothed out in what was plainly meant to be an encouraging smile. "Well, gentlemen and Mrs. Rayner," he said, "this is no time for mourning or—what did you say, Mr. Crouch?"

Crouch hoisted himself on to his knees, almost in the attitude of prayer, and spreading his hands said: "I said, Captain Ferguson, there is a time and a season to every purpose under the heaven. So saith *Ecclesiastes* the preacher."

Churt turned on him testily. "There is doubtless a time for quotations, Crouch, but this isn't one of them. Please go on, Captain."

"Well, sir, as I was about to say, it's not a time for mourning or for asking questions. The thing's

happened and we're eight survivors out of twenty. There is no possible chance that anyone else has survived. It's clear enough we struck a mine by the odd chance in a million. The devil's chance. We may be here some time before we're rescued. I don't think it will be long. Sir George is of a different opinion and has suggested to me it may be a year. I think this far too pessimistic but there's never any harm done in allowing for the worst. Now, what are we going to do? Frankly, I don't know precisely where we are, but I'm sure this island is not on the charts." He smiled again. It was a jerky, mechanical smile—a thing of the lips only and not in the eyes. "It may even be Culver Island. But I doubt it. My experience of life, and it's not short and it's pretty wide, is that things don't happen like that outside of fairy tales. We know nothing of the resources of the island and the sooner we find out the better. We'll come to that in a moment. Our condition, our plight, assuming we're not soon rescued, is not a happy one. I doubt if any party of survivors has ever been as ill-founded for supplies, tools, and weapons as we are. We've nothing but the raft and the few provisions in her locker, enough food and water for ten days, and a pint flask of brandy. We've no firearms and no tools beyond my sheath knife and a belaying pin which somehow or other got into the raft. Unless someone else has something?"

Peters said he had a sheath knife, Forde a

pocket knife and a petrol lighter, and O'Neill a small penknife.

"Nothing more?" Ferguson asked, looking into each face fixedly. "Well, that's the tally then. Pretty grim. But your petrol lighter is a stroke of luck I didn't count on, Doctor. And, to look on the bright side, I'd say at a guess that there's plenty of tropical fruit here; there's obviously no lack of birds and possibly small mammals; and there'll be plenty of fish in the sea. We shall have to make hooks, and bows and arrows and spears. And, by the way, no one is to go into the sea. We don't want to lose one of our number." It was the first command he had issued during his speech and it plainly went home, with all its implications, to everyone there, for all eyes went to his dour face. He seemed unaware of this scrutiny, and went on: "Any further discussion until we've explored the island is a waste of time and we'd better set about that job at once. I doubt if the island is more than three or four square miles in extent, and judging from here, I don't think the vegetation is dense enough to make progress difficult. In the first light of dawn it looked thick and solid but now the sun is well up it doesn't look dense enough to be troublesome. I don't imagine we need anticipate meeting any sizeable animals. Snakes, possibly. And insects of the more unpleasant sort, almost certainly. Anything else is unlikely as it's already clear the island is uninhabited. What we want to

know is the whereabouts of fresh water, what fruits and so forth there are, and possibilities for fishing. We can't use the raft for fishing. That is out of the question. We've escaped the sharks by a miracle. No one should expect two miracles. It's asking too much of God. I suggest we explore in couples and return in three hours. Is there anyone whose watch is out of action? "

"I haven't a watch," Crouch said. "*Ezekiel* saith ——— "

"I've no doubt he did, Crouch," Sir George said, "but he wasn't faced with our problems. You can come with me. Anything more, Ferguson, before we start? "

"As there are four couples, sir, we might take the four points of the compass. You and Mr. Crouch go north, Mr. and Mrs. Rayner west, Mr. O'Neill and the Doctor east, and Peters and I'll make a general survey from the beach here, which is due south. One thing more. If you hear the whistle, make for the sound without delay. In any case I shall be back here sharp on time and I shall then sound the whistle."

Three hours or so later the same little group was about Ferguson, who alone was standing. He had obviously been doing some thinking and when he spoke there was a note of authority in his voice which jarred on some of the other men and caused Mrs. Rayner to glance at him quickly and then at her husband, afterwards lowering her eyes as if

she had suddenly become aware of a matter engaging troublingly her whole attention.

"Hot work," Ferguson said curtly. "We shall have to watch out for sunstroke. It can be nasty. We're bound to take some unknown risks. We needn't take known ones. So improvise some covering for your heads and necks if you have to be in the noon sun for any length of time. Now, Sir George, I'll have your report first."

"Did you notice that 'I'll' and his tone?" Rayner whispered to his wife. "He's already assumed command and is running the show."

"Be careful," she said softly, "he's looking at us."

"We directed our efforts," Churt said, "mainly to finding water, and it's plentiful and very good—cold spring water much of it. For the rest there seems to be, where we went, a fair supply of fruit: pineapples and plantains and a small sort of pear and a little plum thing. What did you say it was, Crouch?"

"I said we'd call it a bullace in Suffolk, Sir George."

"And what is a bullace?" "A little plum, sir."

"That's most interesting, Crouch. Well, Ferguson, I think that's about all. Oh, and there are coconuts."

Ferguson nodded. "That's promising," he said. "Well, Doctor?"

Forde frowned slightly and stroked his chin

without answering for some time and then, after a sharp, quick glance at O'Neill, he said slowly: "Well, Captain, the east side is very rocky and in places rises into cliffs seventy or eighty feet high. A certain amount of fishing could be done from the rocks. We came across one very puzzling object. It was a carapace or shell that might have belonged to a crab, only it was too large, far too large. There were no claws or legs—just the carapace, and that was imperfect, parts having been broken off, probably by the waves. But it was a huge thing. Had it belonged to a crab he would have been a tremendous fellow and about as formidable to encounter as a tank. I suppose it had been washed up but I'd give something to know where it came from and the sort of animal it covered."

"Why do you rule out a crab, Doctor?" Churt asked.

"Because the biggest known crab is the Japanese spider crab which has a leg span of fourteen feet but its body is relatively small, its carapace being little more than three feet by two, a dwarf beside the carapace we found. O'Neill suggested we should try to lug it back to use for a bath or to roof a hut. The spider crabs are all legs but this creature, whatever it was, must have been a giant in every way. Probably weighed five or six hundredweight. What he was I don't know but he was certainly no known species of crab. And it wasn't a fossil. At a guess I should say the creature it be-

longed to had been dead only a few years at the outside—possibly much less.”

“No chance then of its being the remains of a prehistoric crab, Doctor?” Rayner asked.

“None. It was comparatively fresh. And prehistoric crabs were no larger than those living now. Certainly there’s no record of any crustaceans like this huge fellow. Of course there may have been such creatures and no records left, for apart from its carapace and limb armour the crab is soft-bodied and carapaces are much less durable than bony structures.”

“All right, Doctor,” Ferguson said, “we’ll hold an inquest later and view the body. I may remind you there’s the giant crab, the coconut crab, found only on Christmas Island. He hasn’t a shell at all but he’s a big fellow. This one of yours may be a cousin who’s acquired a shell. There’s probably a lot we don’t know about crabs. Perhaps because they’re nocturnal.”

Mrs. Rayner shivered. “What a horrid picture that conjures up,” she said. “Are all crabs nocturnal?”

“I’ve always heard so, ma’am,” Ferguson said, his glance remaining a long time on her face, and then, it seemed to her, moving slowly over her body. “I think that’s correct, Doctor, isn’t it?”

Forde nodded and June said, an uneasy note in her voice: “It’s odd how all the most fearsome things seem to be nocturnal—spiders, bats, owls,

crabs, vampires —— ” She broke off and hesitated. Crouch broke in: “ It’s the night that’s frightening, not the beasties, Mrs. Rayner; what does the prophet say? ‘ Woe unto us for the day declineth, for the shadows of the evening are stretched out.’ Yes, it is —— ”

Ferguson cut in abruptly, his voice loud and harsh: “ Well, Mr. Rayner, what have you to report? ”

“ Nothing much,” Rayner said casually. “ I’m afraid we spent most of the time swimming.”

Ferguson’s face reddened and he said angrily: “ Then you’re either much braver than I am or just plumb daft. It’s a miracle you’re alive. And we can’t afford to lose —— ” He broke off abruptly and when he resumed it was plain that he had changed what he had been about to say, “ anyone else. We are a small community and if we are going to be here a long while and to survive we shall need everyone’s hands.” His glance went momentarily to Mrs. Rayner, and then he added, hesitantly, as if he’d lost the thread of his thought, “ and it is up to everyone to stick to the rules laid down.”

Rayner laughed and faintly shrugged his shoulders. “ Sorry,” he said, “ but I’m neither brave nor daft. There’s a perfectly marvellous natural swimming bath or basin shut in by the rocks on the west side. It would be a lagoon but for a bar of rock which the tide just laps over at its highest.”

"How do you know that?" Ferguson said sharply, his tone aggressive and faintly contemptuous.

"It turned while we were there. The water over the bar was then only a few inches deep. No shark could possibly get in."

"You forget the spring tides," Ferguson said, his tone now openly contemptuous, almost derisive. "They are several feet higher, in some parts considerably more. Ample draught for a shark."

Rayner grimaced. "Heck!" he said. "I'd overlooked that. And I thought I was a sailor."

"But Captain," June said, "if they could get in they could get out again."

There was a pleasanter note in Ferguson's voice when he replied. He might have been speaking to an indulged child. "Well, yes, Mrs. Rayner," he said, "they might. But they're kittle-cattle, sharks. How big was this pool?"

"Oh, pretty sizeable," Rayner put in. "About four or five times the size of a standard swimming bath and simply swarming with fish. There were shoals all about us when we dived and amazingly beautiful some of them were. Colours absolutely breath-taking. I've never imagined anything like it."

O'Neill laughed. "Our main concern is, are they edible? Would they be, Captain?"

"Most of them. These lurid colours in fish aren't a warning against edibility. But the colours of most

tropical fish fade rapidly as soon as they're out of the water. On a fishmonger's slab they'd look as dull as cod. But a fish has to be caught before it can be eaten. Peters and I spent our time making a general survey and looking for small animals which would do for the pot." His face assumed its mechanical smile. "When we've got a pot. However, we didn't find any, not even a mouse. But of course," and he turned his smile on Mrs. Rayner, "most of them would be nocturnal. Wild animals usually are. It's only men and monkeys who sleep at nights." His glance left Mrs. Rayner and went from face to face. "It looks as if for a time, anyhow, our diet will have to be restricted to fruit, fish and fowl. I'll come back to that in a moment. Now a word about the result of our survey. I think," looking over to Sir George, "we might as well agree to call it Culver Island, sir."

Sir George smiled. "Glad you're converted. You didn't by any chance stumble on the treasure?"

"I'm not converted, sir," Ferguson said almost sourly, "it's just a matter of convenience. Culver Island is roughly two-and-a-half miles long and its width varies from three-quarters to a mile-and-a-half. I'm speaking very roughly. It rises gradually from the flat sandy beach where we now are to a rocky east and north-east line of cliff, a hundred feet at the highest points. It is fairly well wooded but undergrowth is more scanty. I can't quite understand that. Never seen it before. But there it

is. Something to do with the soil perhaps. As you've discovered, there's plenty of water, fruit, birds and fish, and we may therefore consider ourselves extremely fortunate. Many of the rock formations are coral and you'd all do well to remember," and again his glance went to Mrs. Rayner, "that coral rocks can slash like a razor. I've seen a lascar die in three minutes from a coral rock gash.

"About provender. We shall have to catch our fish and fowl and make bows and arrows and carve hooks. If we can't get gut from small animals for the bow strings we'll have to do with vegetable fibre. For the hooks there's plenty of pearwood and this hardened in the fire will give a hook almost as strong as metal; or a spear or arrowhead. Mr. Rayner being an artist," and again the contemptuous note was apparent, "will no doubt be able to carve our hooks and any other small articles we need. Luckily we've a petrol lighter but that won't last long and we shall have to be careful to see a fire is always kept going. I'll detail someone for that. We shall have the rains soon and they'll probably last five or six weeks, so that our first job must be to build huts of some sort. It's bad luck we've nothing but a pair of sheath knives and a belaying pin." His grim smile appeared for a moment. "But Adam and Eve had even less. What we lack in tools we must make up for in ingenuity and sweat. And there'll be plenty of sweat. Mr. and Mrs. Rayner will want their own

hut. But there's another matter to be settled first and we'd best get it settled here and now. Obviously in a small community like ours someone has to be in authority—the boss—someone whose word goes." His voice hardened. "Someone who is obeyed without question. Well, gentlemen, have you any suggestions?"

"We needn't discuss that, Ferguson," Sir George said. "As captain of *Astarte* you were boss afloat and you're the obvious choice for boss ashore. It's your proper place on all counts, not omitting," with a faint laugh in which no one else joined, "the physical one that you could give any of us three or four stone and some six inches. Add to that your experience and you're obviously the only man for the job. So you may take it that we're under your orders."

"Good," Ferguson said, and if Sir George failed to notice that he omitted his usual "sir" few of the others did. "It's as well to have that clear from the start. I shall pull my full weight with the work and I shall expect everyone to do the same. As boss I'll have a hut to myself. I think you'll all see that's just plain common sense. I've no doubt others of you would prefer your own huts, or for two, but there isn't time just now for personal likes and dislikes. We'll have the rains on us very soon. We need one large hut to house all of you except myself and Mr. and Mrs. Rayner, and it must be big enough to include a kitchen and stores—a sort of

self-contained house." He smiled. "A lodging house. House-building is therefore our priority job. Rayner can fit in time to get to work on hooks, arrow-heads, and so forth. Mrs. Rayner will be in charge of the kitchen. She will be boss there. Now for signals. All these will be given by the bosun's whistle: one call—knock off work; two—start work; three—urgent summons to assemble. These signals have got to be obeyed at all times without delay. All agreed? Right. Any questions? Good. We'll start right away."

* * *

It was about ten weeks later. The beach had already something of the appearance of a tiny primitive settlement, and from the largest hut a scarf of thin smoke was spiralling slowly into the air.

Rayner and his wife were standing at the door of their hut. She was leaning against him and his fingers were caressing her hair. "This awful rain," she said, "how long is it now? Two months or two years, or two eternities. And that beast said it would be six weeks at the outside."

"Steady on, old girl," Rayner said gently, and almost whispering. "There was a beast in *Revelation* with how many eyes was it? A hundred? This one seems to have a hundred ears. And the rain's nearly over. This is just the tail end of it. It rained hardly at all during the night and it's obviously slackening."

"Did it keep you awake?"

"Well, that and—and other things."

She was silent a long moment and then she said, "If it weren't for notching the days we should have lost the run of weeks by now. It's queer, though, how quickly one gets to do without a watch. The bea —— the Captain's is the only one not broken."

"Yes, and that was Churt's."

"I'd forgotten that."

"I hadn't. Who else of us has or what it stands for. He's got everything he wants in his hands now. We've been here barely three months and in that time he's established a tyranny—a tyranny of fear. We're all afraid of him. And we've reason to be. No one touches a knife, a spear, or a bow and arrow now except himself. It's incredible, the change in him. If it is a change and not simply the real man emerging with the opportunity. He's a complete brute and we haven't the guts to combine to challenge him."

"But what could you do, Cyril? He would kill you. He wouldn't hesitate at any brutality. Look how unmercifully he thrashed poor Crouch for quoting something after he'd told him to shut up."

"Crouch was a fool to say what he did. How did it go? 'Woe unto him that is alone when he falleth and hath not another to lift him up.' That was just asking for it."

"Do you think he is quite sane?"

"Crouch? He was until he got that terrible leathering. That seemed to push him over the edge. And it's broken him up. He's like a cowed child."

"It was too dreadful. Some men would have died under such a thrashing."

"It was done as a warning to the rest of us. And to one of us especially."

"Who do you mean, Cyril?"

"I mean myself. And you know what I mean by that, don't you?"

"Yes. But I shall kill myself first."

"He won't let you. He'll use me as a surety for your good behaviour. I shall be a sort of whipping-boy."

"What are we going to do, Cyril? Already he has kissed me and—— and pawed me. He is always coming in here when I'm alone."

"I know. I've seen him. And I hadn't the guts to do anything."

"But what could you have done? He would have thrashed you. I couldn't bear that. He might have killed you."

"He won't kill me. I'm more use to him alive."

"Can't *anything* be done?"

"What? No one has any influence with him at all. Sir George he treats with a sort of amused contempt—a tolerant contempt—as if he were a naughty child or the village simpleton. For the rest of us it's the iron hand and without the velvet glove."

"Except Dr. Forde."

"Yes. He doesn't want to offend Forde too brazenly. He's afraid he might need him. His stomach's not too good and he's always worrying about it. He's almost a hypochondriac. Forde says he was always dosing himself with stomach powders and aperients aboard *Astarte*."

"Do you think that is why he is always in such a vile temper—because he's deprived of them?"

"On the contrary, according to Forde. He says it's the best thing that could have happened to him." He smiled grimly. "I'm speaking from the medical point of view. From the human point of view a fully stocked medicine chest to which he had free access would be a gift from heaven. He'd probably dope himself to death, the swine. Or perhaps Forde would be able to arrange something."

"But would he? I mean if he could."

"O good Lord, yes. Jump at the chance. O'Neill tackled him weeks ago about a possibility of concocting a fatal dose of poison from some of the flowers and roots here. Forde said he'd do it like a shot if there were the ghost of a chance of success. But there isn't. None of us knows any botany to speak of, not even Forde. So we'd have to work by experiment. And who'd be the guinea-pigs? And the risk of discovery would be enormous and the penalty pretty grim. He wouldn't hesitate to take a leaf out of Culver's book and flay one of us alive. In fact, Forde says if Ferguson

thought we were trying to poison him he wouldn't hesitate to butcher every one of us. Except you, of course."

"I should find a way to kill myself."

"It's not easy."

"Then I should find a way to kill him."

"And be alone?"

"Is it half so terrible to be alone as to be with that monster?"

"Utterly alone. Who knows? But then no one is ever so utterly alone as you would be here. And supposing, in the night, fear came."

"Fear of what?"

"Just fear. And you utterly alone. Could you control your thoughts? And your imagination? And go on doing it night after night? Could you, being utterly alone? Could anyone? You would go mad. A mad woman alone on an uncharted island."

"O God! don't Cyril. What can we do? What are we going to do?"

"Nothing. The chance has gone by. He's broken our nerves. We're tamed animals with our teeth and claws drawn. Listen."

"What is it?"

"Can't you hear?"

"Only the birds and the sea and the—— why the rain has stopped."

"Yes. The rains are over. We shall soon know what Ferguson wants with us this morning. That

damnable whistle will blow any minute. It's one of the bright spots of his day blowing the accursed thing. If only he'd swallow it."

"It's the running he enjoys most. That was why he beat Micky for walking."

"Poor Mike. If the first blow hadn't lamed him he'd have been at Ferguson's throat. And will be yet, the little bantam. It's the humiliation of that thrashing that's still eating into him like a cancer, burning him up like a fire. He'll risk anything one of these days to get ease from that torment."

"Shush! Here's Ferguson coming."

Captain Ferguson strode unceremoniously into the hut. He was bare to the waist and the colour of mahogany. Like all the other men he was heavily bearded. "Rain's over," he said. "I'm holding a meeting in a quarter of an hour. Shin over to my hut and tidy up, Rayner. Your wife will stay here. I want to talk to her. And I don't want to see you again until the whistle goes. Beat it."

Rayner hesitated, glanced from Ferguson to his wife, looked swiftly round the hut and seemed about to speak but did not. But he stood his ground.

Ferguson walked slowly over to him and without a word suddenly hit him a smashing blow in the face, knocking him over. Rayner lay still and Ferguson stooped and, picking him up with one hand, carried him to the door and slung him into the sodden undergrowth.

Mrs. Rayner made to run out of the hut but he

caught her by the arm and then he laughed and, lifting her off her feet, held her in a rough embrace and again and again kissed her mouth. He put her down and with a sudden wrench at her clothes stripped her to the waist, and pulling her to him again began to fondle her breasts. Presently he released her and said: "Cover yourself up. I can't have my wife appearing in public half naked."

"I am not your wife. I shall never be your wife."

"Call it what you like. You'll be my bed-fellow from tonight. And take my advice and be a loving one. A wife's probably all the better for an occasional thrashing. So if you misbehave, my dear, you'll be whipped. I've an idea I shall enjoy that as much as the other thing. You needn't attend when the whistle sounds. You'll get over to my hut. Our hut in future. There's nothing you can do about it and if you've any sense, and I think you've got your share, you'll accept it as inevitable. If you don't I shall whip you. But first of all I shall thrash your husband—your former husband. Do you get that? Now stay here till you hear the whistle and then get to our hut. And don't meet your husband on the way or it will be the worse for him." Once more he took her roughly into his arms and kissed her mouth again and again, and then, letting his glance go slowly over her, he stroked his hands down her body, pressing and squeezing as if he were pricing a plump fowl. "Do you know why you've no children?" he said. "Because your little

husband's only a mannikin. I'll show you what a man is tonight." He gripped her arms and said savagely: "And you'll be proud of our children, yours and mine." Again he kissed her and then hurried away, the whistle at his lips.

A few minutes later the meeting had assembled. Ferguson sat in a roughly made chair. The others stood at attention. Rayner's lips were bruised and cut and swollen, and blood was slowly trickling down his chin.

"The rains are over," Ferguson said, "and I've got something to say to you. And something particular to one of you. And more than something to say to another of you when I've finished talking. There's a dam' sight too much scrimshanking. This isn't Utopia or Paradise. It's a working community where all are expected to pull their full weight. And you're not doing it. Not by long chalks. There's a saying about Satan finding mischief for idle hands. I don't know if it's out of the Bible. Crouch will be able to tell you. Anyway, it's true. I'll have no more skulking about. When you've done one job find another. And I won't have you collecting into a group gossiping or whatever you're doing. There's no time for gossip. Or anything else in that line. Such as plotting. Now listen. If I suspect any one of you of any sort of caper like that I'll burn him alive. And I'll see he takes a hell of a time to die. None of you are doing a real job of work. But you can all make a dam' good job of dodging.

Dodging and hiding. You seem to have a gift for disappearing, Churt. Looking for the treasure perhaps. And if you found it it wouldn't be worth a packet of needles or a box of matches. And talking of matches, Churt, you've twice recently nearly let my fire out. I know all about the rain. God help you and Crouch if any of the fires go out. They're one of your jobs. So I warn you. If you're wise you'll take the warning. If you're a fool, Churt, or you, Crouch, you'll be dealt with as we deal with disobedient puppies and children. Your age won't save you, Churt. Nor your piety, Crouch. You've had one thrashing. I should have thought that was ample lesson. May I remind you, Churt, that in a primitive community, and that is what we are, when a man or a woman got too old to be of use they were killed. Keep that in mind. We're going to be here a long while. I've changed my opinion on that score. We may quite likely be here for the rest of our lives. This now is our world and this is our life. The *Bounty* mutineers on Pitcairn Island over again. Except that there's only one woman. Do you follow me, Rayner? "I'm afraid I don't."

"You do well to be afraid. But I think you do follow me. But I'll make it clearer. I'm the boss of this community. The king. And I want a queen. Somebody once said: 'The State, that's me!' I don't know who it was, but that's how it is here. I'm the State and the Church and the Law. As the Law, I dissolve your marriage, Rayner. As the

Church, I marry June to myself. And as King I make her my Queen."

Rayner cried out, his voice shaking with passion, "You can't do this, Ferguson!"

"Dry up," Ferguson said, "it's already done, you fool. Mrs. Rayner is in my hut."

Dr. Forde took a step forward, but before he could speak, Ferguson snapped, "Get back in your place." Forde obeyed, but said boldly, "I protest against your action, Ferguson. There's an ugly word for it."

"You can save your breath," Ferguson said. "And if you don't like the ugly word there are plenty of pretty ones to choose from. And they all boil down to the same thing." His voice rose and he snapped: "Stay where you are, Rayner."

Rayner did not move. His face worked. He looked like a child about to cry. "You're not going to do this, Ferguson," he said, and took a step forward.

"Stay - where - you - are," Ferguson said slowly, each word a threat.

"It's no use, Cyril," O'Neill said, putting a restraining hand on his arm.

Ferguson nodded. "Sound advice. If you show fight, Rayner, I'll kill you as I would a dog that bit me. I'd have killed you before this only I needed you alive." He smiled. "I thought you were a man of sense. You can't prevent my marrying June by getting yourself killed. Don't be a romantic fool.

You wouldn't even have the pleasure of driving your fist into my mouth or your foot into my guts. You haven't a dog's chance of laying a finger on me. Are you so anxious to die? "

At this Crouch lifted his hands above his head and looking up at the now clear sky, intoned: "I heard a voice from heaven saying, 'Blessed are the dead'."

"But not the living, Crouch," Ferguson said, "as you'll realize if you don't keep your trap shut. And now get to work. Except the biggest skulker of the lot. That's you, Peters. You stay behind. I'm going to thrash you."

Without a word Peters broke from the little group and ran towards the trees. Ferguson bawled to him to come back, but he took no notice and was soon hidden by the trees. "All right," Ferguson said slowly, "let him go." In his voice, low and thick, was a note of gloating cruelty. "Presently you dogs will hunt him down and bring him back." As they listened to the slow words, chilled by the menace in them, each man suffered the bitter humiliation of knowing they were true; of knowing that presently they would hunt down the wretched Peters and bring him back to be beaten to death. And they knew also that to this utter degradation, this broken and cowed submission, they had come because in the beginning they had failed to make a stand. And it was the beginning that had counted. Afterwards it was too late.

"Your immediate jobs," Ferguson resumed, "will be to move the main hut and your huts further from mine and my wife's. We don't want to be crowded. I'll show you presently where I want them. I want that done first. You can leave Peters till later in the day. The longer punishment waits the more it hurts and the deeper it bites, and——" He broke off and stared, then laughed and said: "The hunt's off—the quarry's come back."

Peters was seen emerging from the trees and walking slowly towards the group about Ferguson's chair. When he was about thirty yards off, Ferguson shouted: "Stay there!" But he came on slowly and they saw he was smiling. They thought fear had driven him crazy, and Forde said: "He's out of his mind, Ferguson."

"Is he, by God!" Ferguson said, "and he'll soon be out of his body. Stop there, you bloody fool!" he roared.

Peters came on and Ferguson sprang out of his chair. Peters brought his hand from behind his back. In it was a pistol. "Keep still, Ferguson," he said quietly. "You've had it, you bastard. I've been saving this for you." He fired, and Ferguson, halted abruptly by the impact of the bullet as he sprang, fell on his face and lay still, except for one swift, convulsive movement of his legs.

Peters, the pistol in his hand, turned to the others. "O.K.," he said, "he's had it. I don't miss

a haystack at six feet. We'll attend to what's left of him presently. Or you will. Listen to me. The king is dead, long live the king. You've heard that before. It's true. I'm the new boss. I'm the King of Culver Island. By right of conquest. Isn't that what they call it? And I'll hold my kingdom by the same right. Or one like it. The right of might. This Browning packs eight shells. There's seven left. And we are seven. Like the poem, isn't it? And one's in heaven. Also like the poem. Only it's probably hell. I'm the new boss. And the first one that tries any hanky-panky joins Ferguson. Don't worry, Rayner. I'm not looking for a queen. I don't covet my neighbour's wife. Never was a hobby of mine. Do you know what my hobby is? " smiling amiably around at the amazed faces: " It's *dolce far niente*—that's what they call it, don't they—sweet do nothing. It's always been my dream to have nothing to do and be waited on hand and foot. Silly dream, isn't it? But is it sillier than any other? But you'll find me easy. I'm no slave-driver. As long as I've four square meals a day and someone doing the work we'll all be as happy as bugs in a rug. And as I haven't a horse and don't intend to walk, the royal carcass'll have to be carried around. So get cracking and make me a palanquin. And, Rayner, you can paint a coat of arms on the door. I leave the design to you. Something classy. One more word to all of you. I'm easy. And things are going to be easy for everybody. But no double-

crossing. No hanky-panky. I'll shoot first and make enquiries afterwards. Doctor, you're appointed brewer and distiller to the royal household. It's up to you to make some liquor. Something with a kick in it. I believe there's a lovely lush to be made out of plantains if you've the know-how. So get cracking. And now beat it, all of you. I'm going to turn in. And I sleep like a dog, with one eye open and both ears at the ready. And the Browning in my armpit. O.K.? Hook it. Just a minute. I'm forgetting the dear departed. Forde, you and Crouch and O'Neill take it away and bury it. Right away over on the north beach. And bury it deep. Half a tick! There's another thing. My name's Tom Peters. You wouldn't know that, would you? I'm Peters to you. I've always been Peters to everybody. Only one person ever called me Tom, and he's been dead a long time. I was brought up in an Orphanage; a Home; so I never had one. And no one called me Tom. As far back as I can remember it's always been Peters. Hi! Peters. Come here, Peters. Peters here and Peters there. Do this, Peters. Do that Peters. Well, I'm no longer Peters. You'll call me Tom. That's another thing I've always wanted. Sounds silly, doesn't it? But don't think because I'm silly I'm soft. I'm not. Any hanky-panky and you're for it. Perhaps you're wondering why I didn't shoot Ferguson before this. That's easy. I don't like shooting. That's one reason why I hid the gun. 'Fraid I might lose my temper. I'm

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no killer. I'm a man of peace. And so, while the bastard kept his hands off me, I minded my own business. Perhaps you think I ought to have interfered when he was knocking hell out of Crouch and O'Neill. Well, *I* didn't think so and that's that. And when it comes down to rock bottom I don't give a damn what you think anyway. So don't get me wrong. And the name's Tom. And I may be silly but I'm not soft. And now you can all get cracking."

* * *

Two months had slipped away. Under the easy-going genial reign of Peters, life on Culver Island had changed into something like an earthly paradise. The terror lifted from them, the little community was like a party of school-children on a camping holiday. It was true that Peters was not invariably genial. He had occasional outbursts of temper, brief but violent, during which he bawled orders, using surnames instead of the usual friendly Christian ones. These outbursts puzzled the others, and when they were discussing the matter one day, Mrs. Rayner said: "I think it's when he feels he has been slighted or treated casually."

"I think you've put your finger on the tender spot, June," Dr. Forde said. "Behind Peters's friendliness and geniality and *bonhomie* lurks an appalling inferiority complex, the result, I make a guess, of his being brought up in an orphanage.

Do you remember how bitterly he referred to that the morning he shot Ferguson? 'Brought up in a Home,' he said, 'and so I had no home.' That must have bitten deep and left a lasting wound. We must be on guard not to touch that wound."

How right June's diagnosis had been was made plain early one morning when Peters sauntered out of his hut to find June alone and making preparations for breakfast in the open. He was fatter and looked very pleased with himself and his little world. "'Morning, June," he said.

"'Morning, Tom. What were you whistling? "

"Donkey's Serenade. Now that's what I call music. Breakfast's late."

"I'm sorry, but they're not back with the fish yet."

"Who's gone? "

"All of them."

"Then I bet they've gone swimming." His face clouded. "They might have called me."

"The handle of the palanquin's broken."

"I could have walked for once. Do you think I'm getting fat? "

"Well, not really fat, Tom. Just pleasantly plump."

"I want to be fat. I like fat men."

"And fat women? "

"No. I like slim women. Trim little women like you. You and Cyril been married long? "

"Nearly six years."

"What made you come on this goose-chase?"

"Oh, just fun. And Cyril thought he'd get some good painting."

"He has and all," chuckling and looking at the garish colours daubed on the huts. "Your fire's getting low."

"It's all right. I'll get some logs presently."

"Shall I get you some?"

"No thank you."

"Tom."

"I'm sorry. No thank you, Tom. I think I can hear them."

"Not half you can't. Ay, here they come. Like a lot of perishing schoolboys. They might have asked me. I'm friendly enough, aren't I? And easy-going. I said I'm friendly, aren't I?"

"Of course you are, Tom."

His face darkened. "And I can be the other thing if that's what they want." He raised his voice and bawled: "Hurry up with that bloody fish. I'm starving. And less bloody noise. Why are you so late back?"

Several of them spoke together: "We've been swimming, Tom."

"And who told you you could go swimming? Eh? Who told you?"

"Why, hang it all, Tom," Sir George said, "we've been swimming every morning for weeks." And O'Neill added: "We didn't know we had to ask permission."

"Well, you bloody well know now. And I want my palanquin mended."

Again several of them spoke together. "O.K., Tom, we'll see to it after breakfast."

"You'll bloody well see to it now. And no breakfast till it's done. Where's Crouch?"

"Ah, where *is* Crouch?" Sir George said placatingly. "He certainly came with us. Must have slipped away some time. Anyone recollect seeing him go?"

No one replied, and then Forde said: "That's just the point with Crouch. He's always slipping away and one never does recollect seeing him go."

"He probably slips away to look for the treasure," O'Neill said with a laugh.

"It's not that," Sir George said. "I'm sure about that. No one could be less interested in treasure trove than Crouch."

"He goes away to pray," Rayner said abruptly, as if he had suddenly decided to speak. "I feel a bit low down telling you this, but I stumbled on him about a week ago praying in a clearing in Star Wood. His arms were stretched up and he was praying aloud. He didn't hear or see me and I got away without disturbing him. But here he comes. And in a hurry by the row he's making. He's stopped now. What's he stopped for?"

"Oh, he's just out of breath," Forde said. "He must——"

His words were cut off by a piercing call on the

bosun's whistle from Peters, who then bellowed: "Get a move on, Crouch. At the double. Where the hell have you been? Blast! have you lost your tongue? Where's your fish?"

Crouch trotted up and came to a halt. He stared at Peters and then at the others. And then he said slowly, in a flat voice: "Ferguson's body's gone."

"What?" Peters snapped.

"Ferguson's body's gone. I went round to the grave."

"What the hell for?"

"I went to put some flowers on it."

"O you did. Well, go on."

"The grave was all dug up—scratched up—and the body gone."

"That's dam' queer," Peters said, all his anger dispelled. "What d'you think of that Doc.?"

"I don't know what to think till I've seen the grave, Tom. I suggest we all go over and make an examination as soon as we've had breakfast. And the sooner we go the better."

Peters nodded. "O.K. Get the fish gutted and lend a hand with the breakfast everybody. Leave the palanquin." He grinned. "If I get tired of walking I'll ride on Mick's back."

Less than an hour later the five men stood about the deep hole which had been Ferguson's grave, and Forde said: "Was this just how you found it, Bertie?"

"That's right, Doc.," Crouch said.

"And all these marks—these scrapings and scratchings in the sand and up to the bushes?"

"I really don't remember noticing them."

"But they're all over the shop," Peters said.

"I didn't notice them," Crouch said. "I was frightened when I found the grave all dug up and the body gone, and I just ran without looking about or . . . or looking round."

"What were you frightened about?" Peters said sharply. "You didn't see anything, did you?"

"No. I didn't see anything. But I felt something. It was something in the air. It was evil."

"Of course there was something in the air," Peters said contemptuously, "what did you expect? Ferguson's been dead more'n a couple of months."

"It wasn't that," Crouch said slowly, and there was horror in his voice.

"Well, what *was* it, Bertie?" Forde said quietly.

"It was evil."

"That doesn't help us much. Ferguson was evil for that matter. Any theories anybody?"

"Is there any possibility of it being big crabs?" O'Neill said. "There was that carapace you found, Doctor, when we first came."

"I don't think it likely, Mick. I'm not so sure that carapace was in fact a carapace. It postulates something which science says does not exist and probably never has existed: a species of gigantic crab, a huge *bodied* creature."

"Crabs *would* account for all the queer markings about the grave," Rayner said.

"I daresay. So would jackals."

"Jackals! What, here, Doc.?" Peters said. "Cheese it."

Forde smiled. "I don't mean precisely jackals—merely jackal-like beasts of some sort. It's true we've found no wild animals of any kind but we've only looked for them during the day. We really don't know what sort of creatures may be sleeping in inaccessible lairs and dens during the hours of sunlight."

"Still," Rayner said, "it is rather queer we've never found any trace of wild animals, large or small."

"I don't think so," Forde said, "not on a small volcanic islet, which is what this is."

"But you said, Doc." Peters put in, "that there might *be* jackal-like animals we'd never come across."

"That's so, Tom; there might."

"Then why did they wait over two months before disinterring the body?" O'Neill said.

"Quite," Forde said, "why did they?" That's the point and that's the key."

"If they *did* wait two months," Rayner said, "but suppose they only arrived at the island last night. Let's assume for the moment that that is what happened and also that they are crabs or some crab-like creatures. Obviously, if we can

judge from the evidence of the carapace, they, or similar creatures out of the sea, have been here before. Obviously they don't live here but have just come on a visit. And it seems to be a periodical visit. Perhaps once, long ago, they cleared out all the animals here. Ate them as they've apparently eaten Ferguson's corpse. But why do they come? It can't be looking for grub, if they've cleared it all out. Or if there never *was* their sort of grub here. Isn't the answer that they come for breeding purposes, once a year? That's reasonable enough, isn't it, Doctor? "

Forde nodded his head slowly, rubbing his chin. "It's perfectly reasonable. Perhaps the most astonishing of all natural phenomena are the breeding habits of wild creatures, and especially fish, sea-birds, and amphibians. But I don't believe it's a question of crabs here—big or small—or their breeding habits. I'm still inclined to think it was done by some strictly nocturnal creatures indigenous to the island. But there's only one way to find out and that's to patrol the beach here. Whatever it was is bound to return to see if there are any more meals lying around."

"You're right there, Doc.", Peters said. "Any more ideas? "

Before Forde could reply, O'Neill put in: "The patrol should be two at least and they should be armed."

Peters turned on him, his face darkening, sus-

picion in his eyes. "Oh, yeah!" he said, "with my Browning. Don't make me laugh."

"Can't you trust us now, Tom?" Rayner said.

"Like hell I can. I believe this is all a bloody plant. By God, if it is I'll shoot every bastard of you."

"Don't be absurd, Tom," Sir George put in, "do you think Bertie the sort to join in a plant on anyone. It's as Rayner says: you can surely trust us."

"Aw, dry up, sir," Peters snapped, "and talk sense. One of the things I've learned from life, *and* in the hard way, is that no man's word can be trusted if it comes to the pinch. If you had the Browning and were fool enough to lend it to me I'd return it, would I? Would I hell. Not if I'd sworn to on the Bible. It's marvellous how you can twist your conscience when it's a question of Number One. Trust no one's my motto. Neither man, woman, child, dog nor horse. So if you're thinking about getting your mitts on the Browning by appealing to my better nature, you can think again. I haven't got a better nature. Only a human nature. And when you've said human nature you've said a mouthful." His bitter mood suddenly changed and his expression cleared. "But you're right about a patrol, Doc. And you're right about weapons, Mick. Cudgels and spears will be O.K. against anything the patrol's likely to meet. And don't forget I've already trusted you with spears,

and that's not to be sniffed at. A dam' sight more than you ever got out of Ferguson." He grinned. "Of course, if you'd been any good with them I might have thought twice about it. But don't forget the worst marksman might fluke a bull. O.K. then. Sir George and Bertie will patrol the beach here tonight." Peters almost always gave Sir George his title, or addressed him as "sir," even in his angriest and bitterest moments. It was something neither he nor any of the others could have explained. "They'll carry clubs and spears and," with another grin, "to show my trust in them, Sir George can borrow the bo'sun's whistle. It may come in handy. As darkness is only about five hours it won't be necessary to take much in the way of rations. There's nothing more we can do now, so we'll skin off back to camp."

Shortly before sunset Sir George and Crouch left the camp and set off for the north beach, some twenty-five minutes or so's walk away.

As they set off, O'Neill called out: "'Ware Bertie's spear, George," at which there was a general laugh.

As they neared the beach it was already dark and Churt said: "Are we going to split it into two watches or into two patrols?"

"I don't quite get your meaning, sir," Crouch said. Like Peters, Crouch found it difficult to discard the "sir" or "Sir George," but in his case

the explanation was simple—he had for years been Churt's manservant.

"What I mean, Bertie, is that we could take it in turns to patrol. One patrols while the other sleeps. Or we could cut out the sleeping and each of us take a part of the beach for our patrol. What do you think?"

"I don't think we ought to sleep at all, Sir George. And I know I couldn't sleep, anyhow."

"Well, I could drop off right now. That's because I missed my afternoon nap. Very well, then, we'll cut out the sleeping." "Thank you, sir."

Sir George laughed. "I believe you're scared of my falling asleep. Scared to be left alone in the dark."

"I *am* afraid to be left alone in the dark. I never was afraid of the dark before. Not even as a child. I am now. On this island. It is an evil place. A haunted place. I can feel things in the darkness all about us. It is not fancy, sir. I can feel things. Evil things. Hungry things."

"That's your imagination. I've always contended imaginations were a curse. Glad I've never had one. You're not afraid to patrol alone, are you?"

"No, Sir George. When you talked about sleeping I was as much afraid for you as for myself."

"That's nice of you. Well, here we are. This is what I suggest. It's only a suggestion. I'm not the boss, you know. This is Equality Island." He

smiled. "Except for King Peters. Well, then, you patrol from here to Elbow Rock. I'll patrol from there to the Pool. That means we'll meet every hour or so. And at half-time we'll change beats. What do you say?"

"That will suit me, sir."

"Good. About the whistle. Would you rather I had it or yourself?"

"I think you'd best have it. In an emergency I can move faster than you, Sir George."

"I smell a double meaning there. But unintentional, I'm sure. Everything clear?" "Yes, sir."

"Then we'll separate. Oh, by the by. About your spears. No hurling them at - er - well, just noises. I mean one should see one's target plainly."

"I quite see that, sir. We can't afford to waste spears."

Churt chuckled. "By Gad, yes—there's that too. Well, I'll see you later."

It was nearly an hour later when they met again and as they approached Churt called out: "Hello, Bertie! Anything to report."

"Nothing, sir."

"Want anything?"

"No, sir, thank you."

"Good. See you later then."

Nearly another hour went by and once more they met and neither had anything to report. They stood chatting for a while and Sir George remarked on the beauty and stillness of the night. And

then he said: "I'm finding this a bit boring and rather all my eye. Lucky we've something to chew or I think I'd have fallen asleep in my tracks. Glad we brought some. Five hours is five hours."

"I haven't eaten anything," Crouch said. "I couldn't eat. You may have mine if you like, sir. I don't need anything to keep me awake."

"You may do. We've some time to go yet. Nice of you, all the same. Bye-bye."

At their third meeting Churt said: "Sorry I'm a bit late. I made a detour by the cave and it took longer than I anticipated. Hope you weren't alarmed."

"I was rather anxious, sir. I'll be glad when this night's over. But, of course, I knew you'd sound the whistle if you needed help. Unless, of course——" he broke off in some confusion.

"Of course what?"

"Well, sir, you won't sit down, will you? It's so easy to drop off without knowing it once you're sitting down."

"Don't worry, Bertie. I won't sit down. But I'll be infernally glad when this caper's over. I'm getting too old for such antics. We'll change here. I'm not likely to fall asleep on your beat. Too much clambering. See you later. And don't worry about me. I don't feel sleepy any longer."

When they met the next time Churt said banteringly: "It's you who are late this time. Anything to report?"

Crouch seemed to hesitate. Then he said: "Nothing, sir. Except—oh, nothing, sir."

"Now then, Bertie, that won't do. Except what?"

"I was only thinking how quiet everything had become. Haven't you noticed, sir? Even the sea is quiet. And everything so still. As if — as if it was all waiting for something."

"Well, it is—for the dawn—and not more eagerly than I am, I assure you. We can trek for camp next time we meet. Happy thought. So long."

Shortly after dawn the quiet of the camp was abruptly broken and Peters came yawning and stretching out of his hut and bawling sleepily: "What the devil's all the row about? What's up, Doc.?"

Forde was standing by Crouch who was half kneeling, half squatting, on the ground, his hands covering his face. He was weeping. Forde's hand was on his shoulder and he was saying: "Pull yourself together, man."

"What the devil's up with you, Crouch?" Peters said.

Crouch dropped his hands and stared at him, and cried: "O God! O God!"

Peters shook him angrily. "Stow that," he said. "What's the matter? Where's Sir George?"

But all Crouch said was: "O my God! O my God!" a sobbing note in his voice.

"Come, Bertie," Forde said. "What has happened?"

Crouch rose to his feet and stared out to sea. He lifted his arms and said in a wild voice: "I saw a beast coming up out of the sea having ten horns and seven heads."

"Stop that Holy Joeing," Peters snapped, "or I'll knock some sense into you. What's up? And where's Sir George?"

Forde held a pannikin of water to him and said: "Take a drink, Bertie, and tell us what has happened."

"I don't want anything," Crouch said. The wildness had now gone from his voice and something of the terror from his eyes. "They came out of the sea," he said, "great things with shells and claws. They came up from Hell. Two of them fought over him. They dragged him up and down and tore him in pieces. There was a great noise. I was afraid and I could do nothing. They made scuttling noises with their claws and their shells clashed. And then they saw me and came after me. They fouled the air with stink and I was sick as I ran. They were fast and would have caught me but the sun came up and they went back to the sea."

"How many of them were there?" Peters asked.

"Very many. I don't know how many. I did not see them all. There was a great noise and stench

and I was afraid. I did not run away and leave Sir George. He was dead when I got there and they were already dragging him about and tearing him to pieces."

"Were there a dozen, do you think, Bertie" Forde asked.

"Perhaps, Doctor. I don't know. They were all together. Pushing and fighting and clashing their claws. I don't know. It all happened so quickly. And then I ran. And they came after me." An hysterical note crept into his voice. "They scuttled after me. They were near me. I could almost feel them. I heard their claws clashing and clanging. I smelt their stench. It is in my nostrils and in my mouth. And tonight——" he broke off and began to sob.

"Shut up, you louse," Peters snapped, "tonight nothing. Stop snivelling. What were they, crabs or what? *Were* they crabs?"

"I don't know what they were. They were like crabs. You will see them soon. Tonight. Then you will know."

"Just a rough estimate, Bertie," Forde said soothingly. "What size would you say they are?"

"Bigger than anyone could believe."

"Do you remember that big shell I found when we first came here?"

"I don't remember anything."

"All right. Never mind. You'd better turn in and get some sleep."

"I don't want to sleep. I shall sleep for ever soon."

"Why don't you want to sleep?" Peters asked suspiciously. "Did you sleep during the night?"

"No. I wasn't tired. It was Sir George who was sleepy. He could hardly keep awake. He said he missed his afternoon nap. He was alive when he said that. It was only a few hours ago. I think he must have sat down and dropped off and then they came out of the sea and found him."

"Didn't he sound the whistle? Didn't you hear anything?" Peters asked impatiently, and still suspiciously.

"Yes. I heard it. But it was a long way off. They must have been all round him when he sounded the whistle. He sounded it twice. Perhaps the first time when their noise woke him and he saw them. And the second time as he turned to run and saw there was nowhere to run and they pulled him down."

"Did you see his spear or his club?" Peters asked. "And what about yours? Didn't you use your spear?"

"I threw my spear but it didn't reach them. I had no strength in my arm. And then I went closer but I did not see his spear or anything. And then they saw me. I was looking down from the rocks. And they came after me."

"Do you mean over the rocks?" Forde asked.

"Yes, over the rocks. The noise was dreadful.

They were so quick. One moment they seemed a long way off and the next they were all about me. Everywhere. Scuttling and clashing. They had great eyes and a great mouth like a beak and slobber came from their mouths. They made everywhere wet with slobber. It was that which stank I think."

"O.K.", Peters said roughly, "I won't tell you what I think. You've said a mouthful, anyway. If you don't want to sleep go and give Mrs. Rayner a hand with the breakfast. And if you feel like chatting, just chat about something else. Get cracking." As Crouch moved slowly out of ear-shot Peters said: "What d'you make of it, Doc.?"

Forde frowned and combed his thick beard with his fingers. "Making all allowances for Crouch's being scared out of his wits, it's plain something pretty grim has happened. It looks as if Sir George is dead." "But these crab things?"

"It looks as if the island is a breeding place for a species of giant crab. They disinterred Ferguson's corpse and ate it and they've now apparently eaten Churt. Ferguson may have been their first taste of dead human flesh and Churt of live. And so we must count on their looking for more. They know there is more, if Bertie's story is true."

"You mean they'll be hunting us tonight instead of us hunting them?"

"I don't say that; but they may be on the island a dozen or a score of other nights. Perhaps several

score. We don't know *how* long they'll stay. We know nothing about them at all. They may be vulnerable to our spears and they certainly would be to a bullet in the right place."

"Oh, yeah. I've only seven shells."

"I'm not asking you to do anything. They may be far less formidable than Crouch's tale suggests. Or his imagination. And they may stay only a few nights. Although, if they come here for breeding, perhaps that's rather unlikely. Fortunately they apparently don't come out of the sea till about an hour before sun-up. But the immediate point is: will they come as far as this tonight? I doubt it very much, and just because it's highly probable they've never gone any farther afield than the north beach. They've probably been coming ashore there for countless generations and if my theory is right, that they've never gone very far afield, then they won't come here tonight or any other night in all probability. They're creatures of instinct and iron habit and won't do anything new. In fact, can't. Instinct plus long habit is immeasurably stronger than any individual appetite or desire. And so, on all counts, I don't anticipate their coming here tonight. But we must take precautions, of course. It would be the worst folly not to, for we don't know what we're up against. I suggest two or three big fires. Speaking for myself, I'm inclined to be sorry they're most unlikely to come. I'd like to see them for myself. Crouch's descrip-

tion was obviously dictated by his too lively and too morbid imagination. They're probably nothing so formidable as his story suggests. But it has whetted my curiosity and I'm more than half inclined to satisfy it by going over to north beach before daybreak tomorrow. That is, of course, if they don't turn up here."

Rayner and O'Neill had joined them and O'Neill said: "If you go, Doc., give me a shout. I've an itch to see these beasts of the Apocalypse."

"Of course. I'll be glad of your company. If only as witness."

"Look here," Rayner said warmly, "aren't you forgetting they dug up Ferguson, and he was buried a good five feet down. And they tracked down poor Churt, if Crouch's tale is true, and killed him. That means two unpleasant things: they are big, strong and voracious, and they hunt by scent. If they can scent a corpse five feet down why shouldn't they scent our camp, especially as the wind's southerly."

"I rather think, Cyril, that they stumbled on Ferguson's grave," Forde said. "And on poor Churt. But we'll see what happens. I don't anticipate their coming here and unless you've any objection, Tom, O'Neill and I will do a little scouting in the early hours."

"O.K., Doc."

"I think," Rayner said irritably, "you're treating this affair pretty casually, not to say flippantly."

After all, Sir George is dead. Not a matter for flippancy."

"We're not, Cyril," Forde said quietly, "and after all, we're not even sure Sir George is dead. Crouch may have imagined the whole scene in a sort of hallucinatory trance. He's getting pretty near the border line in my opinion."

"We'll all go over to north beach as soon as we've got some grub into us," Peters said. "I don't fancy doing anything on an empty stomach, especially if Crouch's story of the stink is half true. But we won't take him. He's had a plateful and can stay and help Mrs. Rayner."

Rayner looked sharply at Forde and said: "There's no chance of their coming here in daylight, is there?"

"None at all, Cyril." "How do you know?"

"All the evidence points to it."

Rayner shrugged his shoulders. "I'll take your word for it," he said, "but if you and O'Neill go on your hare-brained reconnoitring stunt tomorrow morning and they give chase, don't make for the camp. I don't share O'Neill's itch to see them and I'm sure June doesn't."

"Did Crouch say anything about the bo'sun's whistle?" Peters asked. Forde shook his head.

"Then we'll have to write it off, I suppose. Wonder if one of the bastards swallowed it." He grinned. "Might whistle as he scuttled. Reminds me of a play I saw as a kid. The only one. That's

how I remember. But it was a crocodile swallowed a clock. Well, let's stow some grub into us and then we'll get cracking."

"The palanquin isn't mended," O'Neill said.

Peters turned on him. "Don't be bloody funny," he said, and there was an ugly note in his voice. "I'm sticking to Shanks's pony while those bastards are about." He spat on to the sand and glowered from one face to the other. "And I'm sticking to the Browning, too. So don't start getting ideas."

"O.K., Tom," O'Neill said, "I didn't mean to rile you." He put a hand on Forde's arm. "You won't forget I'm coming, will you?"

"Of course not," Forde said. "You'll be able to bear witness if we find anything."

Crouch, who was sitting staring out to sea, said, without looking at anyone, "You will find death."

* * *

Peters tended now to sleep late in the morning and to get up irritable. Lack of exercise was making him liverish and he was also drinking too much of the crude liquor Forde had made from plantains. He had a strong head and was careful never to get fuddled, for he had no illusions about the friendly atmosphere of the camp. He believed it was due solely to the fact that he was the only man with a firearm and that he had shown himself ready to use it. He felt that the others were always

covertly watching and waiting for the chance to catch him napping and overpower him. It was a chance which he was determined they should never have.

But on the evening after Churt's death he had drunk more deeply than usual of the very potent liquor and was in a deep sleep when, some time after dawn the next morning, he was woken by a hammering on the door of his hut. He dragged his consciousness up from the deeps, clutched at his Browning, and with a sense of relief as his fingers closed round its familiar shape, he called out: "What is it? What do you want? Who's there?"

"It's me, Rayner. Can I come in?"

"No. Wait a bit. I'll be out." A moment later he pushed open the door and stood blinking in the dazzling sunshine. His vision clearing, he stared at Rayner. "What the hell's up with you?" he said surlily.

"Forde and O'Neill are missing."

"What d'you mean, missing?"

"They're not in their huts."

"Gone fishing. Why didn't you go? Too scared? And why the hell didn't they call me?"

"They've not gone fishing. I've been over to the pool and there's no sign of them. And I've been to the north beach and it looks as if an army had been marching over it and it stinks like hell. And some of the tracks were half way to the camp."

A note of hysteria invaded his voice. "They were coming here."

"Stop whining, damn you. Who were coming here?"

"The crabs. They had smelt us out." His voice rose. "They were coming here. And they met Forde and O'Neill. And — and after that it was too late and they went back to the sea because the sun was coming up."

"After what?"

"After they'd eaten——"

"Stow it. I don't believe a bloody word of it. It doesn't hang together. It was daylight when you went to the pool and north beach, wasn't it?"

"They're dead I tell you—eaten."

"Maybe they are. Maybe they aren't. Your yarn doesn't hang together. As I see it they got up in the night, as they said they were going to, and went over to north beach and these bastard crabs saw them and gave chase and ran them down about half way to the camp. And when they'd finished they went back to their beach, their breeding ground. They didn't see us nor scent us. And I don't see why they should. If we let them alone they'll leave us alone. The island's big enough for all of us." He scratched his head. "Didn't you come across any remains?"

"Nothing. Not even blood."

"It licks me. They can't eat bones and all, can they? They couldn't eat a skull. Or could they?"

"Easily, Tom. According to Ferguson, coconut crabs crack the nuts with their claws and they're midgets compared with these swine."

"We've only Crouch's word for their size, and he's nuts—gone right over the edge."

"Anyway, they're big enough to eat a man and leave not so much as a toe-joint. What hellish things they must be. Even lions leave the skull."

"You're scaring yourself with guesswork. How do you know they eat bones and all?"

"They leave nothing."

"They may drag it into the sea to feed in comfort."

"That wouldn't square with Crouch's story of how they killed Sir George."

"Leave Crouch out of it. He's bats. And anyway he greased off before they'd finished. Does he know about the others? Does J—— Mrs. Rayner?"

"No. I thought I'd better say nothing."

"You're wrong. She's got guts."

"I was thinking of Crouch."

"To hell with Crouch. If I'd a big enough hook I'd bait it with Crouch and catch one of those bastards. We'd know better where we stood then."

"They'll be here tonight, Tom."

Peters grinned. He looked fixedly at Rayner, a half sneer on his lips. "Well, they might," he said. "And they might not. I think they won't."

Rayner flushed, humiliated by the contempt in

Peters's voice. "Then you're just shutting your eyes to the obvious," he said. "We might as well walk into the sea and give the sharks a meal and have done with it."

Peters looked him up and down. "Go ahead, then," he said. "I'm not stopping you. You haven't your wife's guts. Nor her sense. These bastards may have finished their breeding and last night was their last do. Forde said they might stay anything from a week to a month. *And* another thing. The moon'll be almost full by tomorrow. It'll be nearly as light as day. If they don't like the light——"

"It was light last night," Rayner interrupted, "and the night before. They're not troubled by the moonlight. But you may be right about the moon. Their breeding habits may be connected with the moon and finish by the time it's full. I remember now Forde's saying that the old fertility rites of primitive people were linked with the full moon because wild animals linked their breeding with it."

Peters scratched his head and spat. "Might be something in it. In that case they're probably finished and we've seen the last of them."

"Till next time."

"Nothing like looking on the black side. Next time'll be next year, won't it? By then we'll have been rescued. And if we haven't, we'll have had bags of time to build a barricade the bastards can't

get over. Even if they came this way. Which I don't believe."

"Next year must look after itself. What are we going to do tonight? Build bonfires?"

"More likely to attract them. A Russian chap I knew in the merchant service told me that wolves'll come to a fire to warm themselves and eat anyone they find lying around. I'm against bonfires. They might spread. Set the whole bloody island alight. Nice toss-up for us then—stay and roast or hop into the sea and feed the sharks. No bonfires. We'll trust to the moonlight."

"Then I don't. And Mrs. Rayner and I'll clear out for the night and hide somewhere in the cliffs."

"You won't."

"Why not?"

"Because I bloody well say you won't. There's no hiding somewhere in the cliffs. Or anywhere else. You heard what Crouch said about the way they dash over the rocks."

"I thought you didn't believe Crouch."

"He's only half a liar. I believe the other half. Anyway, you're not going. You're just the sort of bloody fool to run into trouble. So forget it. Or if you must go, you'll go alone."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean just that," Peters said, and for the first time his voice was loud and fierce and menacing, and in it was an undertone of something else that frightened Rayner. "See?" Peters went on,

"that's what I mean, and you needn't bother to tell Mrs. Rayner. I'll have a talk with her. You can tell Crouch. He's got to know sometime. And now beat it."

They spent the day uneasily, yet all after their habit: Crouch mostly in prayer, Mrs. Rayner busy about her work, Rayner wandering restlessly about the camp, and Peters lolling in his bunk and smoking a substitute tobacco he had made from a mixture of dried leaves. It had a vile reek and burnt the tongue, but he declared it was as good as cut plug and smoked it incessantly in pipes he made from nutshells and reed stems.

As darkness began to fall he went over to Crouch's hut, taking with him a gourd of plantain "wine" which he pressed Crouch to drink. Crouch refused, saying it would make him sick. "It'll make you sleep," Peters said. "Knock it back and no heel taps." Crouch took the gourd and tossed the contents to the floor. "I don't want to sleep," he said.

Peters flushed with anger and raised his arm but lowered it. "They don't beat 'em up in the bins these days, Crouch, so they say. Now listen. You'll stop in your hut all night and keep something heavy against the door. We shan't want you."

"What are you going to do?"

"Go to kip. Same as you. As soon as it's dark."

"It's dark now."

"Stow it. And don't forget what I've said. They're orders. It won't be dark tonight. The moon's full tonight and tomorrow." He turned to go. "Good-night."

"Good-night, Tom," Crouch said quietly, and then he raised his arms and intoned: "Woe unto us! Who shall deliver us out of the claws of these night beasts?"

Peters ignored this, slamming the door behind him. Outside, talking together in low voices, were Rayner and June. "The moon won't be up for nearly an hour," Rayner said.

"So what?" Peters said surlily.

"Even if you're right about the moonlight we've got to face an hour of darkness. And they may come at any time."

"Cut it out. According to Forde they only come out of the sea an hour before daybreak."

"He didn't say that. It was only surmise."

"Dry up. It was fact. And we're a mile from north beach. They won't fly here."

"What are you going to do, Tom?" Mrs. Rayner said quietly.

Peters smiled at her and put a hand reassuringly on her shoulder. "Don't worry. We'll do just what's wanted. And at present that's nothing. I'm going to turn in for a couple of hours, and if you take my tip you'll do the same. There's nothing to be frightened about. Go to bed, Rayner."

"I couldn't sleep," Rayner said, his voice on a

high note. "If they're coming I don't want to be caught in the hut. I'd rather face things in the open."

"Go to bed. That's an order. And Mrs. Rayner'll go with you. And if you're afraid of being caught asleep then stop awake. But you're going to your hut. Good-night. And good-night June."

For more than an hour Peters lay on his bunk smoking his rank tobacco, his thoughts fully occupied with the events of the immediate past and the possible ones of the immediate future. He later dozed off, to be violently awakened by a battering at his door and the voice of Rayner shouting hysterically. "Aw! shut up!" he bawled, and getting to his feet hurried outside. Before he could speak Rayner clutched at his arm and cried: "They're coming. We can hear them."

Peters swore at him. "You'd hear anything," he said, "you've lost your nerve if you ever had one."

"Listen, I tell you!" Rayner said frenziedly. "Good God, man, can't you hear it? And the stink's all round us."

Peters stood still, his head bent forward. Remotely there sounded a clashing and clanging noise, eerie and terrifying in its strangeness. "Something's cooking," he said, "and by God, there is a hell of a stink." He hawked and spat. "How long've I been asleep?"

"They're nearer, they're all around us," Rayner said. "Hell, I can't stand this."

"Shut up. They're not here yet."

June had come up to them. "What are you going to do, Tom?" she said.

"A spot of reconnoitring. Jesus! some noise. Reminds me of a march of the gladiators I saw on the pictures. And what a stink. Get Crouch up, Rayner. We can't stop here. I'll cover you. They won't stand up to a bullet. Run like hell."

Rayner ran off and Peters put his hand on June's shoulder. "Don't lose your head," he said quietly, "and stick by me. Christ! here they come. There's your husband coming. But where the devil's Crouch?"

June cried out. "O they're behind him." She screamed and called: "Cyril! Cyril!" and made to run towards him. Peters caught her arm and held her. "Shoot!" she cried. "Shoot! shoot! O God, he's down! Let me go! Let me go!"

"Shut up. They're going. It's the dawn."

"They're dragging him with them. You let him be killed." She tried to break away from him, sobbing and crying, "You let him be killed."

"Shut up." "You let him be killed."

"Shut up, I say. You're right. I did. I couldn't stop it."

"You didn't want to. You wouldn't shoot."

"You're right. I wouldn't. Because I've only one shell."

"It's not true. It's you who've killed him."

"Shut up. Or talk sense. I've only one shell. That's the God Almighty truth. When I shot Ferguson I'd only one shell left. I told you all seven. That was bluff. If I'd tried to save him it'd have been my last shell. And I wouldn't do it. I might want it. Good God! there's Crouch. What the devil's he up to? He's kneeling down."

"He's kneeling down where you killed Cyril."

"Crouch," bawled Peters, "come here! "

Crouch stood up and turned towards them. He raised his arms and cried out in a loud voice: "I saw a beast come up out of the sea and who is able to war with him? "

"Shut up, you damn' fool," Peters roared. "Come here! Come here, Crouch! Stop! "

"He's running into the sea," June said, "you must stop him."

"Stop him hell. The fool's swimming out to sea. Christ! there's a dorsal fin. And another and another. Look at them. They're all round him."

"O do something." She covered her face with her hands and cried: "O God! O God! "

"He's gone."

She crouched on the sand, and hiding her face in her arm, began sobbing.

Peters turned away from her and walked slowly over to where Crouch had been kneeling. He remained there some time. Then he walked slowly

back to June, and kneeling down beside her, said gently: "There's nothing there."

She looked up at him. "There's blood on your hands. You killed him. You wanted him dead."

"I've told you why I couldn't do anything," he said patiently, "and it's God's truth. What's done is done and it's no use crying about it. Let's face facts. There's two of us left and we've got to make the best of it."

"Tomorrow we shall be dead. I shall be glad. I would walk into the sea if I were brave enough. But I can't do it. But I shall have to do it before they come. Unless you shoot me."

Peters stood up. "I'm not going to shoot you," he said, "and I'm not going to let you walk into the sea. You know that. You're not a kid. I want you. It's going to be the Garden of Eden over again, like it or not."

"The Garden of Gethsemane."

"I don't get you. But you're not going to feed the sharks. Nor the crabs either."

"You can do nothing. Except shoot yourself." Her voice suddenly became wild and pleading. "You won't do that. Promise me you won't do that and leave me alone. You won't do that, Tom!"

"That's better. Death's the great leveller, they say, don't they. So's fear. You can't be afraid and a snob as well. It somehow doesn't work. Don't you worry. I'm not going to shoot myself. And the crabs aren't going to get us. We're going to be

Adam and Eve over again. And now I'll tell you something. Only a month after we landed here I stumbled on something. And stumbled's the right word. It was over by the north beach just beyond Elbow Rock. I was clambering down the cliff when I slipped and began slithering down and couldn't stop, and then my feet dislodged a bush and went into a hole and that stopped me. I kicked about to get my feet out and widened the hole and found I could squeeze through into a small cave. It was fairly roomy—not more'n about six feet high and would've been as dark as hell except for the hole I'd come through. The hole's high up in the side and not in the top. The sea comes into the cave at high tide, but only about a couple of feet up. The high water mark's plain on the sides. It comes in through cracks and crevices in the rocks. No holes. A louse couldn't squeeze in. Once inside there we can laugh at the crabs, even if they find us. They couldn't get in without dynamite."

"And you've never told anyone. You've let them all be killed——"

"Stow it. We didn't know they were going to be killed."

"You could have told us of the cave. It would have been a refuge as a last resort. Why did you keep it for yourself?"

"For ourselves."

"I shan't come."

"You will. What's the matter with me?"

"Nothing, except that you've killed them all."

"To get you. Is that what you think? You must be as crazy as Crouch. It wasn't in my head at all. It is now. And you're coming with me."

"Why did you keep it to yourself?"

"I'll tell you. You won't believe me. Sounds too crazy. But seeing's believing, and I'll show you when we get there. I was poking about there one afternoon, that was after I'd seen Ferguson off." He grinned. "One of the days I didn't need the palanquin. I was poking about and I found . . . what do you think?"

"I've no idea."

"I reckon you wouldn't have, being a woman. You never hear of women going off on treasure hunts. Women don't believe in fairy gold. The other sort's their lay."

"Do you mean you found Culver's treasure?"

"Just what I do mean. Crazy, isn't it? We search for Culver Island for months and draw a blank. We hit a mine, a million to one chance, and blow up, and come ashore on a raft. And it's Culver Island! And we comb it for weeks and weeks but can't find Culver's loot. And then I fall down the cliff and at the bottom get stuck in a hole and find a cave, and in the cave is old Culver's loot: half a dozen leather bags of diamonds and other stones and gold bits and pieces. Worth a king's ransom, as they say. And not worth a bag o' beans to us now. Crazy, isn't it? But isn't it just what life

does to you? No sense anywhere as far as you can see."

"And so you said nothing. And if we'd been rescued what were you going to do? "

"You can have one guess."

"You'd have kept it—stolen it."

"As much as I could have stowed away safely, and left the rest. But come off it. What d'you think I was going to do with it? Hand it over to Churt? I've been poor all my life; never had as much of anything as I wanted; never been on easy street; always at some bastard's beck and call. Peters here, Peters there, Peters do this, Peters do that. And I stumble on a fortune. It wasn't Culver's because he stole it in the first place. Then whose was it? It belonged to the man who found it. And the name's Tom Peters. Tom for short. Now what about it? And talk sense and not parson's humbug."

"And what use is it to you now? "

"No use. What's *use*? But, by God! it's lovely to look at. Wait till you see the sparklers. They'll make you scream with joy just to look at them. And you'd have given them up. Oh, yeah! I wouldn't like to bet on it. But they're no *use*. A tommy-gun and a thousand rounds would be worth the lot just now. By God! I'd give the bastards hell. But we're not always going to be here, my dear. We'll be rescued. I'm going to keep a bonfire going day and night. One with a proper smudge. And when we're rescued we'll go halves.

But you'll have to take me with your half. I reckon by then you'll be willing enough. You'll find I'm not so dusty. And if we're not rescued, why then we'll make do here. It won't be too bad. It might be the goods. For both of us. When you get used to me. In that way. Proper Garden of Eden. We'll have to spend most of the day getting things to the cave. So we'd better get cracking. Forget about what's happened. It's done with now. And there's only us. Let's make the best of it. It might be——" He broke off and shrugged his shoulders and said again: "Come on, let's get cracking."

It was a mile to the cave and they had much to do, so that the hours flew by and the sun was already near to setting when they made their last journey there.

"Phew!" Peters said, "we've cut it a bit fine. I began to think we'd have the dark on us before we could get here. It's going to be wet inside after a bit. High tide's in about three hours. There aren't any sizeable ledges we could clamber up on. Have to put up with a bath. Good job it's warm. Lucky there's no wind or the torch might have blown out. Got the others all right?"

"Yes."

"Sure?"

"I'm quite sure."

"How many?"

"Six."

"O.K.! Better too many than not enough. Now

you squeeze through. Give me the torches. We mustn't get them damp. Then let yourself go and drop. It's no distance and the bottom's sand. Soon as you're in I'll hand you the lighted torch and then the others. There's a very narrow ledge about four feet up where you can lay them. In you go. O.K.? Now take the doings. Torches first. Don't drop 'em. The sand's wet. Stand clear. I'm coming in." He dropped lightly to the sandy floor and smiling at her said, "Haven't you a smile?" She smiled faintly, and he went on: "Here we are. Safe as a general in a battle. And nearly as snug."

"Aren't you going to cover up the hole?"

"Must have a vent with the torch burning. Nothing can get in." He laughed. "Nothing big enough to hurt. As much as those bastards could do to get a claw in. Hope one tries that on. I'll surprize him."

"You think they'll come?"

"It's about evens. It ought to be fun. If we could only start them scrapping it would be as good as a Roman circus, what with the noise and the stink. They were proper do's Roman circuses; so I've been told. Blood, noise, and stink. And the Eye-Tyes I've met have been the same. Blood doesn't change."

"Do you think it will be long?"

"Hours, perhaps. Pity we haven't got a radio or a pack of cards. Time's going to hang. Queer that about people. Must have something to do or

see or hear. Can't just sit. That's where the coloured races have the edge on us. There was a lascar in a boat I once sailed in who'd sit for hours just sitting and looking at nothing. We're different. Got to have something. Some toy or other. Jeeze! that reminds me. Know what a woman's best toy is? "

" I'm afraid I don't."

" Don't spruce. And can't you be a bit more matey. And say Tom. I mean as if you meant it. You've got to come to it one day. We're down to rock bottom now, you and me. A man and a woman. I can't quote the Bible like Crouch, but I do remember it says somewhere, ' Male and female created He them.' And that's how it is with us now. Just male and female and it don't matter a damn now where I went to school or who your father was. You're shivering. Are you cold? Come a bit closer. God A'mighty, I'm not going to touch you."

" I'm not cold. What is a woman's best toy? "

" Well, some say a baby. Some say jewels. O.K. Now I'll show you the finest collection of jewellery outside of Buckingham Palace or the Tower of London, or wherever the Queen keeps her sparklers. And you can play with them till the—— the cows come home. Over here. I'll hold the torch. In these bags. Hold your lap. Look at this little lot. Lovely, aren't they. I'll stick the torch here and you can play with them."

" I don't want to play with them."

"Keep your mind off other things."

"Listen! "

"What? "

"They're coming."

"O.K. It's all right. Nothing to be frightened at. Jeeze! We've been in here longer'n I thought. It's high tide. Water's up to the mark. Torch is getting low. Better light another. They're here all right, the bastards. What a hell of a row."

"I can smell them. Listen. They're on top of the cave."

"O.K. Don't get flustered. We're cushy here."

"What was that? Something splashed into the water."

"It was nothing."

"It was a piece of rock from the roof. They're breaking in."

"Don't be so damn' silly. There's three feet and more of solid rock overhead."

"How do you know? O there's another piece. They *are* breaking in."

"Not they. It's only a few bits of loose shale stuff. The roof's over three feet thick. I know. I've examined it. I made sure of that."

"Look at the water," June said in a voice of appalled dismay.

"What about it? "

"It's past the high tide mark."

"It can't be."

"But it is, Tom. How can it do that? "

"It's nothing. It'll turn any minute now."

"It's not turning. It's still rising. It's rising quickly. You can see it creeping up the wall."

There were several splashes as pieces of rock fell from overhead, and June cried out: "O God! they're breaking in."

"Don't be so damn' silly. They can't get in. Jeeze! look at that. One's shoving his claw in the hole. He wants to shake hands. Give me the torch. I'll warm him up. How do you like that, old son? I thought you wouldn't."

"O don't. Give me the torch."

"O.K. He's gone, anyway. Christ! You've done it now. How the hell did you come to drop it? We'll have to sit it out in the dark now."

"The water's still rising. I can feel it rising."

"Don't panic. It'll go down."

"Tom, I know why it's still rising." The horror in her voice startled him.

"What d'you mean?" he said sharply, groping for her in the darkness.

"O don't you see? It's the full moon. There's a spring tide at the full moon."

"By God! You're right there. But don't worry. It'll turn any minute now. Hark at those bastards."

"There are two spring tides every month, aren't there?"

"That's right. One at the new moon and one at the full."

"So there should be a spring tide mark on the walls as well as a normal tide mark."

"That's right. There probably is one."

"There's not. We should have noticed it. O don't you see what it means?"

"Damned if I do."

"At spring tides the water fills the cave. That's why there's no mark on the walls. We shall be drowned like rats in a trap."

"No fear. Hark at those bastards."

"But it's true, Tom. It must be true. O what are we going to do?"

"It can't be far from daylight and they'll be off. It's probably lightening now. There doesn't seem to be as much racket up aloft."

"The water's up to my chest."

"Don't panic. It'll be all right. It'll turn any minute now."

"It won't turn till it's filled the cave."

There was a great noise of scuttling and clashing overhead and the sound of many heavy splashes.

She cried out: "They're coming in. The roof's giving way."

"Don't be so damn' silly, June. It can't give way."

"The water's rising more quickly. O what shall we do. I can't stand it. I'm suffocating."

"Steady. Bite on it. We'll be all right. I believe they're moving off."

Piece after huge piece of rock fell from the roof with loud splashes.

"They're not. They're breaking in. The water's up to my chin. It's still rising."

"It is an' all." Grimly: "We can't stop here. I'll have a look outside. They're not near the hole. That warm welcome taught them something. We may have to make a bolt for it. I'll only be a minute. Don't come out till I shout."

He squeezed slowly out of the hole. The clashing and clanging rose to a great din, died away, rose again. In a lull she heard the sound of a pistol shot. She began to squeeze out through the hole. She screamed: "Tom! Tom! Where are you?"

She dragged herself out and stood upright. She moved a few steps forward and stopped in horror at what she saw. There was a great noise of scuttling and clanging. She screamed and turned to run.

But there was nowhere to run.

THIRTY-SIX HOURS

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THIRTY-SIX HOURS

IT was three o'clock on the afternoon of Friday, October 25, 1945, and a fine, warm day.

By the side of the main road, about twenty miles from Overthorpe, a small, shabby saloon car had come to a standstill. Its bonnet was raised and a slow spiral of steam drifted up into the air.

Beside the car, one hand on her hip, the other holding a cigarette, a girl stood regarding the steaming engine and radiator with a dismay not untouched by a sort of amused exasperation. She was tall slim and pretty, and well dressed, if perhaps in a style which one would have more expected to see at an art-students' cocktail party than on a country road. But it became her well: she took the eye.

A small coupé drove up and stopped just behind the broken-down car. Its driver, a young man in a brown tweed hacking jacket and grey flannel trousers, sang out: "Making tea?"

The girl laughed, and said: "That's an idea; have you any?"

He got out of his car and came over to her, looked her swiftly up and down (but not so swiftly that she did not note his glance, which she half resented, despite his obvious approval pleasing her)

and then looked at the engine. "You've got a cracked cylinder head," he said.

"How do you know?"

"It's part of my job to know about such things. Or it was. I was in the R.A.F. I got out only three weeks ago. I'm still on demobilisation leave."

She looked at him and caught his smiling glance. She thought how attractive his smile was, how attractive he was altogether; how well-made and how powerful looking; and above all, what beautiful eyes he had: violet and with long lashes: far too beautiful for a man, she thought. "I was in the W.A.A.F. until three weeks ago," she said. "Quite a coincidence, isn't it?"

"Everything's a coincidence, just as everything's fore-ordained. This meeting was planned when God said 'Let there be light'."

"Is it so important as all that?"

"It may be."

Again she looked at him and caught his smiling glance and felt the attraction of his charm. But she had learned to be wary of charm, learned how insincere are so often those who consciously exert it. "What am I going to do?" she said.

"About your car?"

"Why, of course."

"My name's Noel Blake."

She laughed. "That doesn't help much. Or ought it to? Are you someone terribly famous?"

"Completely unknown. Even to the police. All

I meant was that as we were going to be together for some time we ought to know one another's names."

"But *are* we?"

"Don't you want me to help you?"

"Please. I didn't mean that. But it sounded, well, rather ——"

"Presuming on your misfortune." He smiled.

"Quite right. I am. I'm delighted your car's broken down and you're too much of a duffer to do anything about it. This gives me the pleasure of your company for an hour or so."

"Will it take so long?"

"Does that upset you?"

"Well, no. But I wanted to get to Overthorpe before tea."

"Another coincidence. I'm going to Overthorpe." He smiled at her.

"I don't believe you."

"I assure you I am. Could you get there by yourself with this box of junk?"

"It's a nice little car. It's my brother Dick's. But I shall be very grateful if you'd help me with it. I — I didn't mean that when I said I didn't believe you."

"You meant you didn't believe I was going to stay at Overthorpe. That I said I was in the hope of foisting my company on you while you were there. You're quite wrong."

"I — I really didn't mean that."

"Of course you did. And you were quite right. Or you would have been, except for the fact that I set out from London this morning to spend three or four days at Overthorpe. I'm staying at the *Royal*. Well? "

"Do you want me to say I'm sorry? "

"No. Where are you staying? "

"I don't know. I never book rooms in advance. I don't know why. Just that I can't be bothered. Or that I hate being tied down to anything in advance."

"I haven't booked either."

"I thought you said —— "

"That I was staying at the *Royal*. That's right. I looked it up in the A.A. Handbook this morning. They give it three stars, which is just right. Four's too opulent, too shiny; two always seem to lack that extra little bit that makes all the difference. So it's the *Royal*. May I recommend it to you, Chloe? "

"That's not my name."

"It's a beautiful name. My favourite, I think."

"Aren't you sure? "

"Not yet."

She could not help laughing at the look he gave her: part boyish, part mocking, part something else she could not quite define. "You're very absurd."

"Not in the least. I'm eminently sensible. And quite sane. Do you think I'm mad? "

She regarded him with affected close attention and he caught her steady look and held it smilingly. She returned his smile. "Well?" he said.

"I don't think so."

"I've been called mad. Mad Blake." He laughed. "That's where we came in. Or almost."

"Is it?"

"Well, isn't it?"

"The engine's stopped steaming."

"Never mind that. We'll attend to that presently. I told you some minutes ago, although it seems much longer, that my name was Noel Blake."

"I thought you said Mad Blake."

"We'll come to that in a moment. For now it's just Noel. Noel Blake. Well?"

"Oh, very well, laughing. "My name is Lessing. Sylvia Lessing."

"Late of the W.A.A.F.?"

"Yes."

"What were you?"

"Section Officer."

"Where were you stationed?"

"At St. Athan, in Wales, until six months ago. Then I was near Hastings. I was doing radar work."

"I was a flight lieutenant. I was at Manston for more than a year. I was there during the Battle of Britain. I was flying a 'Spit.' I was only a pilot officer then. That's when I was called Mad Blake."

"Why?"

"Oh, nothing heroic. Just daft aerobatics. After I'd crashed a couple I was carpeted by our Group Captain and given the worst jacketing I've ever had in my life."

"Did you shoot down any Germans?"

"We all did. Couldn't miss."

"How many didn't you miss?"

He laughed. "That's a neat way of putting it. I think my tally was seven."

"And you got the D.F.C.?"

"Who didn't?"

"Lots didn't. You needn't be so modest."

"I'm not. But gongs are like luck. The best chaps often miss them. After I left Manston I was in Scotland for a year, training fighters. Then I transferred to bombers and was stationed in Norfolk and took part in about twenty night raids on Germany. My luck held. Not even a scratch. During the last three months of the war I was in France and Germany as one of the pilots for the Brass Hats. I flew Monty several times and scores of lesser lights. I saw ——" He broke off and looked away from her.

"Yes?"

"Nothing. Have you any insulating tape?"

"No. What were you going to say?"

"I'll tell you another time. Perhaps. If there's an opportunity. That depends on you."

"And what does that mean?"

"Just what it says. You're sure you've no insulating tape?"

"Positive. I don't think I know what it is, in fact."

"You needn't know what a thing is to possess it. Queer that. But it's true."

"I don't know what you mean."

"It doesn't matter. Perhaps I don't know myself. But I know what's wrong with your engine. Do you see that?" He stooped and pointed to the cylinder head and she came close to him and bent down to see so that their heads were almost touching. Suddenly he turned his head and smiled into her eyes, so close to his own. She drew away, feeling her face flushing. She felt angry, as if it were a trick he had been playing upon her.

"Did you see it?" he said.

"I didn't see anything."

"What's the matter?"

She felt she was being silly and forced a little laugh. "Nothing's the matter. What ought I to have seen?"

"Why, this," he said. "Look."

She bent over and saw what he was pointing at. "Is that why the engine stopped? It's only a little crack."

"It'll put your car in dock for two or three days."

She made a little gesture of dismay. "Is that true?"

"Gospel."

"But you said you could put it right. Or didn't you?"

"I said I'd attend to it and asked if you'd any insulating tape. But I can only do a temporary repair. Enough to get it to Overthorpe. Perhaps. Have you a first-aid outfit?"

"I haven't the least idea."

"You start out in a car and don't know what you've got in case of emergency."

"Have you got one?"

He smiled. "No. But I knew I hadn't. Perhaps you'll look in the pockets."

He stood away from the car and she opened the door by the driving seat. Then she said: "Would this be it?"

"Looks like it." He took it from her. "I hope there's medicated adhesive tape in it," he said. "There ought to be, unless your brother's dumb. What was he in?"

"Subs. He still is. And he's not dumb. He's only thirty and he's commanding the *Conger*. She's one of our newest and biggest."

"And how old are you?"

"I don't think you know anything about repairing an engine or you wouldn't talk so much."

"I don't. Not about engines. I was talking about something much more delightful and attractive."

"What are you going to do with the tape?"

"Stick it over the crack."

"And will that be all right?"

"For a few miles. May even take us to Overthorpe. To the *Royal*."

"I'm not staying at the *Royal*."

"That's churlish."

"Well, don't take things for granted."

"One has to these days. There's no time for finesse."

"Then you've a lot to learn."

He laughed. "Perhaps we both have, Sylvia. You chose the right place to break down."

"What do you mean?"

"Noel."

"Don't be so childish."

"Why not? I thought men's childishness was their chief charm in women's eyes."

"It's not in mine. And it's not true. I think men who believe that sort of sentimental nonsense and play up to it are just loathsome."

"Absolutely. Poisonous. Now say Noel. Just to be matey. And aren't I getting you to Overthorpe? Not, of course, the *Royal*. You look adorable when you smile. There's the slightest ghost of a dimple just ——" He broke off and watched her with a smile. "As if you didn't know." He left her side, and bending over the engine, pressed the strip of tape over the crack and then several other strips crosswise. He straightened up.

"And it's all right now?" she said.

"Noel."

"Very well. Noel."

He nodded his approval. "Not yet quite all right. That's why I said you'd chosen a good place to stop." He pointed to a cottage about fifty yards away along the road. "We'll want some water. You must have boiled most of it away. Didn't you know your engine was boiling?"

"I didn't think it mattered. Dick said the car was a hot little job and I thought that was perhaps what he meant."

"Marvellous. I'll hop along and get a can of water." He glanced at his watch. "We'll be at Overthorpe for tea if all goes well. It's only about twenty miles. Done much driving?"

"Quite a lot. I've driven for four years. I've a little open tourer. My father gave it to me when I was twenty-one."

"That makes you twenty-five. It's a girl's best age. She knows what she wants by then. And what she doesn't want. And how to get it, or avoid it."

"You know a lot about girls."

"A lifetime's study. Or shall we say about thirty years."

"Is that your age?"

He nodded.

"Did you start studying them as soon as you were born?"

"With my first breath. Or when my mother started to feed me. I was breast fed. That's why I've no complexes. Did you know that?"

"I think you're perfectly absurd."

"Or mad?"

"We shan't have tea at Overthorpe at this rate."

"Then you will have tea with me?"

"Of course."

"At the *Royal*?"

"Why not?"

"As you say. And it's very charming of you. What I was going to suggest, and it's why I asked if you'd driven much, is that I'll drive your crock and you drive my little bus."

"But why?"

"Well, yours will need nursing if we're going to make Overthorpe. I'm good at nursing. Almost as good as my mother was. I once nursed a Lancaster home on two engines, both missing."

"Had they fallen out?"

He shouted with laughter. "Coming in on a prayer. I mean they were misfiring."

"Was that anything?"

"Good God. It was the talk of the station for quite five minutes. Do you agree about the change over?"

"Of course." She laughed. "I should be scared driving with only a piece of sticking-plaster between me and disaster. You don't think anything will happen, do you?"

"Nothing more serious than the tape melting. In that case we'll have to stop and cool down and re-tape."

"I don't think we're going to get to Overthorpe for tea."

"The sun will still rise in the morning if we don't."

"You say the oddest things."

"I'm an odd chap. But let's get cracking. I'll beg some water and we'll be off."

Ten minutes later they set off, Sylvia leading in Blake's little coupé. "Keep her down to thirty," he sang out, "and don't crash the gears."

She put her head out through the flap and looking back at him called out: "I don't crash my gears. I double declutch."

He smiled, putting a hand to his ear as if he had not heard. Before she could repeat it he shouted: "Get cracking!" and changing up into third, sounded his horn again and again, as if he were a child playing with it.

She flushed slightly, and changing to top, felt the little car slip forward effortlessly and noiselessly. It was a pleasant change from her own car and she was soon thoroughly enjoying driving so responsive and silent an engine. She did not watch her speedometer and completely forgot the car behind. Then she noticed she was doing over fifty, and taking her foot off the accelerator, allowed the car to come to a standstill. She looked back as far as she could see along the road, about three-quarters of a mile, but there was nothing in sight. She got out and lit a cigarette and stood watching

the road. A feeling of uneasiness invaded her mind, yet its coming puzzled her. What was there to be uneasy about? He would come along presently. But why had he not sounded his horn when she went ahead? Perhaps he had and she had not heard him. How silly of her to feel uneasy. What *was* there to be uneasy about. And suddenly she was aware that she was not uneasy about her car but somehow about the whole affair. Yet what was there in it after all to make her uneasy? It was the sort of thing that was happening every day. She was just being silly and fanciful. She went back in her mind over the whole incident and pondered everything she could recollect—and there was very little she had forgotten, if anything at all. She could not help thinking how very ordinary it was. Just the sort of chance encounter that was taking place a hundred, a thousand times, probably, that very afternoon. She recalled his image to her mind. He was very good-looking. Almost too good-looking. Just as his eyes were too beautiful. For a man. But what charm he had and what an attractive smile and laugh and way of looking quickly at one. But why did she have this odd inexplicable feeling of uneasiness? Or was she imagining it? And then, in the distance, round the bend of the road, she saw the car coming and put her uneasiness out of mind. Throwing away her half-smoked cigarette she got into the coupé and waited for him to come up.

He drew up beside her. "I thought you'd bolted," he said.

She laughed.

"No, really I did. Quite honestly. My coupé would be a good bargain in exchange for this little crock. I thought you were a crook and had been leading me on in order to pinch my car."

"You didn't think anything of the sort."

He smiled. "I began to."

"It was you who proposed I should drive yours."

"Did I? I couldn't remember. Well, let's get on. And keep within hail."

"I'm so sorry. But your car is such a darling that I just let her out without knowing it."

"Nice little job. Glad you're enjoying it."

"And you're not. Poor Noel."

"That's better. I'd drive a red-hot tank for that. Now don't say it slipped out."

She laughed. "Half slipped out then."

"O.K. Half a loaf. Carry on. But I don't think we'll make Overthorpe without another halt. She's already beginning to steam a bit."

"That means we'll not be there for tea."

"'Fraid so. Does it matter so much? Or are you dying for a cup of tea?"

"I am rather."

"There's a sizeable village only about a mile or so ahead. Hayley Peveril. There's bound to be a place for tea there. I suggest we have tea and let Boanerges cool down."

"Why Boanerges?"

"You don't know your Bible. Don't you remember John and James, the sons of Zebedee, were called Boanerges, meaning the 'sons of thunder.' With the row she makes, don't you think it's a good name. What are you laughing at?"

"Something I remember. And I ought to have known about Boanerges."

"Go on."

"When Dick was at school—he was at Shelbourne—all the boys had to read the lessons in turn at the morning and evening chapel. One evening Dick had to read about John and James, and he read out in a solemn voice: 'John and James, the sons of Zebedee and Zambuk.' He got an awful beating from the headmaster."

"He sounds a lad of parts. But what about tea at Hayley Peveril?"

"Yes. I think that would be nice, Noel."

"Carry on da —— Sylvia, and thirty's the sky."

There was a small inn at Hayley Peveril and they ordered tea and sat in a little parlour overlooking a large garden and orchard. The casement window was open and a faint smell of burning leaves drifted slowly into the room.

"I love that stink," Noel said as they sat down. "Don't know why. Something connected with my very early childhood probably. That's when most of the things that stick happen to us. They make us what we are."

"Doesn't heredity do anything? "

"Quite a lot. I suppose it's about fifty-fifty. Are you hungry? "

"I am rather."

"Don't let's eat too much."

"Are you slimming. Or on a diet? "

"I'm thinking of dinner. Dinner's the meal of the day and I like to bring a good appetite to it and enjoy every minute of it—every mouthful, every sip. And afterwards every draw at my cigar. I'm something of a gourmet."

"I thought only old men were that."

"If you're not a gourmet when you're young you never live to be old. So I suggest we just have a snack."

"But I can eat a good tea now *and* a good dinner at eight o'clock."

"Supposing it's seven-thirty at the *Royal*."

"I didn't say I was coming to the *Royal*."

"Of course not. Well, what will you have? Eggs and bacon if we can get it or ——"

"I'll just have what you do."

"Good. And then we'll have a dinner for Lucullus at the *Royal*. Say yes. At least you can have dinner with me. Won't you give me that pleasure, Sylvia? "

"Perhaps. But leave it in the air. I hate to be ——"

"Tied down to anything," he put in, smiling."

"Exactly."

"You'll be tied down to marriage one day, you know."

"I don't know. And you don't know, either. Thank goodness, here comes the waitress. I hope they know how to make tea. I loathe wretched tea."

"I'm a dab at making tea. And coffee. I must show you how good I am one of these days." He smiled, and looking over to the waitress gave their order.

There being no longer any hurry, they dawdled over the meal, talking at first about generalities. But presently, with the scarcely perceptible growing of intimacy, they began to discuss their personal affairs and their experiences in the war. Sometimes, as he talked, she had a feeling that he was inventing as he went along. But she found it all engrossing, and what did it matter after all whether it was true or not.

Talking of the future he said he might take a post as pilot in one of the civil aviation companies either here or in Canada. He spoke confidently, as if he could pick and choose, and again she had the feeling that he was romancing. They had long finished tea and had smoked several cigarettes, when suddenly he glanced at his watch and broke off in the story he was telling her, and said: "Do you know it's half-past five?"

"It can't be."

"Well, near enough. We'd better push along.

We may be held up again by Boanerges before we get there. I've re-taped the crack and I think we'll make it now, but there's always the chance, and we don't want to be too late at the *Royal*. I like a bath before dinner. It's all part of the schedule. You're going to dine with me? "

" I said I wouldn't promise."

" That was years ago. Say you will, and give me something to look forward to while I'm humouring Boanerges along the highway."

" Very well."

" You're a darling."

" That's rather cheap, isn't it? "

He smiled. " Yes. Cheapened by too much use. Everybody's ' darling ' these days. But all I meant was ' thank you very much '."

" Hadn't we better be going? I've to arrange for repairs to Boanerges at a garage, you know."

" Leave it to me."

" You'll miss your bath."

" Why not stay at the *Royal*. Isn't it rather footling to go to different hotels now we've got to know and like each other? "

" We've known each other about three hours."

" Time is what you make it. Three hours, three years, or thirty years mean nothing in themselves. It's what's packed into them. We know each other as well after three hours as some would in a lifetime. Why don't you want to stay at the *Royal*? "

" I've not said I don't want to."

"O.K. Then let's get cracking."

"Nor that I do."

He laughed. "O.K. We'll leave it at that."

It was after half-past six when, Boanerges left for repairs at a garage, and the coupé put into the garage at the *Royal*, they walked into the hotel and up to the desk of the receptionist. He was a young man, and as Blake, with Sylvia just behind him, approached, he looked up with a smile and said: "Good evening, sir"

"I want a room. A large one."

"Yes, sir. Would you prefer a double bed or twin beds?"

There was a moment's silence. Furious, feeling her face flushing, Sylvia was on the point of walking out of the hotel when Blake turned his head quickly, glanced at her and away again, and then said to the receptionist: "I want the room for myself. A double bed. This lady will also want a room."

The receptionist grinned faintly. "Sorry," he said. He ran his finger down a plan. "There's sixteen and eighteen vacant on the second floor." His glance flickered from Blake's face to Sylvia's. The faint grin still lingered on his lips. His whole manner was touched with a discreet lewdness.

Blake turned to Sylvia. "Will that be all right?"

She hesitated. She wanted to say it would not. She wanted to say she had changed her mind, that she was not going to stay at the *Royal*. But before

the faintly lewd smirk of the receptionist her courage failed her. It seemed best, or least embarrassing, to ignore it all: to pretend the by-play between the two men had passed unnoticed by her. And so, despite a conviction that she was doing the wrong thing, despite an increasing uneasiness, she said quietly: "Yes, that will be all right." She added "Noel" but realized it was a shade too late and saw, or thought she saw, a lascivious gleam of amusement in the receptionist's eyes.

"What time is dinner?" Blake asked.

"Eight, sir," pushing over the keys of the two rooms. "The porter will bring your things up. The lift's to the left."

"Don't bother. We've only hand luggage. Oh, by the way, are there bathrooms attached to the bedrooms. I must ——"

"Yes, sir," the receptionist put in, and turning away busied himself with some forms.

Going up in the lift, and along the corridor to their adjoining rooms, Sylvia was silent, so utterly preoccupied with her thoughts that twice when Blake made some remark to her she made no response and he glanced quickly at her face and as quickly away again.

At the door of her room he gave her the key and said: "A cocktail in the lounge at half-past seven or so. O.K.?"

"I shan't be ready by then. I like to soak."

He smiled. "A quarter to eight, then."

She could not resist his smile, the warm friendliness in his eyes, his charm. She returned his smile and said: "I'll try."

She lay a long while drowsily soaking in her bath, endlessly reviewing the events of the afternoon. She could come to no conclusion about what she had done. At one moment she was glad, at another she regretted it, and at yet another she felt somehow afraid, but was inclined to laugh at herself for this. What was there to be afraid of? She summoned up Blake's image and lay watching him: seeing over and over again his quick smile, the friendly expression in his eyes, a sudden turn of his head, the set of his shoulders, and the trick he had of tapping his cigarette with his forefinger to loosen the ash. How good-looking and attractive he was. Terribly attractive. Too attractive, if such a thing were possible. And yet she was faintly aware that she was not only greatly attracted. There was something else. Something that was not attraction at all. Something she did not quite understand, however conscious she was of its presence. It was a sort of—she sought for a word but for a long while could not find one that did not, considered coolly, seem far-fetched and rather silly. Repulsion. Was that it? A faint, half-sensed repulsion? But wasn't that absurd? How could one be so greatly attracted to a person and at the same time repelled, if only slightly? No, it could not be repulsion. Or could it? It seemed unlikely. What

then was it? Fear? No, it wasn't that. Or was it? Just a little? Wasn't there something a little frightening in his broad muscular shoulders and the powerful set of his figure? What did it remind her of? She sought for an analogy and at last found one: he was rather like a magnificent young bull. She remembered now the bull in the field where they had lived when she was a child. A huge, magnificent animal. How often she had stood admiring its massive beauty, admiring yet fearful, glad that a fence separated her from this huge, magnificent beast so quietly grazing there, so peacefully regarding her with its mild eyes, so amicably giving little occasional soft snorts. This great creature which could wear so different a guise, which could be so menacing, so frightening, so terrifying, when the mood came upon it, when the urge of instinct filled and mastered it (as she well knew from things told her then and other things she had not been meant to hear). Yes, there was a likeness. There was something of the sleeping menace of the young bull about Noel Blake. That would account for her feeling of faint repulsion or fear or terror or whatever it was. She came to some decisions and put at least one of them into effect at the earliest opportunity.

As they sat sipping their cocktails in the lounge, where there was but a sprinkling of other guests, but none near them, she said quietly: "I want you to get this quite clear, Noel."

He glanced at her quickly, smiled, and said lazily: "Don't look so serious, you'll spoil my mood. I'm just right now for a pleasant hour at the trough. Won't it keep?"

"No."

"O.K. Go ahead."

"I'm not going to sleep with you. Do get that clear. Neither tonight nor any other night. I just don't want to. And if that's what you want you're wasting your time. And I'm paying for myself here. Apart from all that I'll be delighted to stay here with you until Monday."

"O.K., darling. Or am I forbidden to call you darling?"

"I'd rather you didn't. It's likely to be misunderstood by anyone overhearing. And anyhow, it's stupid in the circumstances."

"Circumstances could make it appropriate."

"That is just the point. There is not going to be anything of that."

"O.K. But you don't know what you're missing."

"How do you know I don't know?"

"Oh, I don't mean that. I don't suppose you're any more a virgin than I am. You're twenty-five and have knocked about the world, and with your looks are bound to have had experiences. Probably as many as I have. Perhaps more. I could never understand the fuss made about virginity. I mean the value set on it. If it's anything more than pre-

tence: fairy-tale pretence. After all, what is virginity but ignorance? And is ignorance an asset to anyone, boy or girl? No, what I meant was that you've probably never been made love to by a man like me and so you're missing a very enjoyable and moving experience. I've told you I'm a gourmet. I'm also a connoisseur in the art of making love."

"You've a pretty conceit of yourself."

"Not a bit. It's true. Is truth conceit? You see I hold that our bodies were given us to enjoy, to get the best out of. They're like a delicate machine that must be nursed and coaxed and caressed to get its brightest performance. I know a lot about delicate machines and I know a lot about the body. It's been my study. I know how to get the last exquisite scruple of pleasure out of it. Most people know nothing about their bodies. They treat them anyhow. Like taking a hammer to a watch. They eat and drink like pigs at the trough and make love like a barnyard fowl. I eat and drink like a gourmet and make love like a master. That was why I said you did not know what you were missing."

She was very quickly susceptible to alcohol, and was now half way through her second cocktail, so that she heard his words as if from a rather dreamy distance, and watched his face with eyes not quite clear. Behind the pleasant voice, behind the amused friendly eyes, she felt his almost overpowering charm; felt too, but now very faintly and remotely, that other uneasy sensation, that half-

consciousness of fear and, for the possibility of this still remained with her, a slight repulsion. She felt her caution, her convictions, her decisions, slipping away from her on a warm, drowsy, pleasant tide, induced, she knew, partly by her hot bath, but chiefly by the cocktails. She had been silly to have the second one. It always had that effect upon her. She would be careful to drink very little wine at dinner and to refuse a liqueur afterwards. She was relieved when the dinner gong sounded. She would be herself again as soon as she had eaten some food.

She thoroughly enjoyed the meal. The food was excellent and she chose hock to drink, declining the burgundy he wanted her to have and which he had himself. It was a very good hock. Under its gentle influence and that of the food and the soft lights in the dining room, and the muted playing of a small hidden orchestra, she began to feel a delicious sense of well-being, of perfect physical happiness. Blake's voice too, warm and friendly and low, played its part. She not only felt delightfully well and filled with a deep contentment, but her fears and her uneasiness and doubts had all been dispersed and lost in this warm rosy mist that enveloped her: enveloped them both. And Blake set himself out to be the perfect host (despite the Dutch treat side of the affair upon which she had insisted). He kept the conversational ball easily and effortlessly passing back and forth across the table. He told her story after story of his experiences

during the war, or of experiences of others, and when she laughed at some of them and told him he was inventing them, he smiled at her charmingly and said: "Well, darling, they're based on fact and I'm just decorating. Facts are often so cold and dull. They need enlivening and warming." She no longer expostulated at the "darling." He was talking so quietly that no one could hear. And what, after all, did it matter? It had become a commonplace; a sort of vogue word as "old thing" or "old top" had once been. It was not as if she were calling him darling. That would have been different. It would have meant, or he would have thought it meant, what she had no intention of giving him to understand. And so she allowed him to go on, smiling at his stories, laughing softly at his jokes, every now and again catching his warm friendly admiring glance and now returning it with warmth and friendliness. Why not? Why withhold what she felt? She did feel warm and friendly towards him: just that and no more. Above all she was glad that among his stories and jokes there were no bawdy ones. She hated smutty stories, even when they were funny, which she rarely found them. It had been one of the things she had most disliked when she was first in the W.A.A.F., for not a few of the girls had a fund of such tales and delighted to regale all and sundry with them. It had always seemed to her that the laughter which greeted these tales had a peculiar

characteristic note: a note she found gratingly ugly and repulsive.

There was a dance in the hotel from nine-thirty to one-thirty, and about ten o'clock they went into the banqueting hall, where it was being held, and danced until just before eleven, when, as the orchestra began to play *Jealousy*, and he held out his hand to her, she said: "I'd rather sit it out. It's terribly hot and airless in here."

"Let's go into the garden. It's a grand night. Warm and starry."

The gardens were faintly lit with innumerable fairy lights which gave everything, and the few people strolling there, the appearance of scenes and players in a dimly lit play. The orchestra from the dance was muted now to a frail musical background, unheard unless one listened, and yet just touching one's consciousness like delicately stroking fingers.

They sat down in a small arbour. "Enjoying it?" Blake said.

"It's heavenly. How lovely everything is when one is perfectly happy."

"Are you?"

"Just now, yes."

Presently he put an arm about her and drew her closer to him. She did not repulse him or speak. He began to caress her cheek, her neck, with his fingers, very gently and softly. He played with her ear, tweaking the lobe. He turned her face round

and kissed her mouth and she was glad and returned his kiss. He kept his lips on hers and she felt that he was waiting. She wanted the kiss to become passionate, knew that he was only waiting. His arm tightened round her. She felt his lips open and was suddenly afraid. She drew away and stirred in his arms, loosing his embrace. She did not trust herself to speak. He kept silent and his silence began to prey upon her. Her fear and uneasiness increased. The tension in the arbour grew and grew until for her it became unbearable and she was about to end it by saying something, however banal, or by getting up abruptly and going, when he said, in a quiet even voice in which she thought there was a touch of amusement: "Shall we go for a walk or would you rather dance again?"

She agreed to go for a walk and he brought her a wrap. They went down to the promenade and walked its length, then passed on, crossing the saltings dotted with clumps of scrub, over which they occasionally stumbled in the dim light, for the waning moon was frequently hidden by clouds which drifted slowly across its light in the warm, almost still air. "We'd see better if we walked slower," he said. "There's no hurry." He put his arm about her and she did not remonstrate, although his words and his action somehow alarmed her. And abruptly, in an instant, fear flooded her mind. "Let's go back," she said.

"We've only just come out."

"I'm tired."

"We'll sit down. The sand's still warm from the day's sun."

She wanted to say "no"; to say they'd go back at once. But she did not say it. Her mind was a duelling ground for opposing thoughts. One said: "Go back before something happens; you were a fool to have come." The other said: "Don't be stupid, childish; what is there to be afraid of?"

They sat down and he lay back, resting on one elbow. She felt he was watching her in the almost darkness, and was relieved when the moon sailed out from the clouds. She had to glance down at him and saw that he was smiling. "What are you afraid of?" he said.

"I'm not afraid."

"You are, you know. What *are* you afraid of?"

"I am not afraid."

"Then come closer."

She did not move.

He sat up and drew her into his arms. "Don't be afraid," he said gently. "Do you think I would hurt you?" The tenderness in his voice moved her and when he put his mouth on hers she responded to his kiss. Almost immediately she drew her mouth from his, feeling that if the kiss went on she would no longer care what happened. He drew her face down to his and his mouth closed on hers, but now fear once more took possession of her and she

struggled away and scarcely knowing what she said, cried out: "No, Noel; please, no."

He released her and laughed. "I told you that you were afraid," he said. "How silly you are to be afraid of me, and how ungrateful."

"Ungrateful?" She got to her feet quickly and stood looking down at him, feeling his tremendous charm, conscious of his almost bewildering attraction.

"Yes. Ungrateful. Didn't you say in the harbour it was heavenly. Shouldn't one be grateful for heaven?"

"Yes. I'm sorry. I am grateful. I've been very happy this evening. Thank you very much." She laughed lightly. "There! will that do?"

"Fine. Now sit down again."

"No. Please. I'd rather not. Let's go back. I'd like to dance again."

He jumped to his feet. "O.K. Still afraid of me?" "No."

He took her in his arms and again they kissed, but this time he quickly drew his mouth from hers and said lightly: "Now you're being sensible. Come along."

They danced again until half-past twelve and then went into the lounge for a last drink before going to their rooms. She had a lemon and angostura, which he recommended as a thirst quencher, and he had a whisky and soda. They sat sipping their drinks and talking in voices so low as

to be almost whispering, which seemed to give their talk an added intimacy. Sleepy as she was her senses were alert and she felt as he talked that he was exerting all his great sexual attraction to win her over to sleep with him. She fought against it, fought against him, and against herself, for she was only too well aware now that she wanted to give in. She began to feel that if she stayed there much longer, so near him, so much under the spell of his charm, she would not be able to hold out, and she said suddenly, as she watched his finger tapping his cigarette: "O I'm so tired. I simply must go to bed."

They went upstairs in the lift and walked along the corridor together. It was but dimly lit. They stopped outside her door and he took her in his arms and pressed his mouth to hers. For a long moment she would not respond to his kiss and then, as if in sudden surrender, she opened her lips. He stooped and lifted her in his arms and moved towards his door. In swift terror she fought off the sweet langour which was falling over her and cried out "No," pushing her hands against his breast. As he momentarily stopped she said quietly: "Put me down, Noel, and let me go."

He obeyed her and stood watching her, smiling.

She was breathing quickly, her heart thumping, but she mastered her voice and said calmly: "I told you no. I thought you understood. Good-night."

He laughed softly. "Not a last good-night kiss?"

She did not reply, but opened her door and went into her room, and a moment later heard his door close too.

She did not sleep for quite a while. She did not want to sleep. She wanted to go over all that had happened, to think about it away from him, away from his overwhelming, over-riding attractiveness. Close beside him she could not think clearly and logically; it was as if her senses were partly drugged; but here, alone, away from him, she could weigh everything: see everything in its true colours and its right perspective. Yet even as she thought about these things she was conscious of his presence in the next room. How little really lay between them. And how much: for she knew that if suddenly he was in the room with her she would have opened her arms to him. She could still feel that last rough kiss on her lips. They were still a little painful and she was glad of the pain. Presently, as her thoughts veered back and forth, the image of him as a young bull slipped back into her mind and she knew how true it was. And with that image came, too, that feeling of fear, of terror; and that faint strange sensation that was akin to repulsion; that was, perhaps, it now seemed to her, actually repulsion. He both attracted and repelled her; fascinated and terrified her; charmed her. She began to think of the word charm and remembered that it originally

meant to put a spell upon one, as magicians and witches and sorcerers were supposed to do, and she felt that there was some truth in that old belief. That was what he did when they were together, or tried to do; but whether he did it consciously or not she could not decide. And as her mind puzzled itself with this and that, a slow tide of drowsiness began to take the sharp edges from her thoughts, as the incoming sea erodes the hard ripples in sand. And presently she slept.

She woke suddenly, hours later, knowing, as one does, that something had awakened her, and she lay wondering what it was and what was the time. She looked at her wrist watch and saw that it was half-past three. She lay listening. Perhaps after all it was nothing. She began to sink down into sleep again when she was startled wide awake. Someone was tapping at her door. Tap, tap, tap, it went; tap, tap, tap, and then stopped. Her heart began to beat fast. What was she going to do? Somewhere within her a quiet voice said: "Do nothing; be quiet; don't answer." Another voice cried: "Let him in: why not?"

Again the tapping came and she sat up in bed. Tap, tap, tap, tap it went, and paused, and went on again; and the bizarre thought came to her that it was tapping out a message in Morse. She could not help smiling. It seemed somehow so boyish and typical of him, as if he were playing the part of the hero in some old romance, shut up in a dungeon.

And with her amusement, the voice that cried "Let him in: why not?" lost its power over her. She lay down, and as the tapping began again she pulled the clothes over her head. At the back of her mind was a slight feeling of anger. Supposing he were seen out there tapping at the door. How she would hate that. The thought made the whole affair seem disgusting, clandestine; and before sleep came over her again she had half decided to leave the *Royal* in the morning and return to London.

When she came down to breakfast the sun was shining brilliantly into the breakfast room and outside in the gardens it might, except for the yellowing leaves of the trees, have been high summer. How foolish to return to town with the weather so glorious. No, she would not do that. But she'd leave the *Royal*. Or at any rate she'd think it over during breakfast; and she'd certainly talk straight to Noel about his behaviour in the small hours. It would entirely depend upon his attitude whether she went or remained. There must be no more of these unpleasant attempts to molest her. She would have it out with him as soon as he put in an appearance. Why wasn't he down? It was rather discourteous to her. Perhaps that was yet another side of him: an indifference to the ordinary courtesies a woman expects. But no, somehow that did not seem to fit in. Surely one of the most noticeable things about him had been how punctilious, in an

unobtrusive way, he had been in all those little observances which are so welcomed by women.

And when, presently, he came in he was all apologies: was so penitent, looked so handsome, and was so boyishly charming that when he said, "So sorry, darling. I overslept; just dropped bang off again before I knew it," she refrained from snatching at the opportunity thus offered her, and returned his smile and said quietly: "Isn't it a heavenly morning." But she told herself she was merely postponing having the matter out with him. After all, before breakfast wasn't exactly the best time for having things out. Tempers frayed so easily when the stomach was empty. It could wait until at least the first pangs were satisfied. But it was not until they had finished breakfast that she found the right moment. It was almost as if he were deliberately steering the conversation into every direction but one which would give her an opening.

As they finished and he lit her cigarette and his own, she said: "Everyone seems very excited about something in the papers this morning. Look at them. Is there any exciting news about anything?"

"Haven't heard anything."

"There was nothing on the radio."

He smiled at her through the cigarette smoke wreathing his face. His eyes were half closed and he was leaning back in his chair luxuriously re-

laxed. "I like my first cigarette after breakfast in perfect peace: the mind utterly blank. One owes that attention to the best cigarette of the day. When it's gone to join all the other thousands I've offered up on the morning altar of pleasure I'll hop out to the lounge and bring in a paper and see what all the hullabaloo's about. Or perhaps we'll go and sit in the lounge?"

She nodded and smiled but said nothing.

Presently they went into the lounge and sat on a sofa and he picked up one of the morning's newspapers scattered about. There were other papers about within reach of her hand but she did not bother to get one, waiting for him to tell her.

He seemed utterly engrossed in what he was reading: to have completely forgotten her. At last, impatient, she said: "Perhaps you'll give me another cigarette while I'm waiting."

He looked up from the paper and smiled at her. "So sorry, darling," and took out his case.

"Must you call me darling?" she said, as she took one and he lit it.

"You are a darling."

"O don't be so absurd. And what is the exciting news?"

"It's certainly exciting." He put the paper down. "Do you know Stonington?"

"No."

"Well, apparently it's in Bucks and about thirty or so miles out of London. On Thursday evening,

just before seven, a young man and woman booked in at the Cavendish Hotel there. Just for the night. They had dinner there, went for a walk, returned and had a few drinks in the bar and went up to their room about half-past eleven. In the morning the manager had to force the door of their room. The man wasn't there. The young woman's body was on the bed, naked, face downwards. Her feet were tied together with a silk stocking. She had been strangled and mutilated. And she had also been beaten about the body and thighs with, apparently, a dog-whip."

Sylvia uttered a cry of horror. "Mutilated," she said, "how do you mean?"

He explained and she cried: "O stop! No one could be so vile. It's — it's inhuman, bestial; the work of a fiend."

He smiled. "The work of a man."

"I can't believe it."

He shrugged his shoulders slightly, continuing to smile. "I was one of the first into Belsen," he said. "I flew a party of 'brass-hats' in. I saw horrors there that took me a long while to forget and I won't describe for you. And I heard stories, even more horrible, of the depths men can sink to in the grip of lust."

She stared at him, her hand to her face. "How do you mean?"

"Murder, rape, perversion, torture, even canni-

balism: there were authenticated stories of all these things."

"They must have been fiends."

"They were men."

"They were maniacs."

"Oh, of course. When the fit took them. But only then." "What do you mean?"

"They were just ordinary, normal, average men, most of their time. No one would have guessed, meeting them in a social way, that hidden in them was a ravening beast that slept most of the time and then woke up and took possession and turned that very ordinary-looking bloke into a maniac who had to satisfy his lust at any cost."

"I can't believe it."

"It's true, darling. But I forgot. You don't like 'darling'." He smiled and looked into her eyes and his charm was like a warm and friendly hand-clasp.

"But surely, Noel, people couldn't act like that and it not show in their faces, in their expressions. Surely there'd be something about them that would be noticeable, would mark them out from ordinary normal decent people?"

"Not a bit. Do you think that young woman at Stonington noticed anything?"

"She might. No one will ever know."

"Not she, my dear Sylvia. If you had met that bloke last Thursday you'd have thought him just an ordinary sort of chap. So you would if you'd met

him on Friday. The fit had passed then. The hunger satisfied."

"O it's too horrible."

He laughed softly. "If maniacs were recognizable there'd be none at large." He regarded her smilingly, tapping on his cigarette. "I might be a maniac for all you know. I might even be that bloke. Aren't you glad you didn't sleep with me last night?"

"Why did you come knocking on my door at three o'clock this morning?"

"I hoped you'd hear me and let me in."

"I did hear you."

He gave her his warm, friendly, and too attractive smile. "How unkind of you."

"Do you always break your word like that?"

"Did I give it. I don't remember. But if I did it was made to be broken, as all such promises are. Women expect them to be broken. Are disappointed if they are not."

"You know a lot about women."

"You mean I think I do. But I do know. Why shouldn't I? Are women so mysterious? They are merely human beings, as men are. One has only to be much with them and to study them and make love to them to know them."

She did not comment on this but sat silently watching the smoke from her cigarette for some considerable time. Then she said: "All women are not alike. Or perhaps you think they are."

"They're slightly more alike than men. That's all. What then?"

"Well, Noel, *I* don't expect a promise of that sort to be broken. If you didn't give it in words it was understood between us. I don't see how two people can associate at all if the given promise of one or both can be so lightly broken."

"In ordinary mundane things, I agree. But in the matter of love ——"

"It's not love, Noel. Not what is usually meant when people speak of love. You don't love me and I don't love you. You just want to go to bed with me." "Well, why not? You like me."

"Is that enough?"

He laughed. "Why not? You would enjoy it as much as I should. I can promise you that."

"I just don't want to, and I've no intention of doing anything of the sort, as I told you last night."

"If that's how you look at it you shouldn't let yourself be kissed."

"How can I help myself?"

"Your kisses were as hot as mine."

"That's what I mean."

"That I'm taking an unfair advantage of you?"

"Well, yes, I do mean that in a way, Noel. But all men do. They set out to rouse girls and it is not hard." "They come half way to meet us."

"I suppose so."

"But you adorable innocent, isn't that the whole crux of it? That is the greatest joy of sex. Each

goes half way. Each gives and receives. For the Lord's sake don't be so vestal. What are we going to do this morning? "

"Nothing. Unless you give me your promise to stop at least from waking me up in the middle of the night. Supposing someone had come along and seen you. One of the staff. That horrid little man at the reception counter. I should have been ashamed to face them. Aren't you ashamed to do that sort of thing with all its risks of — of embarrassment?"

"If people were ashamed of love-making the human race would have died out aeons ago."

"I'm not talking of love-making, but of such horrid clandestine — oh, I don't know what to call them."

He laughed. "Let's say antics. Or if you prefer it, monkey tricks."

"That's horrid."

"Monkeys are. And men were monkeys once. Or near enough. And what's bred in the bone you know. But O.K., I promise."

"And you'll keep it? "

"I promise that too. Now what are we going to do this morning? "

"Do you know Mulhay Parva? "

"Is it a drink? "

"Don't be so absurd. It's a village about ten miles from here and is one of the reasons why I came to Overthorpe."

"Then God bless Mulhaye—what was it?"

"Mulhaye Parva."

"Oh, yes, of course. One of the few Latin words I remember from my Winborough days. And is there a Mulhaye Magna?"

"I don't think so."

"Well, what's Parva got?"

"There was a small Roman town there and the site has recently been excavated, and, well, I'm interested in archaeology and I'd like to go and see what there is. Will it bore you?"

"I'm rarely bored. And never when in the right company. What time do you want to set off?"

"I can be ready in a quarter of an hour. Will that be all right?"

"O.K. by me. Would you like to drive?"

"O may I? I'd love to. Your little car runs like — like velvet."

"What did you expect? O.K. You shall drive and I'll sit beside you and admire the scenery. I'll hop round to the garage and give her the once over."

They reached Mulhaye Parva soon after ten, and when she had taken photographs of some of the excavated villas they sat down on one of the broken marble steps leading down to the remains of a Roman bath and remained there quite a while, smoking and talking.

"Queer crowd, the old Romans," he said. "I mean the patricians: probably the most vicious

people who ever lived. The Italian aristocracy at the time of the Borgias were a bit rank, but they were sweet compared with the old Romans."

"Were they as bad as all that? I haven't gathered quite that from my reading, and I've read pretty extensively."

"You haven't read the right books. They wouldn't come your way. I assure you they were the tops in the vice class. There was nothing they didn't practice and enjoy. They brought flagellation to an art. A sexual art."

"Flagellation," she said. "Do you mean whipping?"

"Exactly."

"But I don't understand."

He explained at length, and as he spoke she glanced sideways at his face and could not but observe his absorbed expression. But it was more than absorption, she thought, and puzzled herself to find a word, and at last found one: gloating. It seemed somehow apt, not only for what he was telling her, but for the very tone of his voice. As she watched his face and listened to his normally pleasant voice, now invaded by this note of gloating, she began to feel horrified; and abruptly there again took possession of her that feeling of fear, of uneasiness, and of a sort of repulsion, of which she had several times been so vividly conscious. She wanted to tell him to stop; that it was vile, beastly, and that she had heard enough, and more than

enough. But his expression and his voice began to exercise a horrid fascination upon her and she said nothing. It was almost with a sense of startlement that she heard him saying, in his normal voice: "Of course, they'd no games. I mean games played purely for the games' sake. No public games of that sort. Of course they had private games: a sort of checkers, and hop-sotch, and craps. But of anything like cricket they'd nothing." He half sighed, or so it seemed to her, and shook himself, and she glanced at him and noted his changed expression: boyish, open, warmly friendly, and how charming. "What a lovely game cricket is," he went on. "I used to be pretty good at Winborough. I was in the first, got my cap, and once, playing against Radley, I scored one hundred and nine not out, and took five wickets for seventeen."

She was listening, with no great interest in his subject, but loving the sound of his voice. She felt that he was inventing it all, but what did it matter?

"It was my ambition," he went on, "to play for a county; and to play for England in a Test Match seemed to me the greatest goal to which a man could aspire." He laughed softly. "And I still think so. But I wasn't good enough. I was merely very good just now and then, and that very rarely, but as a rule I was very average. Not half as good as I am at sailing a boat in any class, from

a twelve-foot dinghy to a ten-ton yacht. I'm tops at that. And not just on my peak days, but all the time." He smiled. "You have to be when you're sailing a boat, or you're in trouble."

She laughed happily. "I don't believe a word of it."

"You don't believe I can sail a boat?"

"I don't believe anything. I think you're the most dreadful romancer since Baron Munchausen, or old Mandeville, or Louis de Rougemont."

"O.K. I'll show you. It's a grand day for a sail. Enough wind to show a boat's paces and a nice little popple on the sea to test the sea-legs. Are you a good sailor?" "I think so."

"We'll see. We'll get back to Overthorpe for lunch and go out this afternoon. There are some nice little craft on the beach. I noticed them as we came along the strand this morning."

She smiled, but she still did not believe him.

"There's no hurry," she said. "I want to take a few more photographs here, and then I want to go about a mile beyond the village where they're beginning to excavate a temple."

"Who's it to? Venus or Priapus?"

"I don't know. Perhaps we'll find out if one of the archaeologists is there."

He glanced at her and smiled, and said: "Well, either would be intriguing." And then: "Don't move. You're just perfect there. Let me take a snap of you."

He took up his position and levelled the camera, shielding the view-finder with his hand. And then he looked over to her and smiled. "Watch the birdie," he said. She looked at him and returned his smile. He did not press the trigger but stood there, slightly stooping, regarding her fixedly, the smile still upon his lips. She found herself beginning to feel uneasy under that smiling, fixed regard, and there slipped back into her mind something which, on and off, had been bothering her all the morning. When Noel had left her in the lounge after breakfast to go and see to the car, she had picked up the paper and read the account of the affair at Stonington. She had read it with a disgusted and appalled fascination, and then read parts of it through again. And it was then that she had suddenly realized that the newspaper account differed from the story as Noel had told it to her. He had said the girl had been whipped on the back and thighs, but in the paper it merely said on the back. Why had he added thighs? She weighed and pondered it. Was it of any importance? Wasn't it the sort of thing anyone might do in retailing something read? Perhaps. But then would not one be more likely to omit something than to put in additional matter? Surely that was a reasonable assumption. But was it so entirely reasonable as it seemed? After all, in thinking about a whipping one would expect the thighs as well as the body to bear the marks. And that being the case, he would

quite naturally say "body and thighs." Or would he? Wasn't there perhaps some other reason why he had added thighs when the account in the paper merely said body? But what other reason could there possibly be? It didn't seem to make sense. Was it that he'd thought the girl had been whipped on the body and buttocks, but disliking the word buttocks, as so many people did, and as she in fact did herself, he had substituted thighs? It might, of course, be that. It was reasonable enough. Or it might be nothing of the sort. The thing might be pure chance and utterly unimportant; a trivial difference that anything might have been responsible for. How silly she was being, taking such a trifle so seriously. This was making a whole range of mountains out of a molehill. And so, by the time Noel had returned to say the car was ready, she had dismissed it from her mind. But only temporarily. Again and again, during the morning, the thought had come creeping back, edging its way in, troubling her, taking away much of the pleasure of the excursion. Especially had it taken possession of her mind while he was telling her of the vicious lives led by the old Roman patricians, when his voice had seemed to take on that ugly, gloating note. Of course, since he was telling her about the vice of flagellation, it was reasonable that she should think of the whipped girl, and reasonable that she should remember he had said body and thighs. Yes, that seemed to explain why she thought about it then.

But why should it now have come creeping back into her mind as he stood there holding the camera and regarding her with so fixed and watchful a smile? There did not seem to be a reasonable explanation for that. True, it was not quite his usual warm, friendly smile. It was more—what was the word—more probing. No, that was not quite what it was. It was almost as if he were trying to put a spell upon her. Or was it all just her fancy, and wasn't she being ridiculous and childish? Once you started fancying things there was no preposterous, grotesque, or absurd limit you could set to your thoughts.

Noel's voice broke into her thoughts. "Turn your head a little to the left and I'll take another."

"Are you sure you've taken one? I didn't hear the shutter."

"Of course you didn't. Your mind was wandering. Do you know what you looked like?"

"No."

"Have you ever seen a rabbit fascinated into immobility by the glare of a stoat?"

"No."

"Then you must imagine it. And that's just how you've been looking for the past two or three minutes."

"What do you mean by fascinated? Hypnotized?"

"More or less." He laughed. "Did you think I was trying to hypnotize you?"

And abruptly she decided to ask him. "No. But my thoughts were far away. I was thinking of that awful affair at Stonington."

"That must be the influence of the Roman remains. This site is probably haunted by all sorts of horrors."

"Why this site in particular?"

"Oh, I meant the whole village. But for a particular one, I'd lay odds on the temple where we're going presently. More horrors, ritual horrors, have been committed in temples, in the guise of religion, than anywhere else on earth. An odd commentary on humanity, don't you think?"

"I might if I believed it. But never mind that, Noel. Perhaps it's true. You remember in the lounge this morning telling me about the Stonington murder?"

"Of course. I read it out of the *Telegraph*."

"You *read* it in the *Telegraph* but you *told* it to me. You'd put the paper down."

"Quite right, now I come to think of it. Carry on."

"Do you remember telling me the girl had been whipped on the body and thighs?"

"I think so. Yes. I think that's what I said."

"Aren't you sure?"

"Good lord, no. What's the odds. Back or thighs or belly or bottom. The poor little bitch was strangled and is dead. That's all that matters, isn't it?"

"I picked up the *Telegraph* when you'd gone to the garage and read the account, and it merely said she'd been whipped on the body."

"So what?"

"Well, Noel, it seemed—— I mean, I thought——"

He interrupted her with a burst of laughter. "Rich!" he said. "Oh, rich! So I'm the bloke who did the bloody deed at Stonington. What a darling little duck you are. Here, take a specially posed snap of me for the Police 'Wanted' poster." And he struck an attitude.

She had to laugh, partly from relief, partly because of his absurd pose. What a ridiculous donkey she had been. "I thought you were taking another of me," she said.

"I took that when you were charging me with murder."

She laughed again. "I'm so sorry, Noel. Stay like that and I'll take you as a memento and a reminder." She took the camera from him and took the snap. Then they both laughed and he took her in his arms and kissed her. It was a kiss on the lips, but a fleeting one, without passion; just a friendly caress; almost the kiss of a child.

"And now," he said, "let's go and pay our respects to Venus. Or was it Priapus?"

"I don't think they had temples to Priapus."

"A sad lack of imagination. Wasn't he the son of Bacchus and Venus? Who could be more worthy

of a temple? Or what more worthy than the Phallus? ”

“ Let’s go and see,” she said, not liking the trend of the conversation.

“ Come along then.” He took her hand, and as they walked along, he said, an amused note in his voice: “ You’re offended.”

“ No,” she said, “ but, well, why talk about such things? ”

“ I thought you were an archaeologist. The scientific approach, and all that.”

“ I’m not. And if I were you were making a joke about it, and, well, oh, I don’t know, but it seems somehow indecent.”

“ What a little Puritan you are. And what a goose. A conventional goose. Don’t you see that the only sane way to deal with these things is to accept them and laugh at them. If one takes them too seriously they don’t make sense. Or the creator who thought them up doesn’t. If there was a creator. So let’s make fun of them. And, of course, enjoy them.”

It was nearly one o’clock when they set off for Overthorpe. She was glad she was driving, as it gave her an excuse not to talk. She didn’t want to talk. She wanted to think: to think about this extraordinary young man who was so handsome, so attractive, so charming: who seemed to be a dozen persons, all utterly different, in one body, and who changed from one to another with bewildering and

even frightening swiftness. Yes, she wanted to think a great deal about him; about this young man who was already (and she did not attempt to hide it from herself) beginning to trouble her greatly; to trouble her heart, to disturb her mind.

As if aware of her wish to be quiet, Noel said very little during the ten miles' drive back, although, as she was aware, he often watched her face. Once he said: "You drive well," and she said: "Thank you." Almost immediately he added: "For a woman," and she knew he was smiling but would not glance at him. Presently he went on: "Silly joke that; women by and large drive as well as men; only difference is they're a little less mindful of the rights of others on the highway. But then, of course, they're like that in everything. Everything revolves round themselves. They always take the personal view. They can't see the wood because they're looking at one tree in the middle. The family tree. Their family. And themselves in particular. Jolly good that, don't you think?"

She smiled, but made no comment, and for several miles he was silent. Then he said: "Cigarette? If I light it and pop it in for you?"

"No thank you."

"Unhygienic?"

"I didn't say so."

"Perhaps you thought so. Not half so unhygienic as kissing. Don't you think so?"

She did not reply and he again lapsed into silence. She knew he was smiling and watching her, and this long inquisition of his eyes began to play on her nerves until at last she glanced quickly at him, caught his watching eyes, and said almost sharply: "I wish you'd not sit watching me like that. It makes me nervous. Why don't you look at the scenery."

"It's very beautiful, the autumnal scene, isn't it?"

"Then please look at it."

"But not a patch on you, darling. But I won't look at you if it rattles you. Not now. Too dangerous. I'd hate to be killed just now, wouldn't you?"

"Oh, please stop talking nonsense."

He said no more until they reached the *Royal*, and then he said: "One-thirteen. I hope the soup won't be cold."

It wasn't, and they were just finishing it when he said: "Don't look for a moment, but presently take a squint at the table near the corner on your half left."

"I've already looked at them, if that's what you want me to look at. They seem two very ordinary, harmless big men. They look rather like policemen."

"That's not a bad shot. They're detectives."

"How do you know?"

"It's writ large on every inch of them."

"I wonder why they don't use little men as detectives."

"Because detectives often get into a scrap and it's then that size counts."

"But the little men could do the brain work behind the scenes and let the big men do the fighting."

"Are you suggesting I'm brainless?"

She laughed. "Don't be silly. And I thought it was only women who always referred everything to themselves. Can't see the wood for the tree in the middle, I think you said."

"If we weren't in a public place I should beat you."

"I'm sure you'd like to." "Love it."

She glanced at him quickly, because of a strange note in his voice, and caught, or thought she did, an odd expression in his eyes. He smiled gaily at her and she wondered if she had been mistaken, and almost immediately was sure she had. What a fanciful little donkey she was becoming. "What are they doing here?" she said.

"Sherlock and Sexton? Oh, looking for the bloke who strangled the girl at Stonington with a silk stocking."

"You're not serious."

He laughed. "I'm never serious when I'm happy. But they might be. Why not? Stonington's only about a hundred miles or so from here. And the bloke no doubt had a car."

"It didn't say so in the paper."

"It didn't say he had a head either." He smiled into her eyes. "You know, Sylvia, being strangled with a silk stocking puts a girl into the peerage in a way."

"Whatever do you mean?"

"Well, peers have the traditional right to be hanged by a silken rope. What's the difference between a rope and a stocking?"

"Did it say in the paper she was strangled with a silk stocking? And it might have been nylon."

"I don't know. Did it? I don't remember. You read it." He laughed. "And jumped to the conclusion I'd done the dirty deed. Is the silk stocking another clue?"

She too laughed, but it was rather a forced and uneasy laugh. "Well, I don't remember reading she was strangled with anything in particular. It just said strangled. Or so I think."

"You're probably right. Why I said strangled with a silk stocking is because that's how I'd do it." He smiled across the table at her; his smile, so warm, so friendly, so full of charm, so charged with admiration. Beside that smile his words meant nothing at all; were just boyish nonsense. She smiled at him with equal warmth, and said: "Do you know what you are, Noel?"

"You think you do, don't you?"

"Yes. You're a little preparatory schoolboy home from his first term and boasting to his young

brother about his feats in the classroom and on the playing fields, and against those who tried to bully him. And on top of that you're old Baron Munchausen, and I don't believe a word you say about anything. I don't believe you were in the R.A.F."

"If you'd slept with me last night I'd have shown you what a cannon shell did to my thigh."

"You said you didn't get a scratch."

"That was in bombers. I got my little packet in a dogfight over Kent when I was flying a 'Spit.' It was almost five years ago to a day. Shall we call this the fifth anniversary and celebrate it tonight?"

"A scar in your thigh doesn't prove you were in the R.A.F."

He laughed. "You don't believe I can fly at all."

"I shouldn't be surprised."

He pursed his lips. "Wonder where the nearest civil airfield is. Perhaps the waiter will know."

"Don't bother. I wouldn't fly with you."

"Nobody's asked you to, my pretty maid. I'd just show you a bit of flying."

"Anyhow, we were going sailing."

"But you don't believe I can sail a boat."

"I didn't say that."

"I thought you said you didn't believe a word I said about anything. O.K. Failing an airfield we'll do a spot of sailing. The wind's quite fresh now, and there's a nice sea. As soon as we've had coffee I'll trot down to the strand and see about a boat."

It'll take me a little time to get exactly what I want. Could you be ready, say, about half-past two? Good. And put a pullover on and wear a raincoat. It'll be nippy out at sea and a bit wet if the wind increases, as it looks like doing."

"You're trying to scare me."

"Scare you! What's there to be scared of? You'll be as safe with me in a boat as in your little truckle bed at home. I've sailed boats all my life. It's in my blood. My people have been naval men for donkeys' years. I was the first of a long line to rat. But that's another story; perhaps I'll tell you one day."

After he had left her in the lounge to go to see about the boat, she picked up *The Times* and read the Stonington case once more. There was nothing in *The Times* account about the girl being whipped on the thighs, nor was any mention made of a silk stocking being used to strangle her. The only silk stocking mentioned was the one which was tied round her feet. She walked over to the table where lay an assortment of newspapers and periodicals, and taking three of that day's papers, she returned to her seat, poured herself out another cup of black coffee, and lit a fresh cigarette.

She carefully read through the three accounts and found them substantially the same as that of *The Times* and, so far as she remembered, that of the *Telegraph*. She went back to the table, but there was no copy of the *Telegraph* there, and she

returned slowly to her seat and sat very still, the cigarette smouldering between her fingers, her thoughts deeply engaged. And once again fear and uneasiness began to edge their troubling way into her mind. She slowly passed in review everything that had happened in the past twenty-four hours. And as she viewed in retrospect incident after incident, watched in innumerable images her companion during most of those hours, heard again the things he had said, the things he had suggested, forthrightly or obliquely, heard too the amusement and mockery in his voice and the gay laughter at things which shocked her, the feeling, that she was treading a dangerous road with a man about whom she really knew nothing, more and more possessed her until, by the time Noel returned and said the boat was waiting, she had decided to tell him she would be leaving for London after dinner (there was a train at nine-fifteen) and that the garage people could drive the car back when it was ready. But as she saw him come striding towards the table, his hair ruffled by the wind, his eyes so warm and friendly, his lips smiling, she could not tell him then and there. It would seem like snatching a toy from a child. He was so obviously looking forward to showing off his skill. Perhaps after all he was tops at that, as he'd said. And she was wrong about his boasting; and perhaps about other things. Well, anyhow, she'd wait till they came ashore again.

They were out for nearly two hours. The wind was very fresh (strong, frighteningly strong, she would have declared it to be) and the sea quite rough. She was glad of her pullover, and before it was over, her raincoat. She knew nothing about sailing a boat, but even to her complete ignorance it was plain that he knew what he was doing; that he was handling the tricky little craft superbly; and was, as he had boasted, a master of the art.

For the first quarter of an hour or so she had been frightened, and several times had with difficulty suppressed a cry of alarm as the tiny craft heeled over, the sea hissing by at what seemed terrific speed and level with the gunwale. And at these moments she glanced quickly at him and found him smiling, and was reassured. Once he said: "Enjoying it?" just after they had come round in what seemed a sharp angle and the boat heeled over horribly as it went into another tack. She could only nod in reply, not being able to find any words. But she wasn't enjoying it very much. She was too scared just then. But afterwards, with the calming assurance that she was in completely safe hands, she could settle herself comfortably in the stern and begin to enjoy what was for her a new and thrilling experience.

It gave her much to think about. She had always believed, because it was the popular belief, that men who could and did do things never boasted about them. Well, clearly, that wasn't true. Noel

had blown his trumpet about his sailing and here he was, even to her ignorant eyes, handling superbly a tiny craft in a sea which every minute seemed to grow rougher.

If, then, his boast were true, as it so obviously was, then was it not reasonable to infer that all his boasts were true? It simply meant that in some respects he had never grown out of his boyhood. He was the eternal schoolboy: boastful, mocking, casual; by turns warmly affectionate and completely indifferent; attractive and charming, and never to be taken seriously. Did not that sum up Noel Blake and completely explain everything? She thought it did. By the time they came ashore she was convinced it did and had changed her mind about going home. She didn't want to go home. She wanted to stay on here at the *Royal*; here with Noel, who was the eternal schoolboy with all a boy's mischievous charm. How could she ever have felt afraid of him; ever have felt that there was something behind his great attractiveness that was faintly repellent? How could she have been such a fool? A worse folly, of course, might be to fall in love with him. She would not commit that folly. It was as well that their association was to be just for a week-end. Had it been a month, or even a full week, she was only too aware that her feelings might well have become involved to the point of heartache when the parting came, as it always had to come in such affairs. Or in nine

out of ten. And why should she count on being the fortunate tenth?

At tea, the evening papers from London had just come in, but there was nothing further about the Stonington murder. There was merely a brief paragraph saying that the police were pursuing their investigations.

"It doesn't say they've called in the Yard yet," Noel said, crumbling a piece of cake.

"Do you mean Scotland Yard?" He nodded, and she went on, "What do you mean, call them in? Who would call them?"

"The Bucks police would call them in if they wanted their help. The Yard can't interfere outside the Metropolitan area unless they're invited to come in and take charge."

"Then your two detectives wouldn't be from Scotland Yard."

He gave her a quick smile. "The two blokes here for lunch? No. They don't seem to be here for tea. Perhaps they're trailing a clue. Or have made an arrest."

"I shouldn't think that likely." "No?"

"You see, one of them is the local bank manager and the other a local tailor. They always lunch here together on Saturdays."

He grinned boyishly. "Clever girl. Who gave you the gen?"

"No one. I asked the waiter. Detective was writ large on each of them, wasn't it?"

"I was seeing how much you'd swallow."

"Isn't that what you've been doing all along?"

"No. I've told you nothing but the truth. A bit embroidered here and there, but that's all. So you've not believed any of it?"

"If I haven't it's because it's impossible to know when you're being serious."

"If I said I loved you would you believe I was being serious?"

"No."

He smiled. "I love you. Are there three more beautiful words in the whole range of language? I mean when they come together in that order. Don't they give you a thrill?"

"Not the way you say them."

"And what does that mean?"

"You turn everything into a joke."

"It's one way of getting through life. And you believe in nothing. That's just another way. I prefer mine."

"That's not true. I believe in many things."

"What?"

"I'm not going to tell you. You're laughing at me."

"But you don't believe I was in the R.A.F."

"You might have been."

"But not wounded."

"You may have been."

"Sleep with me tonight and prove it."

"Can't you play another record?"

"Yes. Lots. Each in its right time and place. And the night was made for love."

"You can't even quote correctly."

"I'm not quoting." He grinned. "It's original. And was first said by Adam. Or perhaps it was the serpent. But what am I supposed to be quoting?"

"The night was made for loving
And the day returns too soon;
Yet we'll go no more a-roving
By the light of the moon."

"And who's that? Byron, at a guess."

"Yes."

"One of your pets?"

"He isn't. I think he was poisonous. But I like some of his poetry."

"Would you have slept with him?"

"How absurd you are, Noel. Can't you think of anything else?"

"Not when I'm with you. Or not for long. Lots did, you know."

"Lots did what?"

"Slept with Lord Byron. Would you?" He smiled at her impudently, boyishly.

She returned his smile. It was silly to take him seriously. "Perhaps. If he'd asked me."

"So you think he was a better man than I am."

"I don't. I think he was horrid."

"And what am I?"

"A cocky little schoolboy."

"Cocky: yes. Schoolboy: if you like. But little: no. Six feet, and twelve-seven stripped, and not an ounce of fat."

"There's more than one way of being little."

"Your pet, Byron, was five feet six inches, and fat as lard. An obese dwarf. Did you know that?"

"He's not my pet."

"And you'd sleep with that blubbery midget and not with me. Do you know what's the matter with you?"

"No."

"You're decadent. That's the sickness of the age. We're all decadent. Half the men today are homos and the other half eunuchs. And the women are either Lesbians or as sexless as cold porridge."

"All except he-man Noel Blake."

"You've said it. And I'm proud of it. I'm one hundred per cent male——"

"Rubbish. No man is. Any doctor will tell you that."

"Well, they should know." He grinned. "They're about the randiest section of the whole community. After nurses."

"I don't think that's funny, Noel." She stood up. "I've some shopping to do and I'll have to hurry before they close."

"So have I." He gave her his warm, friendly, gay smile and she returned it, everything else forgotten. "You don't have to come," she said.

"But I *have* some shopping to do. And then how about an hour or so in the flicks before dinner?"

"I'd like that."

"Good girl. Do you love me a little?"

"I like you."

"A lot?"

"I don't know. And stop being absurd. I'll be ready in five minutes."

As they set off for the shops she said: "Are you sure you want to come?"

"More than anything else in the world."

"I thought men hated shopping."

"Only married men."

"I don't like you when you're cynical."

"You prefer me to tell lies."

"I *hate* that."

"But what is called cynicism is usually just the plain truth. So if you forbid me the truth I must deal in lies."

"I don't think you'll find it difficult."

"Second nature. I was born with a lie in my mouth. Or very near it. The nurse gave my limp body a slap and I didn't respond, and she said: 'He's dead, doctor'."

"I suppose you heard it and contradicted her."

"More or less. She was a fool. The doctor ought to have slapped her. Luckily he slapped me good and hearty and here I am, and my blessings on his head. Vesey was his name. I wouldn't have missed life for anything."

"You find it so happy?"

"By God I do. I enjoy every minute of it. I grudge the hours spent in sleep. The night was made for loving, as your fat dwarf said. Correct that time. I'm going to buy you a present."

"You're going to do nothing of the sort. We agreed we were paying for ourselves."

"What's that got to do with it? You *are* paying for yourself."

"Already I'm not. You paid for the boat this afternoon."

"Do you keep a diary?" "No."

"If you did it would be full of items like: Went for a walk this afternoon. Spent a penny."

"Am I to laugh?"

"I'll toss you ten bob or nothing."

"What on earth are you talking about?" laughing despite herself.

"The boat was ten bob. As you insist upon paying half——"

"Oh, all right. I won't insist."

"And I may buy you a present?"

"On condition I may buy you one."

"Of course. I love getting presents. I always let people know when my birthday's coming. It doesn't always work. Would you like to know?"

"It won't work with me."

"You could send me a Valentine."

"On your birthday!"

"Exactly. It happens to be on St. Valentine's

Day. February the fourteenth. The day the birds mate. That's why I'm the man I am. Here we are. What size do you take? Don't tell me." As they stood at the window of the milliners he faced her and looked her slowly up, so slowly that she flushed a little when at last his smiling eyes met hers. And suddenly the grim, uneasy shapes of fear and misgiving were at her elbow, nudging her, whispering to her. "Nine and a half," he said. "Is that right? I knew it. I'm always right. Let's go in."

She walked in beside him, outwardly calm, but within a riot of tumbling, troubling thoughts. Silk stockings. Why was he buying her silk stockings? Why was she once again afraid of him, filled with uneasiness, feeling that faint repulsion behind all his overpowering charm? But at the counter the young assistant's smiling greeting and the everyday atmosphere of the big shop, with dozens of ordinary looking people coming and going or standing about, swept away her troubling thoughts as morbid fancies and replaced them by plain commonsense. Were not silk stockings a usual gift for a man to make? She knew they were. Probably seven men in every ten who wanted to give a woman friend something chose silk stockings. They were just right. A dainty, pleasing gift. Not too expensive and with just that little touch of intimacy which gave an added warmth. Undies would have been a different matter. She would have resented that. She would have been embarrassed and the

girl behind the counter secretly smiling. How often she had seen that happening. But the men were usually old. Sugar daddies. Horrible.

"What colour would you like?" Noel had to repeat the question, so occupied was she with her thoughts.

"This is the latest shade, madam," the girl said, displaying a stocking on her very pretty white hand. "It is *clair de lune*."

"Do you like it?" Noel said.

"It's rather charming."

"I'll have three pairs," he said.

"You're not to be so extravagant," she said, and turning to the girl: "two pairs will be enough."

"But three pairs is only two pairs plus a spare for each," Noel said. "Isn't that so?" smiling at the girl.

"That's one way of looking at it, sir" she said.

"Good. Two pairs and two spares then, please. Make a good selling slogan for a stocking firm, wouldn't it, darling? I must see if I can't do a deal with someone." He took the stockings and paid for them and they walked from the shop. He put them in his pocket, saying: "I'll present them to you later," and the simple, commonplace words brought back something of her uneasiness. But she fought against it, telling herself she was morbidly fanciful and that the real origin of her silly imaginings was the part a silk stocking had played in that awful affair at Stonington.

They walked along the shopping arcade and she stopped at the brilliantly lit window of a tobacconist. "Would you like some cigarettes or a case or both?" she said.

"Both would be greedy."

"Rubbish. I want to give you something nice."

"If only you did." He smiled. "I'd like a pipe." His smile broadened to a grin. "A pipe is so manly, isn't it. The virile pipe and hair on the chest."

"I don't believe you smoke a pipe."

"I smoked nothing else before the war. But a pipe's a leisurely sort of thing and we'd no time for leisurely smoking in the R.A.F. One usually had only time for three or four quick drags at a gasper before hopping into your bus. And so I got into the habit of fags, with an occasional cigar at dinner in the mess. Time I started a pipe again. How much can you run to?"

"Whatever they cost."

"Well, Dunhill's cost a fiver."

"Five pounds for a pipe!"

"That's nothing. The Begum of Bezeeka bought a pipe for the Bazooka and paid a lakh of rupees for it. In sterling, about five thousand quid. But, of course, it had knobs on."

"Oh, do be serious, Noel."

"Would you pay five pounds for a pipe for me?" "Yes."

"You're a darling. But I won't let you. I'll have that one."

"It's only fifteen shillings. I'm sure you wouldn't like it."

"I'll cherish it for ever. Come on. Let's go in."

"Then let me buy you some tobacco too."

"So you don't really believe I smoke a pipe. You hope to see me puke." He stood still. "I was an ounce a day man before the war. Cut Cavendish." Suddenly he laughed loudly. "Heck! that's funny," he said. "What is?"

"Cavendish. Doesn't that ring a bell?"

"No."

He looked down into her upturned face, smiling, his eyes twinkling. "How's Stonington for a clue?"

The warmth and brightness faded for a moment and the pleasure went out of it. "I don't know what you mean."

"It was at the Cavendish Hotel there. Dam' funny. What are you looking so happy about. Lost your bag? I'll let you off buying me a pipe."

"I haven't lost anything. Come along in. Are you sure you like that pipe in the window?"

"Dead sure. I shall look like Errol Flynn. And I'll have an ounce of John Cotton to go with it."

"I don't believe that is a tobacco. You want to make the man laugh at me."

"Not a tobacco! It's the oldest tobacco in history. It set Rome ablaze. Nero was always knocking his pipe of John Cotton out on a Christian. Doesn't your brother Dick smoke? Or your father?"

"They both smoke pipes."

"Then you ought to have heard of John Cotton. But I'll ask and you can pay."

They did a little more shopping and then went into the cinema in the High Street. Noel glanced at his watch. "A bit of luck," he said, "it's just starting. Will you get snooty if I pay?"

"No."

The film was an American melodrama, tough, sexual, sadistic. Some of the incidents were so ugly and so starkly and vividly portrayed that again and again Sylvia looked away from the screen nauseated. And at these moments she glanced at Noel and saw how utterly absorbed he was; once or twice to the extent of leaning forward in his seat, his hands gripping the arms. And as she glanced from the disgusting scenes being enacted on the screen to his intent face there again crept into her mind all the misgivings which had, on and off, troubled and haunted her almost from the first hour of their meeting. How could he, how could any normal decent person, be so utterly engrossed by the horrible and degrading scenes following one another on the screen, each succeeding one, it seemed to her, a little more vile and ugly than its predecessor. How could he enjoy it? How could he even bear to watch it? And then the thought came to her: but what about all the rest of the people here? She turned round in her seat. Although it was so early in the evening the place

was full. She could not see anywhere an empty seat. And everywhere there were intent faces, hundreds of people utterly engrossed by what was being enacted. And, too, there were scores of children. Who, she thought, could have been so misguided, so indifferent, so casual, so wrongheaded, as to bring children to watch such a play. What were they thinking, these children, as they watched men doing these outrageously brutal things to other men and to women. Why did not someone stand up and shout a protest? But no. Far from protesting, they were all enjoying it, gulping it down greedily. As Noel was doing. Why had he brought her to such a beastly picture? Did he think she'd enjoy it? How could anyone enjoy it? Well, they seemed to. As he did. The picture went on its way but now the incidents were less ugly and her thoughts, as if influenced by the change, took a new turn, a more reasonable turn. It was silly of her to blame Noel for bringing her to such a horrid picture. It was pure chance it happened to be showing. And if it absorbed his attention, well, so it did all those others. Perhaps he was merely fascinated by the horror of it. Perhaps they all were. It was simply that and nothing more. Perhaps she was more sensitive than most people; more easily upset; her imagination working too strongly so that she put herself in the place of the woman being outraged; for the time being was that woman. That was why she was so disgusted and so

terrified. That was the explanation. It was she who was abnormal, not all these other people. Or Noel.

The picture came to an end and Noel said: "Marvellous people the Yanks, aren't they? They won't allow all sorts of words that are common colloquial English speech and they hold up Pecksniffian hands in horror at the bare idea of a woman's breasts being seen; but kicking a woman in the face is O.K. by the Hays office, or whatever the darned thing's called."

"It was dreadful."

"Gripped you though, didn't it? "

"It didn't me, Noel. It made me feel sick."

"Good Lord. I thought you'd get a kick out of it or I wouldn't have brought you."

"Did you know what it was like? "

"I've seen it twice before in Town."

She could think of nothing to say except: "Oh, let's go. It's so hot."

"Let's see the Gaumont news."

"Do you want to? "

"I dote on news pictures. I spend hours in Town at news theatres. I once thought of trying for a job as operator, but I thought it might kill the taste, as chocolate-packing does."

"Very well."

One of the news flashes was a rugby match at Twickenham. She knew nothing about rugby and was bored, and glanced aside at Noel and saw him leaning forward in his seat, his hands gripping

the arms, his whole body motionless, his face intent. And the sight of him sitting there like that routed all her uneasiness, dispersed every misgiving. This absorption in spectacles was just the boyish side of him showing uppermost, as it did in all men at times. It didn't matter what the spectacle was, however brutal it was, or however skilful. It was the excitement of swift and violent action. All such actions gave him pleasure, as they seemed to do most men; and many women too. And weren't they lucky to be able to wrest pleasure out of so many things? Wasn't that living life as it was meant to be lived and enjoyed? Perhaps Noel was right when he said she was decadent. So many things that others seemed to revel in she found distasteful, even mildly disgusting. Wasn't it they who were right and she wrong? Wasn't she too finicky, too nice, too—what was it Dick used to say? Too Miss Prunes and Prisms. She smiled to herself. Perhaps she was. Didn't that mean she was half afraid of life, too conscious of the coarse and rough and vulgar elements in the human scene? Afraid to take the plunge. Like standing by the side of a swimming bath and dipping in a toe and shivering instead of taking a bold header and coming up gasping, but with all the body tingling deliciously as the blood rushed back to the skin. She was twenty-five. Life was passing; moving on. You'll be a long time dead, Dick was fond of saying. It was true. What were those lines the English mis-

THIRTY-SIX HOURS

tress at St. Bede's used to say were so lovely, although *she* could never see their loveliness. How did they go? She recalled the words and said them over slowly to herself and then repeated the last two lines:

"The grave's a fine and private place,
But none, I think, do there embrace."

There was no beauty in the words, yet how true it was, and wasn't it Keats who said truth was beauty.

She was brought back from her thoughts by the feel of Noel's cheek softly moving against hers, and just before the news ended she felt his lips near her mouth and turned her head to meet them with her own. It was a long kiss, enchanting and sweet to her in that long moment, and as the lights slowly brightened she turned to meet his smile, so moved and shaken by that kiss that she could not trust herself to speak, but her arms hungered for him, and all her body desired him.

Just before they separated to go to their baths before dinner, Noel said laughingly: "Pity we're not in Japan; we could take it together then." Twenty-four hours earlier she would have thought this cheap and coarse and it would have repelled her and broken the spell that was still upon her. But it seemed neither cheap nor coarse now but conjured up images that set her heart beating

faster and she laughed too and said: "They must have bigger baths than ours."

In the lounge before dinner she allowed herself to be persuaded to have two cocktails, and as they smoked a cigarette, Noel said: "You look perfectly adorable."

"I feel rather good."

He smiled. "Soulfully or bodily?"

"Perhaps both. But perhaps good is too mild. I feel heavenly: deliciously lazy and ravenously hungry."

He put a hand on hers. "Life isn't too bad, eh?"

"Just now it's perfect."

He made a little gesture with his hand that held the cigarette. "All this and love too."

She did not say anything.

"Why not, darling?" His fingers caressed her hand.

"I don't know, Noel."

"Then why not, darling?"

She smiled shyly at him. "Don't spoil it all, please. Don't bring me down to earth."

He returned her smile and she watched his lips and suddenly ached to kiss them. "This isn't heaven," he said, "it is only the gate to heaven. Heaven lies further."

"It is heaven enough for me, Noel; please," and she pressed his hand.

He laughed softly. "O.K. We'll stay this side of the Pearly Gate. Let's feed, shall we? I could eat

old boots. That's the spin on the briny. Filled us up with ozone. I'm a pretty hot seaman, don't you think? "

" I think you're wonderful. Sometimes."

Roast pheasant followed the fish and Noel said: " You can't drink that Hock with pheasant."

" Why not? It's lovely, and so cold."

" Because anything but Burgundy is an insult to a noble bird. You wouldn't insult the dead."

She was in no mood to argue or to refuse him. She smiled. " Well, just a sip."

He ordered a bottle of Vosne-Romanée.

" Half a bottle would have been ample, Noel. I'm already feeling a little too, well," laughing, " elevated."

He gave her his warm smile. " Heaven's the ceiling. But don't worry. I'll drink it. You shall have just one glass."

With their coffee in the lounge she had Benedictine and Noel a Drambuie. She did not, to her surprise, feel at all intoxicated, but just deliciously drowsy, utterly contented, happier than she ever remembered feeling in her life before. Noel seemed the same as always: gay, light-hearted, jesting: a smiling, handsome attractive boy; almost a schoolboy; a mischievous schoolboy.

The evening was as warm as summer and presently they went out and sat in one of the garden arbours. She expected Noel to make love to her in his slightly mocking fashion; to kiss and caress

her; and she felt herself eager to receive his kisses and to return them. How easy it would be to fall in love with him. And how foolish. She would have to keep a firm hold on herself. She knew now his almost overwhelming power; knew now too the unsuspected strength of her own desire.

But he did not make love to her. He sat beside her for some minutes even without speaking and ever and again tapping his finger on his cigarette: the only movement that he made. She began to wonder if anything were the matter with him. And then, when the long silence was beginning to fray her nerves, he said, very slowly, as if he were even then still pondering the matter: "I think perhaps I'll accept the Canadian offer."

For a moment she could not think what on earth he was talking about. And then she remembered and said, merely for something to say: "Do you think you'll like Canada?"

"I've been there, you know," he said. "I've a sister and brother-in-law in Toronto. I stayed a fortnight with them during the war."

"How could you do that?"

He smiled. "Early in '44 there was a shuttle-cock service of V.I.P.'s and brass-hats across the Atlantic. They were flown in bombers. For three months I was one of the pilots and in the April there was nothing doing for three weeks when we reached New York, and so I got leave to hop over into Canada and stay with my sister."

She wondered if he were speaking the truth. But it did not seem to matter very much now. What was the truth after all, and how many people spoke it? "And you think you'll like Canada?" she said again.

"Sure. But it's the pay I'll like. Over here all I'd get as a civilian pilot is about six-fifty. Think of that. About what they pay a decent mechanic, and about half what a printer earns. Knock off income tax, and I get no rebates, and it's about destitution level. In Canada I'll get eight hundred Canadian dollars a month. That's about a hundred and sixty pounds. And income tax about half."

"And the cost of living double."

"Not on your life. Some things are a lot dearer, but some are cheaper, and there's everything in abundance. How would you like to be able to go into a shop and order ten pairs of nylons and then cross the road and sit down to a huge steak; with real butter *ad lib* and half a dozen sorts of cheese on the table; and a bucketful of cream with your dessert?"

"We don't seem to have done so badly this evening."

"Fairly well."

"It's heavenly."

"Not quite." He threw away his cigarette and suddenly took her in his arms. She put her arms round his neck and drew herself closely to him as she felt his mouth on hers. Slowly she opened her

lips. It was a long while before the kiss ended and she felt him trembling. "You're cold," she said softly.

"Yes," he said, "let's go to bed." He drew her again into his arms more tightly. She did not speak. Her eyes closed. Again her mouth felt his and she opened her lips. Presently, when the long kiss had ended, she heard his voice very softly, as if from a distance: "Let's go to bed, darling." "No."

"I love you."

"No, Noel, please."

He held her in his arms again and caressed her cheek with his lips. "You love me," he said. "Why not?"

She did not contradict him. She said: "It's not that, Noel."

Her words puzzled him. "Not what, darling?"

"I can't come to bed with you. I — I should be ashamed."

"God in heaven! Ashamed of what? Is love anything to be ashamed of?"

"I don't mean that, Noel. But here."

Still he did not understand.

"I couldn't, Noel. We came here as — as just friends. And then that horrid little man at the desk. Oh, can't you see. Supposing you were discovered in my room. After what happened when we arrived. Don't you see, Noel? Can't you understand? I should be so humiliated and ashamed. I should die."

" Good God! "

" Oh, you must see it from my point of view. It's so different for a man."

" I do, darling. I see everything. And I understand. Don't you know why I said ' Good God! ' "

She laughed unsteadily. " No, Noel."

" Because he is good."

" I don't understand."

" I think you do. Don't you mean that if we'd taken one room when we first came here it would have been all right? "

" Yes. I do mean that. There would then have been nothing clandestine and sly and, oh, creeping and listening and everything horrid to make it all disgusting and — and shameful. But it's too late now."

" It isn't, darling."

" No, Noel. We couldn't do that. It would be even worse."

" What would be even worse."

At the laughter in his voice she said lamely: " I — I thought you meant — but of course you couldn't have meant that."

" I'm sure I didn't. Do you know Waverton? "

" Is it a place? "

" Yes. And a lovely one. It's about twenty-five miles from here. It's on the river. There's a big roadhouse there called the Upas Tree. Will you come there for tonight and tomorrow? Till Monday morning? "

"Yes. I'll come, Noel."

He looked at his watch. "Bit late to knock up a jewellers."

"Whatever for?"

"I thought you might want a ring."

She took his hand in hers and caressed it. "You haven't understood me at all, Noel. As long as we do everything openly I don't care at all. What hurts me and seems to smear everything is doing things furtively as if you were ashamed. I'm not ashamed of what I'm doing. I'm doing it because I want to and because I like you."

"Like. Is that all?"

"Perhaps I love you." She smiled. "A little."

He took her in his arms and they kissed a long while. Presently he said: "And lots of women don't wear wedding rings these days."

"Don't they?" she said, "well, that's something. But I don't believe it. And it doesn't matter. But hadn't we better be off? It'll be ten before we get there. They'll take us in, I suppose?"

"Of course. And there'll be dancing till the small hours. Probably till dawn. But we won't stay up for that. You'd better trot in now and get your things and I'll settle the bill. All right, all right," with a laugh, "we'll square up later. On Monday morning."

"I'm paying half, Noel, and I shall want to see the accounts."

"Do you think I'd cheat you?"

"I'm sure you would. Cheat me out of paying my share." She gave him a quick kiss and rumbled his hair. "Let's be off. Before I change my mind."

He took her by the arms lightly and held her in front of him, and in the faint light from the fairy lamps, no more than a luminous mist in the arbour, she could see he was smiling at her. "You'll have plenty of time to do that," he said.

She lowered her eyes and played with his tie. "I shan't do that now, darling," she said gravely, and released herself and hurried away.

It was well after ten o'clock when they reached Waverton and drove up to the Upas Tree, which was brilliantly lit up, and from which the strains of a band, the susurrations of dancing feet, the murmur of voices, the tinkle of soft laughter, greeted them, as, the car garaged, they passed through the revolving doors.

When Noel came back from the receptionist's desk Sylvia said: "In what names did you book?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Noel Blake."

"I did not think you would do that. I mean I thought you'd use another name."

"I thought I wouldn't this—— why should I?"

"You were going to say this time."

"Of course."

"You've been here before?"

"No. I've never stayed here. But I knew about it. What I meant was," smiling down at her, "that

it's not my first experience. Nor is it yours. Didn't we agree about that at the beginning."

"Noel."

"Well, darling. Do you know how lovely you look? "

"What would you say if I told you it — it was the first time and — and that I'm rather frightened? "

"I'd say you were the luckiest girl in the world and that if you are frightened you've only to ring up Chelcaster double-one double-O and ask for police protection. And now shall we dance or shall we have a drink first? "

"I'd like to go up to my room first. I mean our room." She flushed slightly and laughed softly. And then she said: "You don't believe me, Noel, do you? "

"I'll believe black is white if it will give you a moment's pleasure. I'll carry our traps up. Come along. You're not wanting to go to bed yet? "

"I want to dance and dance and dance."

"Grand. The night's young. And the night was made for dancing as well as for loving."

They did not dance immediately they came down again but sat in the lounge with a long cool drink and smoked a cigarette.

"Does the dancing really go on till the morning, Noel? "

"More or less. Well into the small hours, anyhow. And that's when it begins to get noisy."

"It will be Sunday."

"Don't worry. We'll get up in time to go to the eleven o'clock service."

"I should have thought it terribly wicked once to be dancing into the early hours of Sunday morning. I'm sure my people would think so now."

"Not your brother, surely."

"Oh, Dick!" with a laugh; "he thinks nothing's wicked that's enjoyable. That's what he says. But he says the most outrageous things. He always did. Even as a schoolboy. But I think most schoolboys do." She gave him a quick, warm little smile. "Most of the nice ones."

"I think Master Dick and I could hit it off pretty well. And he's dead right about enjoyment."

"It's only half true, Noel. There are people who enjoy wicked things."

"In that case then, it's not even half true. But don't let's get serious. We'll leave that for the sermon in the morning."

"Do you really mean you'll go to Church?"

"Of course. Or rather Chelcaster Cathedral. I don't believe a word of what the parsons say, but I love a fully choral service in a cathedral; a Catholic cathedral for choice. I get as much sensuous enjoyment out of that as I do out of a good meal a bottle of wine and a cigar. They run a dead heat for second place with me. The first is love and it's so far ahead of all the others that in the last analysis they hardly count at all. There'll

always be love and it will always be worth all the rest. If one of Truman's atom bombs blows the world to bits one of these days and leaves but one man and one woman alive they'll still have more than the bomb has blown to smithereens. Can you imagine life without it? "

" I don't know, Noel. I've never really thought about it like that."

" You precious innocent. I'm beginning to believe you are a virgin. And you are twenty-five. How could you have been so ungrateful for the gift of life; for the gift of your body, and all its capacity for enjoyment? You don't deserve to have been born."

" I often wished I hadn't been when I was at school. I went to a convent. I was a boarder and I was terribly unhappy. I don't mean just at the beginning of term, but always. And I was there seven years. How I hated it."

" And now? "

" Oh, I don't hate it now. Not even in recollection. I just forget about it."

" I mean do you still wish you hadn't been born? "

" I'm glad. Glad of everything now."

" Then we'll dance."

Shortly after eleven they had a light supper and danced till nearly half-past twelve, when they went up to their room. When they were inside he closed the door. He took her in his arms but did not kiss

her. He smiled into her eyes and said: "Still frightened? I believe you are. You're trembling."

"I'm not frightened, Noel, now; and," with a little laugh, "it's you who are trembling."

"The whole house is shaking," he said. "What a row; they must be running an obstacle race."

"Perhaps we're the only ones who've gone to bed."

"No, we're not. Didn't you notice the shoes out as we came along? Those who're making that racket down below are the odd men out, and the odd women too. They've nothing better to do. So they drink and scream with laughter and kick up their heels to keep from thinking. And they'll probably go on doing it till daylight. But we'll sleep sound, sweetheart." He held her closely and put his mouth to hers and she responded to the kiss with passionate abandon. And then he released her and began to undo her dress. She stood there very still, with a sort of childlike gravity, as he unclothed her.

And presently they lay together in bed. He held her lightly in his arms, brushing her cheeks softly with his lips, staying a long moment with his mouth on hers and then kissing her breasts, while his hands gently caressed her body and thighs. For a long while she lay still, not caressing him, content just to lie there in his arms and now and again to brush his lips with her own. But after a while, as his hands moved slowly and gently over her, she

began to respond, stroking him again and again; murmuring his name.

And when it was finished, and she lay clasped in his arms, dropping down into a vast pit of unconsciousness, her thoughts were all of the gentleness and tenderness of his love-making and of the incredible folly of all that half fear of him that had so haunted her, that fear allied with something that had been akin to repulsion. The last thing she remembered was stirring in his arms, softly kissing him, for he was already asleep, and whispering, "I love you, darling."

She woke. The light was on in the room. She felt cold. It was that which had awakened her. The clothes were drawn down to the foot of the bed. From below came an uproar of mingled music and shouts and laughter. At the dressing table the naked figure of Noel, his back to her, was bent over something.

She sat up and looked at her watch. It was three o'clock. "Noel," she called out.

He turned and looked at her over his stooped shoulder. "All right, darling," he said, "I'll be over in a moment."

His voice frightened her. She did not recognize it. It was thick and blurred. "Noel," she called again, her voice rising to a cry, "what is the matter? You are frightening me."

He straightened up, turned, and came towards her. She tried to cry out but could not. In one hand

he held a dog-whip; in the other a silk stocking. He was smiling. It was not the warm, friendly, familiar smile, but a distorted wrinkling of the mouth that showed his teeth. "Don't be frightened, darling," he said, in that terrifying, purring voice. "I'm not going to hurt you. Just a little game we're going to play. A love game." He sat down on the lower end of the bed. "Lie down," he said, putting the whip and the stocking on the bed and taking her feet in his hands and stroking them.

She knew now who he was and screamed. "Don't scream," he said, "or I shall get angry. You would not like that. And no one will hear you. Don't scream again. Lie down, my darling. I am not going to hurt you."

She obeyed him, staring at a face familiar yet utterly strange; a face that smiled at her with distorted lips which his tongue ever and again licked; a face with eyes that smouldered as if behind them a fire burned.

He raised her feet and began to kiss them, playing with her toes. "What pretty feet you have. You are not afraid now."

She did not answer but lay staring into his mad face.

"We are going to play a little game presently," he said, "but don't be afraid. I shall not hurt you. It is just a love game. Love play. You will like it." He put her feet down and tied them together with

the silk stocking. "There," he said, and drew the thong of the whip through his fingers.

She tried to scream but could not. She tried to speak but her voice would not come. At last she whispered: "Noel, don't. Please don't, Noel. Let me go."

"Don't be afraid, my sweet," he said. "There is nothing to be afraid of." And now his speech was so thick that she could hardly catch his words. "Just a little game, first. A little love play. And then we will love. Did you think we had loved? Silly child. That was only child's play. A boy and girl playing at calf love. Presently I will show you how a man makes love. But first, a little play. Turn over. I shall not hurt you."

She obeyed him, burying her face in the pillow.

He began to stroke her body and thighs with his hand and as he stroked and caressed her he talked. She could not catch what he said but she knew he was no longer talking to her. The words, thick and blurred, came faster and faster; the stroking hand began to pull at her body.

The bed creaked as he stood up. Suddenly the flow of incoherent words stopped abruptly. She heard a faint swishing noise and as the thong of the whip fell, a searing pain ran along her thigh. She raised her head and screamed, but there was no sound. She did not know if she had screamed or not. She heard the mad, purring voice say: "Lie still, darling; a little play; a little game.

Don't scream; that will make me angry." The voice trailed away into incoherency. She heard again the faint singing of the whip, closed her eyes, and bit into the pillow.

At nine o'clock the next morning the manager of The Upas Tree forced the door of the bedroom which had been taken by Mr. and Mrs. Noel Blake. Several of the staff were with him, but he went in alone. At the sight of what lay on the bed he drew in his breath sharply. He turned and came out and let the door swing to. "No one's to go in there," he said. "Has anyone seen Mr. Blake?"

Several voices said: "No, sir," and he went on: "All right. Dawson, stay here at the door till I come back." He ran downstairs, and going to the telephone in his office dialled Chelcaster double-one double 0.

THE MATE OF THE S.S. "VEGA"

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THE MATE OF THE S.S. "VEGA"

THE *Vega*, a steamship of 4,500 tons burthen, was thirty-five years of age and the oldest of the seven ships of the Black Star line of freighters trading between the Port of London and Australasia. She looked her age, especially when compared with the Line's newest ship, *Canopus*; indeed, beside *Canopus* she looked like a fishwoman beside a ballet dancer, or a bulldog beside a greyhound. Even on her trials, back in the nineties of last century, she had not reached ten knots, and ever since had been contented to nose her way back and forth across three of the Seven Seas at a steady eight. She bore the scars of many a pounding and if ships have memories hers were of innumerable struggles with the elements at their ugliest. And if ships had tongues she would have said that she was ready to face as many again, and reckoned herself good for another five-and-thirty years.

She had a complement of thirty-eight all told, of whom James Bryan was the Master (by courtesy "Captain" Bryan); Frank Bowers, the Chief Officer ("the Mate"); and Bob Fraser, the Chief Engineer ("The Chief"). Of the rest there were second and third mates; second, third and fourth

engineers; a radio officer; eight firemen and three trimmers (for she burned coal); a donkeyman, a greaser, cook, galley boy, steward, carpenter, and a dozen A.B.'s.

She was sailing from the Port of London on October 25 with a general cargo, bound for Adelaide, where she expected to anchor by Christmas Day. After unloading she was going to Port Pirie, up in Spencer Gulf, where she would take on a load of manganese ore, and would sail for home on January 15.

Frank Bowers, the Mate, a big, dark, heavily-built and rather sulkily good-looking man in his early thirties, was looking forward to the voyage with much pleasurable anticipation, a seemingly strange emotion for one who had been at sea for nearly twenty years; who knew the eastern voyage as he knew his reflection in a mirror, and who had no illusions left about the sea or a sea-faring life. But it happened to be for him a great occasion. It was to be his last voyage both as Mate and as a bachelor. Captain Bryan was to be promoted to the *Sirius*, Black Star's newest ship, which would, it was expected, be ready to take her place in the worthy Line early in January; and Bowers was to be *Vega's* new Master. He had held a Master's ticket for ten years; yet he counted himself a very lucky man, and would so have been reckoned throughout the Service, to get his ship by the time he was three-and-thirty: many men, and as good

men as he was, held a Master's ticket for as many years as he was old and never got a ship. Much as he was looking forward to his promotion, another coming event moved and thrilled him more deeply: his marriage at the end of the voyage with Susan Roscoe, the only child of John Roscoe, the proprietor of Roscoe Seeds, Ltd., of Steventon, Berkshire. They were very much in love. John Roscoe had a high opinion of Bowers, but his wife Mary did not consider him socially a very good match for the Roscoe heiress with her expensive education. A mere Mate in the Merchant Service! However, his coming promotion inclined her to view the match with less disfavour. He would then at least be Captain Bowers, and a Captain—as she mentally put it to herself—was a Captain whether he was in the Merchant Service, the Royal Navy, or the Army.

There was yet one more excitement that Bowers was looking forward to. He was a fanatical cricket enthusiast and at Adelaide a Test match was to begin on January 7, with Bradman as the Australian skipper and Jardine as England's. Adelaide was barely 150 miles from Port Pirie and he hoped to be able to see the whole of the match. In the ordinary way he would not have been able to be away from the ship for so long while she was loading cargo, but in the circumstances he felt pretty sure that Captain Bryan would stretch a point.

October 25 was a Tuesday. Bowers had not to

be aboard until the previous evening and so he was spending the week-end with his fiancée's people at their big house *Five Elms*, midway between Stevenston and Harwell. About half-a-mile nearer Harwell was a handsome villa, *Rustholm*, which John Roscoe had built and furnished as a wedding present.

On the Monday morning, immediately after breakfast, Frank and Susan set off for a walk to Blewbury where there was a large private zoo owned by an eccentric millionaire, Josiah Hosegood. Hosegood's money came from a patent medicine, a cough mixture, "Hosegood's Cordial," which had been first put on the market by his father, Abner Hosegood, and had been found so soothing to inflamed throats all over the world that when old Abner died the business was a goldmine that seemed inexhaustible. Josiah, as shrewd a man as his father, kept control of the business until he was fifty, and then sold it to Imperial Remedies Limited for, it was said, a trifle under two million pounds. A bachelor, he built himself a huge mansion at Blewbury (labelled immediately "Hosegood's Folly"—but he was no fool) and then, perhaps because he had no other outlet for his affections, he began to make in the gardens of his mansion a sort of animal and bird sanctuary. At first it was a small affair and the birds and animals were the natives of the countryside; but his interest in, and his affection for, wild life growing

rapidly, he bought up a large area of the district and there began to build up the zoo which soon made him a favourite topic of conversation wherever people in the county gathered together in shops, pubs, clubs and back gardens.

Extensive and well-stocked as Hosegood's zoo was, it was not this which made him talked about, but the man himself. He was a vegetarian, a total abstainer, a devoutly religious man, and a vociferous denouncer of all blood sports. He made himself a thorn in the flesh of the various local fox-hunts and whenever there was a meeting of one of the Hunts he sent out from the zoo specially trained greyhounds smeared with aniseed, and these obliterated the scent and led the bewildered hounds a fruitless dance across country. Occasionally foxes took refuge in or near the zoo and Hosegood gave them sanctuary.

His zoo was open to the public on all days except Sundays, when he went to a service in his own private chapel, and then held a service in the open for his animals. He declared they were less in need of forgiveness of sins than mankind; that, being captives, they deserved the consolations of religion, and that they had as much right to look forward to Heaven as had any human beings, and a far better claim.

Although he made a charge for admission to the zoo, the money was refunded on leaving if the visitors had behaved themselves. Good behaviour

in the Hosegood code simply meant obeying the instructions on huge notices posted up throughout the zoo and referring to the treatment and feeding of animals. Indiscriminate feeding was forbidden and only food supplied gratis by the zoo was allowed to be given, and at stated hours. Anyone disobeying these instructions was summarily bundled out neck and crop by one of the army of keepers (all big, hefty men) attached to the establishment. Outraged visitors who had been roughly handled often sued him for damages and these actions he had always defended, fighting them through the Appeal Court to the last ditch of the House of Lords.

Such was the man Hosegood. He claimed that his Zoo was the most beautiful in the world and his animals the best treated. It was a well-substantiated boast, the lovely gardens themselves attracting thousands of people annually from all over the country, people who would never have dreamed of visiting a mere menagerie.

Susan and Frank spent several hours there very happily. They were particularly taken by the lithe beauty of a pair of young cheetahs and talked with one of the keepers about them. "They're the fastest animals in the world," he said. "Over short distances they've been timed to do over seventy miles an hour. They use them for hunting in India."

"How does that compare with a human sprinter?" Frank asked.

The man laughed. "It's reckoned a man's class if he can do a hundred yards in ten seconds, isn't it? Well, a cheetah can do a hundred in three seconds. No man's ever run a mile in four minutes. Cheetahs will do a mile in just over a minute. They're lightning. They do say it's no use shooting at a cheetah going away from you, for they run faster than a bullet." He smiled across at Susan. "But you wouldn't believe that, miss."

"I don't. Are they vicious?"

"Gentle as lambs. Except when they're hungry, or frightened. Then they'll attack."

"Do you mean attack human beings?"

"Sure. Like lightning. Straight at the throat and over you go and your throat bitten out before you can stop them. They don't eat more than the throat at first, for it's the blood they're after. Out in India where, as I say, they're used for hunting, they're trained to pull down their quarry and hold it. Their reward is a cupful of blood from the cut jugular. Nothing of the flesh. But then, of course, they're not hungry. In the wild state they tear out the throat, drink the blood from the jugular, and when their thirst is satisfied they'll have a leisurely meal off the rest of the carcass. But they're choosy. Parts they won't eat. Can't be bothered with skin and bone. They like the nice juicy joints. It's in a different class from all the other big cats, although

some people say it's the same as the leopard. 'Tisn't. Not by long chalks. There's African magic, f'rinstance. Leopards are all mixed up with that. *You* know, the leopard men. Supposed to be leopards at night and change back into men by day. It's all a bit of religious hanky-panky, with natives putting on a leopard-skin and artificial teeth and claws and tearing someone up. Bit of cannibalism as well. Now you never hear anything like that about cheetahs. Queer, that."

"Roughly about the same size as leopards, aren't they?" Frank said.

"Same length, but that's about all. A cheetah's built like a greyhound and a leopard more like a mastiff. A full-grown male leopard'll weigh about four hundredweight, a cheetah not much more than two and a half. A chap used to handling heavy loads could carry a cheetah on his back (a dead one, I mean), but I'd like to see the bloke who could hump a leopard. But these two are only youngsters. Under a year. They won't be fully grown for another twelve months."

It was nearly four o'clock before Frank and Susan set off for Steventon. He noticed after a time that she had fallen very quiet, not volunteering anything in the way of conversation and replying to him merely with a "yes" or "no," and as if she were so occupied with her thoughts that she was barely conscious of what he was saying. He glanced hurriedly down at her several times and saw that

her face was clouded and he wondered if he had done or said anything to offend her. He was not the man to leave things in the dark. He hated misunderstandings and often said that half the troubles of life were due to people not, as he put it, having things out. And so he said abruptly, after one of his glances: "Anything wrong, Susie?"

She was some moments before replying, and then she said slowly: "Well, yes, there is, Frank."

"Out with it." "I want you to give up the sea."

"Give up the sea!"

"Yes. Don't say anything for a moment. Let me speak. I know what it will mean to you. I know that after years of waiting and frustration and anger at being passed over, you are overjoyed at the prospect of having your own ship. I know all that, Frank, and I do realize all it must mean to you. But I ask you to give it all up."

"Leave the sea!" "Yes."

"But why? And why have you waited all this time before asking me?"

"Because I thought I could go through with our marriage, knowing you were going to remain at sea. But during the past few weeks, and especially the past few days, I've realized that I can't."

"You mean you can't marry me if I don't?"

"Yes, I do mean that, Frank. These past few weeks I've come to see that a woman who marries a sailor is neither a married woman nor a single woman. She has neither the freedom and lack of

responsibilities of the single woman nor the comfort and companionship that a woman expects when she marries. I just can't face an existence like that, Frank, much as I love you."

He was silent so long that she took his arm and said gently: "Don't you understand that? Please try to see it from my point of view. Won't you?"

"Well, yes, I do, Sue," he said, "but this has been rather a knock-out and I've not quite got my wits back yet."

"Then you will?"

"Yes. If that's what you want. But it's tough."

"I know, darling. "I'll — I'll try to make it up to you."

"I'll have to make this trip."

"Yes, of course. But it'll be your last. It was to be the last as Mate, and — and so, well, it's not a great deal different."

He laughed wryly. "That's one way of looking at it. But what am I going to do for a job? I'm a seaman. I was bred to the sea as my father was before me and I'm no use for anything else."

"Rubbish. Sailors are noted for being handy-men. And you're far better read than most men."

"Handymen are odd-job men. In other words, casual labourers. That's all I should be fit for. Will you like to live on a casual labourer's wage? How are we going to keep up *Rustholm* on about thirty bob a week?"

"We shan't have to."

"I'm not living on your father's money, Susie, if that's what you mean."

"I don't mean anything of the sort. You'll take no money from Father except what you earn."

"Oh, ho! so that's the great idea."

"And why not?"

"What God-awful use should I be in your father's business?"

"A lot. You could start from the bottom and learn it all, right up to the top."

"Sounds good. Or crazy. Depends on how you look at it. And how long will that take?"

"That's up to you, Frank."

"And while I'm at the bottom how much do I get?" "Enough to live on."

"In the way you've been accustomed to live?"

"Why not? Don't be so difficult, Frank. Can't you see that what Father wants is someone to carry on the business after him. He and Mummy have always regretted they've never had a son."

"And I'm the next best thing. That it?"

"From my point of view you're the best thing, not the next best." She stopped and as he stopped too she faced him and put her arms around his neck and said tremulously: "I know what a terrible lot I've asked of you. I'm grateful. I'll always be grateful. If we have boys, one of them could go to sea. That would be something. I love you more than I can say for giving in. Daddy and Mummy will be overjoyed."

As they walked on he said with a grin: "It's all been a put-up job I can see, a plant."

"Not a plant, just a plan for a happy married life."

After an early dinner that evening the four of them talked it over for half an hour or so before Susan drove him to the station to catch his train.

It was well after eleven when he reached the quay where the *Vega* was berthed. There was considerable activity still going on between the ship and the quay, and after greeting the second Mate, who was in charge on deck, Frank went below to talk with Captain Bryan.

"Had a good time?" Bryan said. "Pull up your chair and let's have a drink." He poured out two stiff whiskies, and raising his glass said: "Well, Frank, here's to my last trip in the good old *Vega*."

Frank looked at him over his glass. "Mine too," he said as they drank.

Bryan put down his empty glass and stared across the table. And then he grinned. "I see," he said, "last as Mate." He filled their glasses again. "The old girl'll be in good hands, Frank. None better. Here's luck."

"They won't be my hands."

"What're you bletherin' about?"

Frank told him and at the end Bryan said: "Well, I'll be damned. I'd never have believed it."

"It's not much of a married life for a woman," Frank said defensively.

"Well, it's suited my missis for over twenty years."

"And she's never complained?"

"Women always complain, whatever a man does. You'll soon find that out. You *have* made up your mind, I suppose? Or shall I say had it made up for you?"

"It's all cut and dried."

Bryan shrugged his shoulders. "Ah, well. Every man to his choice."

Nettled, Frank said: "You'd have chosen differently?"

"I don't say that. But it didn't arise and so I'll never know what I'd have done. By the by, the men know we're bringing back manganese."

Frank relit his pipe. "Ay," he said casually.

"They don't like it."

"I can think of easier cargoes. But what's the odds."

"Two of the A.B.'s refused to sign on and I've had to ship two others."

Frank grinned. "A black cat ran across the road in front of 'em probably."

"They'd the bloody nerve to say *Vega* was too old a ship for manganese." He chuckled. "Know what one of 'em said? Pasty-faced little runt with pimples."

"Oh, the old tale—roll the topmasts out of her in a gale."

"That's it."

"What did you say?"

"Told him I'd roll my boot into his backside if he wasn't off the ship in ten seconds."

"What time do we sail?"

"Seven."

"Everyone aboard?"

"Everybody except Sparks. I'd a wire from him to say he was unavoidably detained but would be here by midnight."

"And if he isn't?"

"He will." He smiled. "You see he's just got engaged to my little girl. She's what's unavoidably detained him. But she knows me and so does he. He'll be here."

"Well, I'll turn in. You taking her out?"

"You shall have the honour, seeing it's your last trip."

"I should have thought you'd want to."

"I'm a generous man."

"So am I. We'll toss for it. Winner takes her out."

"O.K. Tails."

Frank tossed a coin. "Tails it is," he said. "But I'll be on deck in case you need any help. Good-night."

Down in the fo'c'sle few of the crew had turned in. Most were sitting about in little groups smoking and chatting. Some were playing cards. One or two were reading. A fireman, Ted Levett, and a trimmer, Bert Iden, were discussing the coming

voyage. "It's the Old Man's last trip in the Old Girl and I wish it was mine," Levett said. "She's a darn sight too old."

"She's not so old as all that, Ted."

"She is for some cargoes."

"Meaning manganese?"

"You've said it." "It's only a rumour."

"Ay, so's God Almighty. And I believe in both. And Tich Hawkins asked the Second if it was true and he said: 'Well, what about it?' And if that don't mean yes what does it mean? And didn't Ginger Smith and old Dusty refuse to sign? Wouldn't the Old Man've told them the rumour wasn't true if it wasn't? He don't want two hands clearing off at the last minute. Specially one as good as old Dusty."

"I reckon he fired 'em for having the bleedin' nerve to ask him."

Another fireman, a Scot, Jack Finney, who was sitting near, said: "He didn't, Bert. They wouldn't sign on. I know that for a fact. What's more, they'd both got the offer of another ship before they told the Old Man they weren't coming. It's a Yank, the *William Penn*, and they got it because two of the Yank greasers (they're signing on as greasers) got laid out in a pub shemozzle down Limehouse and are in hospital, and as the *William Penn* was sailing at once her skipper couldn't wait. They're getting twice the dough they've been getting in the old *Vega* and the eats are real Ritzy."

"Isn't that why they signed then?" Iden said. "Posh grub and double the dough. Who wouldn't grab it?"

"Might be," Finney said, and then he grinned. "My missis 'd 'a been pleased if I signed on for the *William Penn*."

"Why, Jack?" Levett asked, "*she* don't know about the cargo?"

"She don't. But what she thinks she knows is a dam' sight worse."

"What's that?"

"Something her mother told her. The old woman's got second sight, so she says, and she told the missis she'd seen the *Vega* going down——"

"What, in a dream?"

"Not a dream. A vision. She was washing up the dinner things when she saw it. She saw it in the water in the washing bowl. You know, like the Gyppo fortune-tellers see in their crystal balls."

Some of the other men near who had been half-listening said: "What did she see, Jack?"

"The old *Vega* going down."

"Who did?" asked several voices.

"My missis's mother. She's got the second sight."

"Is that seeing double?" some said, and there was a burst of laughter.

"Same thing, more or less," Finney said. "I always say to my missis when she tells me about her mother's blether: 'Why don't she ever see

something pleasant? Or who's going to finish at the top o' the league. Or win the blinkin' Derby.' I'll lay any bookie would give a hundred to one the old *Vega's* back at her berth here before six months. Pity we didn't think of it before. It'd be a cinch."

"Who for, Jack? If the bookie was wrong he wouldn't have to pay. We'd be in Davy Jones's."

"Sounds like a catch in it somewhere, Sam. I'm going to turn in. I'm on at four, blast it."

When Finney had gone over to his bunk, which was at the far end of the fo'c'sle and out of ear-shot, Iden said: "Jack'd go if he had to swim there. He's got a wife and two kids in Adelaide. Or she thinks she's his wife, which amounts to the same."

Iden smiled. "Now why the heck can't the old girl with the second sight see the Aussie wife and kids in the soap bowl, or whatever it was? Shows it's all boloney."

Levett grimaced. "Dare say it is, Bert. Anyway, we've all got to die sometime."

"Yeah. Old soldiers never die, but sailors are dying all the bleedin' time. I'm for some shut-eye."

It was shortly before noon the next morning, when they were passing the Isle of Sheppey, that Frank Bowers, walking by the galley, noticed two A.B.'s inside drinking tea and talking to the cook and the galley boy. The door was open and he was about to put his head in and ask them if they

hadn't a job when he heard one of them say, addressing the cook: "I just sin sutthin, George, I never sin afore in twenty-five years at sea, and I don't like it."

Bowers stopped to listen.

"Oh," the cook said casually, "and what was that, Joe?"

"It was just as we was passing Sheerness, by a wood. Nearly half-a-mile off-shore we was, and a maggy flew out and settled on the foremast truck and there he perched for five or six minutes. Never sin it afore in twenty-five years. Gulls, pigeons, crows, daws, yus—hunnerds o' times. But a maggy, never. I don't like it."

Bowers put his head in. "Oh, and why don't you like it? And what's a maggy?"

The two seamen put their mugs down quickly and stood up, looking confused. "It's a magpie, sir," Joe said.

"And what about it?"

"It come and perched on the foremast truck as we was passing Sheerness."

"So what?"

The seaman looked sheepish. "Well, sir, they do say——"

"Who do?"

"More or less everybody do, sir."

"Do they. And what do they say?"

"They say a maggy coming aboard a ship means trouble."

"What sort of trouble? Mutiny?"

"They say it means she 'on't reach port."

"*They* say. And do you say so too?"

"Well, I don't know, sir. I'm on'y saying what I've allus heard."

"If you believe that sort of bunk you'll believe anything."

The cook looked over to Bowers with a grin. "They do say, sir, one for sorrow two for joy. Maggies, I mean."

"So I've heard." He turned to Joe again. "So if there'd been one on the foremast truck and one on the mainmast truck that would have been O.K.?" "I dessay it would, sir."

"I see. What are you grinning at, Smilby?"

"Nothing, sir," the galley boy said.

"How the hell do you get yourself in such a filthy mess? Do you start the day by blacking your face?"

"No, sir."

"Well, it's a dam' sight more black than white now. Perhaps you think you're a magpie, Smilby?"

"No, sir."

"He's near enough, don't you think, Joe?"

"Yessir."

"Then if you shin up the mainmast, Smilby, and sit on the truck for five minutes, that would make it two for joy, wouldn't it?"

The boy hesitated, the cleaner portion of his face turning whiter. "Yes, sir," he said at last.

"Well, shin up and sit there."

The boy did not move.

"You deaf?"

"No, sir."

"Scared?"

"Yes, sir."

"A yellow magpie. You don't seem to have a job, Joe. You show him how."

"I couldn't do it, sir."

"No. And there's not a man among you could. Or have the guts to try. And that goes for everyone in the fo'c'sle. And why can't you? Because you're no more seamen than a potman is. Not one of you's been in sail. If you had you'd shin up that mast, stand on your head on the truck, and sing 'Rule Britannia.' And if I find you skulking any more in the galley I'll give you another tune to sing. Beat it. And get some of that muck off, Smilby. Do you sweat much in here?"

"Yes, sir."

"And drip it in the soup. Now listen, Smilby. I don't mind a bit of good honest sweat in the soup, but I draw the line at muck and sweat. And what's that stuff you've got on your hair?"

"Brilliantine, sir."

"Well, cut it out or I'll do what they do in German ships to the galley boys. Know what that is?"

"No, sir."

"They shave their heads, Smilby. If you're ever in such a filthy mess again I'll scrub you with sand-

paper and shave your head with a cut-throat. Got that? Well, get cracking."

The outward voyage was without incident except the small mishaps that are so much a part of life at sea that no one, talking of a voyage, would ever mention them. The *Vega* berthed at Adelaide on Christmas Eve and as the dockers did not start unloading the cargo until the twenty-seventh it was not until January 4 that she was able to sail for Port Pirie. Most of the men had friends in Adelaide and were able to spend several days at hospitable tables ashore, and Jack Finney had three days with his second wife and family.

Talk in Adelaide was, among men, of little else but the Test Match which began on the fifth. In the previous Test Match, Jardine, the English captain, had introduced, as a counter measure to Bradman's devastating batting, what the Australian Press and public were loudly denouncing as bodyline bowling and stigmatising its chief exponent, Larwood, as a thug. Bowes and Voce, who were also bowling "bodyline," but without the terrific speed and accuracy of Larwood, came in for a minor share of Press vituperation and barracking during play.

Frank Bowers, who had been counting on seeing the Test Match all the way over, and who had been worked up to the keenest pitch of enjoyable excitement by the bodyline hullabaloo which on *Vega's* arrival was being violently discussed in

every newspaper and every pub, was in a fury at the slowness in getting *Vega* turned round. He cursed the dockers for wanting Christmas Eve, Christmas Day and Boxing Day off, and when they turned up on the twenty-seventh he spent much of the next week cursing their slowness, but out of earshot, for Australian dockers take no lip from any man, and he did not want to start a riot or cause a strike.

When it was clear that *Vega* could not sail for Port Pirie until the afternoon of the fourth, he abandoned all hope of seeing the first two days of the Test Match, but characteristically said nothing to Captain Bryan or anyone else of his disappointment.

But Bryan, leaving it with sly malice till an hour before they pulled out for Port Pirie, sent for him, and shooting him a leer, said solemnly: "The whole city's gone stark, staring mad over cricket. What's it all about?" Bowers told him.

"You sound as daft yourself."

"I'm keen on cricket."

"Pity you won't be able to see the match."

"I thought as soon as we'd berthed at Port Pirie you'd give me a couple of days or so off and I could then see the end of it."

"Hell of a way to come for so little."

"It's no distance."

"H'm. I think you'd better stop here and see the lot."

"Dam' nice of you."

"Isn't it. It's your last voyage. That's one reason. And I'd like to have a goddam honest account of the match and not have to read the lying drivel the Aussie papers'll be serving up. That's the important reason. Didn't know I was interested in cricket?"

"I didn't."

"I'm not. I think it's about the dullest game the human race ever thought up. But my boy Cyril is. He's sixteen, and cricket captain of his school, and if I go back without a full and unbiassed story of what I understand is going to be cricket with trimmings, mayhem and blue murder, he'll hold it against me to my dying day. Ay, and after I'm dead. Being a husband's no easy job, but it's kiss my hand to being a father. Be warned in time, my boy. And don't forget we sail from Port Pirie on the fifteenth."

"I know. And thanks a lot."

And so the Mate was able to watch the game through, had the pleasure of seeing Larwood skittle out the Australians for 222 and 193, of cheering England's win by 338, and of listening to the most savage barracking of the English bowlers by the crowd. He took the train to Port Pirie the next morning feeling extremely pleased with himself, very contented with life in general, and greatly looking forward to the trip home.

They sailed from Port Pirie on January 15. The

coal bunkers were only about half full, as Captain Bryan intended coaling at the Cocos Islands and again at Colombo. This enabled him to carry more cargo, and when *Vega* steamed out of Port Pirie just after dawn she was, despite half-empty coal bunkers, down to the Plimsoll line, and in fact, to a severely critical eye, more than down. But there was no critical eye there or else it had been persuaded to look the other way.

Vega coaled at the Cocos Islands on January 25 and 26, leaving on the morning of the 27, her coming and going duly reported by Lloyd's agent there.

She was due at Colombo on February 5. On the 12th the Black Star Line agent at Colombo reported her to the owners in London as a week overdue, and Lloyd's agent also reported her as overdue.

On February 19, Lloyd's reported her as missing.

Two days later, Mr. John Roscoe, reading *The Times* at breakfast, did not quite succeed in repressing an exclamation. His wife and Susan both looked up. At his wife's question, he said it was nothing, but he could not conceal the anxiety of his expression from the woman who had been consciously or unconsciously studying it for more than twenty years. "Now then, my dear," Mary said, "don't say 'nothing' like that. I'm sure there is something. What is it?"

Roscoe looked unhappily from his wife to his daughter. He put down *The Times*, fiddled with his table napkin, took up his cup, and finding it empty, put it down again.

"Is it something in *The Times*, Daddy?" Susan said.

He cleared his throat. "Well, I'm afraid it is, my dear. Lloyd's have posted Frank's ship as missing."

"What exactly does that mean?" Susan asked quietly, although the colour had gone from her face.

Her father picked up the paper again, and glancing at it a moment, said: "She was reported a week overdue at Colombo in Ceylon on the twelfth. Lloyd's in London posted her as missing on the nineteenth. That means nothing has been heard of her since — er ——" he again referred to his paper, since she left the Cocos Islands on January 27."

"And where are they?" Susan asked.

"I'm afraid I don't know, my dear. Perhaps you'll get the atlas and we'll see."

The three of them studied the map of the Pacific Ocean for some minutes and Susan said: "How far would it be from — from the Cocos Islands to Colombo?"

Mr. Roscoe measured it with the bread-knife and said: "About twelve hundred miles I should say."

"*Vega* was a very slow boat," Susan said. "Frank said she was the slowest of all the Black Star Line. She might take weeks to reach Colombo, especially if the weather was bad."

Mr. Roscoe glanced uneasily from his daughter's white face to his wife's, and then looked into the fire. "I'm afraid not, my dear girl," he said gently. "You see, *Vega* was obviously expected at Colombo on the fifth because on the twelfth the agent there reported her as a week overdue."

"I see," Susan said quietly, so quietly that her mother put her hand on hers, and said: "I'm sure Frank has only been held up by bad weather."

"Don't you think so, Daddy?" Susan said hopefully.

Her father shifted uneasily in his chair. "Well, darling, I don't know," he said lamely. "You see, if they'd run into bad weather and — and got into difficulties they would have radioed for assistance."

"The radio might have got damaged. Frank says that does happen."

"Yes, of course. After all, she's only just over a fortnight overdue. It's quite possible she's disabled and drifting about with her wireless out of action. Ships have been missing much longer and turned up safely. There's no need to give up — to — er — get — er — to get anxious for quite a while yet."

"I shall never give up hope, if that's what you were going to say. I'm sure Frank's all right. I know it. I know it. Life couldn't be so cruel."

"I'm sure he is too, darling," her mother said.

"Isn't there anything we can *do*? Susan said.

"We can only wait, my dear girl, I'm afraid."

"Couldn't you go and see the owners?"

"Well, I could, but I don't see that it would be of any use, and I don't suppose they would welcome a visit at such a worrying time."

"Worrying! What have they to worry about? They're insured, probably for more than the ship's worth. I daresay they were hoping she would sink. I can't stay here and do nothing. I shall go up to London and see the owners."

"Very well, my dear, we'll go together. We'll go up tomorrow by the first train."

"We're going this morning. Or I am."

He shrugged his shoulders slightly. "Very well. The earliest train we can catch now would be the 9.45 from Abingdon. I'll ask Jackson to have the car ready in twenty minutes. Or would you rather go all the way by car?"

"Which would be quicker?"

"The 9.45 gets in at 11.0. I don't think we could be in London by car by then, with the roads as they are. We don't want to have an accident. One trouble at a time is ample."

"We'll go by train then."

At the office of the Black Star Line in Leadenhall Street, and only three doors away from Lloyd's itself, there was some comfort for Susan.

They were shown into the managing director's

office and immediately he knew who they were he was all sympathy. "We know," he said, "that there was very bad weather in that area between January 27 and February 5."

"We didn't know that," Mr. Roscoe said.

"Oh, yes, really bad. Something in the nature of a typhoon. Several ships were in difficulty. Quite a bad time. Several overdue three or four days at Colombo. But they all turned up eventually."

"Except the *Vega*," Susan said.

"Yes. They all reported a pretty bad time."

"You've not — you've not given up hope," Susan said.

"Given up hope! Dear me, no. There are several things which may have happened."

"Her engines and radio may have broken down," Susan said.

He glanced quickly at her troubled face. "Yes, there is that. Or they may have had to take to the boats without being able to radio the fact."

"You mean that the *Vega* had gone down."

"Well, yes."

"Would the boats have any chance in such rough seas?"

"Chance, Miss Roscoe? Every chance. They are lifeboats—fine big sturdy craft. The *Vega* carried two, each of them capable of holding the full complement of the ship. A double chance, you see. Then there is the jolly-boat, although being, of course, a comparatively small craft, and in such

heavy weather——" he left the sentence unfinished, tapping his blotting pad with his pen. "But," he went on quickly, "the chances would be that both, and certainly one, of the lifeboats would get away."

"Do they carry a sail?" Mr. Roscoe asked.

"O yes. A single sail. What is known as a dipping lug." He made a little drawing on his blotting pad. "Something like that. And of course they also carry oars."

"The lifeboat would not be as fast as the *Vega*?" Susan said.

"Dear me, no. Not half as fast. And she might have to tack and tack and tack; you understand tacking?"

Mr. Roscoe and Susan nodded, and Susan said: "Then if the lifeboat was not seen by a passing ship it might be weeks before it reached Colombo, or — or wherever it was making for?"

"Exactly. I imagine they'd probably make for the Cocos. Depends, of course, on how far they'd got after leaving. And as for being seen by a passing ship, you must remember that a ship's lifeboat is a very small object, I mean relatively, and the Pacific Ocean is vast. A needle in a haystack would be more easy to come upon."

"The *Vega's* cargo was manganese ore, wasn't it?" Susan asked.

The managing director gave her a swift look. "That is so."

"Isn't it — I mean, is it rather a dangerous cargo?"

"Dangerous? Bless you, no. Where did you get that from? Not from Mr. Bowers, I am sure."

"Well, no. But he did say it was a heavy cargo and that in an old ship——"

"The *Vega* was not very old, Miss Roscoe. Forgive my interrupting. But you must not get ideas into your head. The *Vega* has brought many cargoes of manganese ore from Australia in her time. And she's a fine sound ship. No. You may rest assured if anything serious has happened to her, and it's by no means certain yet that it has, then whatever it may have been it had nothing to do with her seaworthiness or her cargo. It was that hazard no one can guard against—an act of God."

"Are you still *honestly* expecting to hear that she is safe?" Susan said.

"I will not say expecting, if you are referring to the *Vega* herself. Let us say hoping. But for all those on board, let me assure you with complete sincerity that we are most decidedly expecting to hear that all is well with them. And quite soon now."

"And — and you will let us know immediately," Susan said.

"Why, of course. We will telephone you immediately."

"Whatever the news?"

"Certainly." And as at this they rose to go he

put a hand on Susan's shoulder and said: "Keep your heart up. I have known ships missing for a month turn up safe and sound. Yes, and ship's lifeboats after two months and even more. Goodbye. I hope we shall have some good news for you very soon."

But February went and there was no news. A week of March went by, slow dragging days for Susan, who haunted the telephone, and still there was nothing. Another week dragged by and another, and then, on March 21, there was a telephone call from the Black Star office in Leadenhall Street. The *S.S. Penelope*, homeward bound from Sydney, had radioed that she had picked up in Lat. 8 deg. N., Long. 82 deg. E. (almost 500 miles due south of Colombo) one of the lifeboats of the *Vega* with only one man in it, alive but unconscious. The following day there was a further message from the *Penelope* saying the rescued man was the Mate, Frank Bowers, who had now recovered consciousness and was out of danger, but was not well enough to relate what had happened. It was not until the *Penelope* berthed at the Port of London on May 8 that Bowers told his story.

The story he told to the managing director at the Black Star office was substantially the same as he told later to Susan and her parents. The few minor differences were in technical details on the one hand and in the matter of complete frankness on the other. He refused to make any statement to

the Press, referring the reporters, during the two days he was in London, to the Leadenhall Street office, where they were given a brief summary which they expanded and decorated in their own fashion.

Susan wanted to come up to London to bring him down to Steventon, but he telephoned her not to, saying he would rather get matters straightened out with his company and would then come down to *Five Elms* as quickly as possible.

She and her mother and father had read all the Press accounts and been horrified by what they had read, but it was only when Frank arrived and they were shocked by his appearance that they began to realize something of the ordeal through which he had passed and survived.

He came by an evening train and it was after dinner, fortified by good food and wine, and with Susan beside him now and again clasping his hand, that he told what had happened. His voice was tired, almost toneless. He spoke as if he were a child repeating a lesson learnt by heart.

"We took on more coal than I had expected at the Cocos. I don't know why Bryan did this. I didn't ask him. And we were too heavy—down well above the Plimsoll line."

"But isn't that illegal?" Susan said.

"O yes, it's illegal, like lots of other things. No one knows. Or cares. And dead men tell no tales. If the underwriters knew they wouldn't pay

the insurance. But they don't know. And I shan't tell them. It's my responsibility, almost as much as Bryan's. I could have protested and if I'd done so Bryan daren't have sailed in that condition, in case something happened and I was left alone to bear witness. As it chances that I am. But I shall bear no witness false or true, unless telling my story is bearing witness. I've told it once to Macpherson. It wasn't quite the one I'm telling you. And I'll have to tell it again to the Enquiry. And that won't be the same either." He stopped and sat still, staring into the fire. He was silent a long while. No one spoke. An uneasy tension crept into the room. A burning coal broke apart and a piece fell against the bars of the grate, and as if awakened by the slight noise from a dream, he went on, as if there had been no pause in his story: "And the weather report we got at the Cocos was bad. We knew we'd be running into something pretty foul within twelve hours.

"It wasn't even twelve hours. The Cocos were barely a couple of hours below the horizon when the wind was already half a gale and the sea nasty. And it grew steadily worse, hour after hour, for the next sixty hours. There was no let-up. We'd hit a typhoon straight down from the China Sea. There's no describing what it was like. Not by me. I haven't the words. Perhaps we'd never have weathered it anyhow. But with a dead cargo like manganese ore, and over-coaled, and an old ship,

the cards were all stacked against us. The seas were huge overhanging cliffs with black pits between them and into the pits we toppled from one to another. I thought she would break her back. She pitched and rolled and wallowed. It was uproar, a pandemonium of sound. There's no describing it, no imagining it. The wind screamed. The thud of the waves was thunder. Every inch of the ship added its noise, every plate groaned, every rivet grated, as we shuddered and rolled and pitched. No one slept except in snatches. Everything was swept from the deck but the galley, which was domed half-inch steel plate, and which defied the waves which broke over us by slipping them. One wave sheered the jolly-boat from its davits and took the davits too, and the wind sucked her up into the air and if she came down again we didn't see her and it was daylight then, if the half-light we were plunging through could be called daylight. We had to eat and drink somehow or other and we had to get to the galley to do it. Most managed it. Some didn't. Some went overboard. One, Evans, a Welshman, was sucked back by one wave and then flung forward by the next against the galley and smashed like an egg. His body floundered backwards and forwards like a fish in the wash of the deck for God knows how long and nobody could do anything about it. And then it went overboard.

"We were now leaking badly through a hun-

dred strained plates, but so far the pumps kept on top. But we were then only thirty-six hours from the Cocos and we hadn't yet struck the worst: the smashing tumult at the heart, the cauldron of unbelievable chaos, the frantic uproar of wind and sea that kills all other sounds, that chokes the breath and stops the heart and smashes the body.

"It was another twelve hours before we drove into that. It finished the *Vega*. She rolled the top-masts out of her and brought all down—wireless aerial stays and halyards crashing to the swept deck. We should have radioed for help before that, but Bryan wouldn't. She sprang her plates by hundreds. Down below ever and again you could hear the pistol-shot of a rivet catapulted by the released tension, and the whine and clang and clatter of loosened plates. The seas sieved into us and the pumps were as much use as spooning out a bath.

"About three hours before dawn on the thirtieth of January we had to abandon ship. Bryan had held on so long that it was a race to get away before she went down. It was no race for him. He didn't leave her." He stopped and again sat a long while, but not this time looking into the fire, but at his hands, first one and then the other, resting on the arms of his chair. After a time he went on, and again as if he had not stopped, so that for a moment his listeners found it difficult to join on the thread. "Or so I was told. The first lifeboat got away and capsized and everyone was lost in the

darkness. All except one. That is how I knew. How we knew. Some of us were swept away and lost as we got the second lifeboat afloat. How many I don't know. Five or six. We got away somehow and kept afloat and turned and saw the loom of the *Vega* in the dark tumult of sea and wind. And then she was gone. It was no slow settling. She was there, a dark, rolling loom; and then nothing. We heard a cry from the water. Or thought we did. Or someone said he saw something. Or thought he did. But there was someone, and by a million-to-one chance he was swept against us and hauled aboard. Better if he hadn't been, for he'd a broken leg and crushed ribs and God knows what hurt inside, and we couldn't do anything for him and he was to die a week later. Not a week. Four or five days perhaps. It might have been more. I forget. He was Peter Craig, our second engineer.

"In our lifeboat, besides Craig and myself, were Bert Iden, a trimmer; Ted Levett and Jack Finney, two firemen; Sos Dyer, Curly Watson and Tich Hawkins, three able seamen; and Tom Smilby, the galley boy: he was seventeen and the youngest, a fine big lad. Jack Finney was the oldest of the party, in his middle forties, a tough Scotsman." Once more he fell silent, longer still this time, and again a tension came into the room and drew close to the little group about the fire and their unease grew and stretched out and thinned until it almost snapped into a cry. He went on:

"With the dawn the sea and the wind began to fall away and we could steady ourselves to make a tally of what we had." Again he stopped, but now only for a moment, and looked over to Susan and said: "Do you know what we should have had? But of course you don't.

"In the locker aft there should have been two 36-gallon breakers of fresh water, a case of biscuits, and a case of tins of sweetened condensed milk. One of the breakers of water was empty, the other full. The biscuits and milk were not there. They had been stolen."

"Wasn't the locker kept locked?"

"In theory. But it never was."

"Who could have been so wicked as to steal emergency rations from a lifeboat locker?" Susan said.

"So wicked," he said, and repeated, "so wicked," and stared into the fire, his expression brooding, sullen.

Fearing one more of those long silences which were fraying her nerves, Susan said: "Who had stolen them, Frank?"

"Oh, someone; anyone; someone while we were unloading at Adelaide or loading at Port Pirie. Wicked! Is that all? They were worth several pounds apiece. Beer for a week. It was just stealing from a locker which wasn't locked. Not like stealing from another man. If you don't think about it.

Just an impersonal bit of pinching. Don't we all do it? "

" But it — it might mean so much, such terrible things," Mrs. Roscoe said quietly.

" It was murder. But who thinks so far ahead as that when a locker's found unlocked? And who's to blame? Whose hands have the blood on them? " He looked at his hands as if he could see blood there.

" Was there nothing else but the water? " Mr. Roscoe asked.

" O yes. Jack Finney had a bottle of whisky. It was nearly full. Queer thing to save, wasn't it? He handed it over to me but he stole it back later. Stole? I don't know. It was his, after all. That was all. Thirty-six gallons of water. Two hundred and eighty-eight pints between nine men. Thirty-two pints apiece. A pint a day for thirty-two days. And nothing to eat. And the sea full of fish. Perhaps we could catch some. One day when we began to feel hungry. We didn't. I don't know why. Perhaps because we hadn't any hooks and those we improvised weren't any good or the sharks took the bait."

" Why, what bait was there? " Susan asked.

" Bait! Of course there was no bait. I was joking. There was nothing to catch fish with and none jumped aboard or flew aboard as they do in stories. But we found other things out when the daylight came and the seas began to fall away and the

wind dropped and veered. We'd all watches and all were going except Craig's. They stopped later. All of them. First one and then the other. Perhaps we forgot to wind them. Or it didn't matter. I don't know. No one mentioned it. But on that first day about noon I said we'd have the sail up. It was folded into a canvas bag and lashed to the mast, which, of course, we had to step first. And when we came to pull out the sail it was rotten. It came to pieces like burnt cloth. Neglect. Bryan's neglect. My neglect. Anyone's neglect. But there it was. We kept the mast stepped and left it at that. We went the way the wind and the sea took us. For the rest we rowed. It made a change if it made no other difference.

"After a time we no longer rowed. We hadn't the strength. But that was a long time later. We just lay about trying to shelter from the sun in the day. Craig died first. He was always in pain and always thirsty, but he wouldn't drink more than his share. He asked me several times to crack him on the head and throw him overboard. It would have been better if we hadn't the water. We'd have died quickly then."

"Please don't say that, Frank," Susan said.

"It's said now. The water kept us alive and hunger tormented us and haunted us. Presently we could think of nothing else but food or dream of anything else. We talked about it at first. The spreads we'd had at one time or another. Just by

way of a joke that was. But we soon stopped talking about it. Tom Smilby was the first to die. The first after Craig. The first to die from starvation. It was quite three weeks after Craig died. Queer it should have been Smilby. He was a fine youngster, a big stout fellow. I suppose he was twelve stone when we took to the lifeboat. He wasn't more than half that when he died. When it has nothing but water the body eats itself away. The fat goes first. And then the flesh."

He stopped and picked up the poker and made as if to poke the fire, but did not poke it, and the poker hung loosely in his hand. He seemed to have forgotten it. He was silent a long while and every second the ticking of the mantelpiece clock grew louder, grew more unbearable in the silence.

Mr. Roscoe leaned over and put a hand on his arm. "You don't want to tell us any more, my dear boy, if it is upsetting you. We quite understand."

"It's not upsetting me. I was just thinking. And there's not much more to tell. The others died one by one. Watson fell overboard and went down like a stone. Or perhaps he crawled over and let himself go. We didn't do anything. It was just after this that Jack Finney took back his bottle of whisky. It was still three parts full. He must have crept aft in the night and taken it. There were only three of us then. It must have been five or six weeks after *Vega* went down. The other one was Tich Hawkins, a tough little Cockney. Finney swilled all

the whisky without taking the bottle from his mouth and went insane. And he was used to drinking whisky. But he'd had an empty stomach then for about six weeks and was down to about five stone, and I suppose that made all the difference. Within a few minutes of his swilling the whisky he was raving mad and for a few minutes had the strength of madness and caught hold of Hawkins and tried to strangle him and they fell overboard clasped together and it was not light enough to see what happened to them. And I couldn't have done anything. I just lay about, mostly asleep, or in a coma. And then I must have passed right out for I don't remember anything more till I came to aboard the *Penelope*. They made a mess of getting the lifeboat aboard and she fell back bow first and plunged into the water and filled and sank. And that is the story. I have told you more than anyone else will be told."

"And now," Susan said gently, "you're going to forget it all."

"Not yet. They won't let me. There's the Court of Enquiry first. And the underwriters' probings. I shall have to lie about some things." He was silent for some time and then he said: "Unless you think I ought to tell the truth?"

"You must do what you think is best—for everyone," Susan said.

He did not answer for some time and then he said: "The best for everyone is to lie. Oh, only one

lie. Just one thumping lie about the Plimsoll line. And a prayer to God, or whoever has liars in his keeping, that no official eye at the Cocos noted it. It's long odds none did. The sun wasn't up when we sailed."

"You weren't responsible, Frank," Susan said.

"I was equally responsible with Bryan. I could have protested and that would have been that. I don't mind owning to it. It isn't that. It's not half so simple. If only things were simple and straightforward. They never are. You see, Sue, if the underwriters don't pay up, and they wouldn't if they knew how we were overloaded, then it would mean a loss of more than two hundred thousand pounds roughly. I don't know exactly, but more or less. A loss to the Black Star of perhaps anything up to a quarter of a million. It might break them. I don't know. I say it might. At the worst it would, and then all the wives and kids would get nothing. Unless there were a public subscription. And how much would that bring in these days when things are as bad as they are, with a couple of million unemployed and the slump smashing all the people it did a couple of years or so ago? And at the best, if it didn't break Black Star, they couldn't afford to be generous; and that's going to affect God knows how many lives. But with the underwriters paying up, Black Star are going to be on velvet. It's true. The old *Vega* was anyway on her last legs and not worth half what they'll get. She'd

have gone to the breakers in a few years. So they'll have money to burn and they'll be generous. It'll look well. So easy when you've got it. Easy money. Blood money. God, I'm sick of the sea. I'm glad I'm not going back. But I'll not be able to forget yet. They won't let me. Afterwards we'll see. If only forgetting were as easy as remembering. There are all sorts of dodges for remembering. But none for forgetting."

"Time helps, Frank, and — and love."

"Perhaps it does. I think I'll turn in now. That's one thing I can do—sleep."

"It's the great healer, my boy," Mr. Roscoe said.

"If one doesn't dream." "That will pass."

"I suppose so. Everything passes. If we wait long enough. God, how tired I am."

The Enquiry was a perfunctory business, no one, least of all the Court, expecting anything in the way of surprises from the only person of any real importance in the affair. Frank gave simple, truthful, and straightforward answers to all the questions put to him, with the exception of the few relating to lading; to these his replies were unequivocal lies.

The underwriters paid up and the Black Star Line was able to be generous to the dependants of the dead men, while making it clear that no one had any legal claim and that all payments were *ex gratia*.

The public, always and very humanly ready to find the humorous element in the most tragic event, found it in the claim of Jack Finney's Australian wife for a share in the compensation. *Ex gratia* were not words in her vocabulary or in her solicitor's. She claimed by right, and not only for herself, but for her three children: a boy of seven, a girl of three, and one of unknown sex "on the way." There was a touch of the farcical, or of the macabre (depending on one's taste) in her claim for this unborn child begotten on her, so it was calculated by the skilled in such computations, by a man who was already dying by the time she knew she had conceived.

The Black Star Line repudiated her claim and she threatened to come to England and sue them. Several letters came from her Australian solicitor addressed to the Company, but these were left unanswered. And then there were no more letters. The Company assumed that her shady solicitor (the adjective was theirs) had given up the game and told her there was nothing doing. The Company was wrong. Mrs. Hetty Finney, as she insisted on calling herself, had been on the point of sailing for England when a letter arrived for her. It ran: "Dear Madam, Your husband, the late Jack Finney, was evidently a man of enterprize and by such men our great Empire, of which you and I are, or should be, grateful members, was built. You must not expect the shipping company

which owed so much to his energies to admit they are in his debt one penny piece, and as your marriage to him was a bigamous one, they are able with a clear conscience (such strange things are consciences) to stifle any generous impulses towards you which they may have. Allow me to step into their shoes and, as a man not indifferent to the many if not always obvious charms of the young of the human species, to send you a trifle apiece for the two actual and one hypothetical offspring of your romantic adventure with Mr. Finney."

The enclosed cheque was for three thousand pounds and was signed, as was the letter, Josiah Hosegood. There was a postscript which ran: "Should number three fail to arrive, as sometimes happens in such cases, please accept his or her share yourself as some *solatium* for the loss of the companionship, however interrupted, of one who was definitely a man of parts."

The Company, heartwarmed by their generosity, and having done extremely well out of the affair, felt it would be a gesture redounding to their credit in shipping circles if they made it clear that they retained the fullest confidence in the capacity of the lone survivor of the dreadful business. Captain Jones of the *Canopus* was to be given the new *Sirius*. What could be more fitting, more generous, and more likely to win both professional and public acclaim than the offer of the *Canopus* to Bowers? The *Canopus* was but ten years old; a

fine boat of 8,000 tons, and compared with the sunken *Vega* was as a hunter is to an old hack.

Mr. Macpherson, the managing director of the Black Star Line, wrote to Frank asking him to call at the Leadenhall Street office at his earliest convenience and to let him know when he was coming. This was about a fortnight after the Court of Enquiry and Frank was still staying at *Five Elms*. He went up to London two days later and was greeted by Macpherson with that air of brisk yet faintly patronizing *bonhomie* so often displayed by men exercising a seldom used impulse of generosity and feeling what damn good fellows they are.

"Ah, sit down, Bowers," Macpherson said. "Let's have a drink and then we can talk. You're looking remarkably fit I must say. Must be the Berkshire air. How are you feeling?"

"Pretty good, thanks."

"Fine. We want you to take a three months' holiday on full pay. I understand you are getting married."

"Yes, in July."

"Fine. Then you'll be able to include your honeymoon. I wish you all happiness on behalf of the Company. And there'll be something in due course a little more substantial than wishes. But all that in its proper time. We are giving *Canopus* an overhaul and doing quite a lot of renovating and refitting, and generally, if I may say so, making quite a luxury ship of her. She'll be back in com-

mission in September and the Company would like you to have her."

"I much appreciate that, sir, but I'm giving up the sea."

"Giving up the sea!" and in the startled words there was that note of querulous sharpness always met with when a cherished gesture of generosity is chilled by rejection. "Yes."

"Is your decision due to this unhappy business?"

"No, sir. My fiancée asked me to give it up before the *Vega* trip, and I agreed."

"It's rather a bombshell. I think you rather owed it to the Company to have informed us earlier."

"Yes. I apologize for that. I fully intended to. But the fact is I thought that there was a possibility Miss Roscoe would change her mind. And so I thought I'd leave it till the end of the trip. But in any case I shouldn't go back to the sea after what has happened."

"We all say that. But we go back. You're not yourself again yet, Captain Bowers." He smiled faintly. "Doesn't that tempt you?"

"Not now, sir. More than ever now my fiancée is dead against my returning to sea. I was in fact writing to the Company to this effect when your letter came."

"Your decision, or should I say Miss Roscoe's, is irrevocable?" "Yes, sir."

"I am sorry. And I speak for myself as well as for the Company. There are not so many good men at sea that the loss of one can be regarded with equanimity."

"Of thirty-seven, sir."

"What was that?"

Bowers looked at him fixedly. "I said of thirty-seven, sir."

"Eh — oh, yes; of course." What a damnedly odd thing to say. And, now he came to think of it, what a damnedly odd look Bowers gave him. In fact, throughout the interview his expression had been queer; a sort of moroseness, was it? Not quite that, nor sullenness. A kind of brooding? Yes, that was it; as if his mind were busy with something else and that something else damnedly unpleasant. Not to be wondered at of course. But that sort of thing was one of the hazards of seafaring life. One accepted it. Damn silly to brood over the business. He doodled on his blotting pad and then said: "You would like me to put your formal resignation before the next meeting of the board of directors?"

"Yes, please."

"Very well, Bowers. I deeply regret it, as I have said. There is a meeting of the board next Thursday. You will be hearing from me shortly afterwards and I think I may say at once that you will not find us lacking in appreciation of your past services. One moment," as Frank rose to go. "I am

going to put you a very blunt question. You will answer or not as you think fit."

The Mate of the *Vega* stood upright by the desk and looked down at Macpherson's raised face. "Don't bother to put it," he said harshly. "The *Vega* was overloaded when she left the Cocos by three hundred tons. She was down to the Indian Summer line. In January."

Mr. Macpherson repeated flatly: "In January."

Bowers looked away from him out of the window. There was a remoteness in that fixed blank look as if he were watching a distant scene or a mental picture. Then he looked once again at Macpherson and said slowly: "The blood on the cargo. I wonder who first said that, sir."

Mr. Macpherson seemed disconcerted. He fiddled with his pen. "Well, goodbye, Bowers," he said. "You'll be hearing from me." He sat a long while after the door had closed behind the Mate, quite still except for a faint tapping with his pen upon the blotting pad. A blob of ink fell upon the white surface and slowly spread, and he stared at the black shape as if he saw in it strange figures. He pulled himself together and his thoughts took a new turn. He began to wonder if Bowers were quite right in his head; if perhaps the ordeal had been too much for him. He was certainly a changed man from what he had been before that last disastrous voyage. He looked a — what was it? The word for some time eluded him and then he

found it: haunted. That was it: a haunted man. Nothing perhaps to be astonished at. And if the affair had affected his reason it was just as well he was resigning. An insane and haunted man in charge of a ship conjured up such appalling possibilities that he hastened to think of something else and, noticing the whisky bottle beside the telephone on his desk, he poured himself out several fingers and, with what might be described as a token addition of water, drained the glass.

At the board meeting the following Thursday, after much discussion, most of which did not figure in the minutes, it was unanimously decided that a cheque for two thousand pounds should be sent to Mr. Frank Bowers in appreciation of his fine record of service with the Company, and in addition, as a wedding present, a silver tea service accompanied by a letter wishing the young couple many years of happy married life.

About a fortnight later there was a telephone call for Frank at *Five Elms* one morning just after they had finished breakfast. It was from London, from one of the Sunday newspapers, and was an offer of fifteen hundred pounds for his story of the wreck of the *Vega* and the subsequent ordeal of the nine men in the ship's lifeboat. Frank put the receiver back before the voice at the other end had finished speaking and when he came back into the breakfast room he looked so upset that Susan cried: "Why, Frank, is anything wrong?"

"Only with the human race," he said, and without another word walked out through the French windows into the garden where Susan presently joined him. "What is it, darling?" she said.

"A ghoul from a Sunday newspaper who wanted to buy what they called my thrilling story. I cut him off. If I could have got my hands on him he'd have had something else to put in his swill-tub."

"The telephone's ringing again," Susan said.

"He's probably back again. Answer it for me will you." "But what shall I say?"

"Say there's no answer."

But not so easily was *The Sunday Medlar* to be put off. That afternoon, just before five o'clock, two young men in a car called at the house and asked to see Mr. Frank Bowers. One of the young men carried a camera slung over his shoulder. The maid, intimidated and flustered by their assured and thrustful manner, had let them in and shown them into a sitting-room before Frank knew anything about it. He went in and they were standing at the window looking out into the garden. They turned round at his entrance and the one without the camera said: "Mr. Frank Bowers?"

"Yes. What can I do for you?"

"We're from *The Sunday Medlar*. The editor——"

Frank turned away, pulled open the door and said: "Get out."

"Please. I am authorized to offer——"

"Do you want me to hit you?"

The young newspaper man was a well-built fellow and no coward, but what he saw behind the glower of Frank's eyes so near his own scared him. Later he was to say to his editor: "They gave me the willies. It was like looking into hell. The man's crackers." But to Frank he had simply said, "Sorry. Only carrying out instructions, you know. Perhaps you'd let us take a picture."

Frank did not answer, merely jerking his thumb towards the door, and they went without further parley.

At tea, Mr. Roscoe, who had heard nothing of the affair, said: "I suppose the paper was going to pay you?"

Frank shot him a strange look. "Fifteen hundred pounds," he said quietly.

"H'm. A nice little sum."

"Wasn't it. I daresay if I'd hung out for more they'd have given me two thousand." A harsh, jarring note in his voice made Mr. Roscoe look up from his plate of strawberries and cream. He felt he had put a foot dreadfully wrong somewhere but could not quite see where. He was a business man. He caught a glance from Susan but found no help there, only further bewilderment. He wondered what to say next and concluded a change of subject was the safest tactics. "I've decided to buy the land with old Hayter's farm. I rang up Jenkins

this afternoon about it. It's roughly about five hundred acres. No one knows why the old man hanged himself. But it was fifty years ago."

"And no one's lived there since?"

"That's so, my boy," very jovially, because of his relief at getting out of an awkward corner.

"But he was broke at the time and the place already pretty derelict, and it soon went to rack and ruin. People from all round about who've had a bit of wall-making or repairing to do have come along at odd times for years to take away the bricks." He smiled. "There must be dozens of cottages and walls in the neighbourhood with bricks from old Hayter's farm in them."

Susan laughed. "If the farm had been haunted," she said, "would the repaired cottages and walls be haunted too? I mean can a ghost be shared out piecemeal?"

"What an awful thought," Mrs. Roscoe said.

"It's more awful," Frank said, "when it concerns the living and not ghosts, for then it's true."

"How do you mean?" Susan said.

"If a man like Caligula or Gilles de Rais has a thousand descendants, and if I understand the very little biology I've read they may run into hundreds of thousands, then each one may have inherited an evil taint."

"Isn't that rather far-fetched. Wouldn't it be so — so watered down as to be only a trace, even if present at all?"

"Perhaps. But I think it would always be there. Latent. But ready to spring out of its hiding-place if — well, if something happened to stir it into life: a sort of trigger being pulled. How much do we really know about ourselves? I mean how much do we really face?"

"I think the less one pokes about in murky places the better, my boy," Mr. Roscoe said. "It isn't healthy. If you ask me I should say there are things we are meant not to know and not to think about."

Frank seemed about to comment upon this but changed his mind and said: "I suppose it'll go fairly cheap?"

"If we don't seem too anxious. Human nature being what it is."

"And business business," Frank said.

"Exactly, my boy."

Frank and Susan were married at Steventon Church on Saturday, the fifteenth of July, and left the same day to spend the first week of their honeymoon in North Wales. They stayed at Bettws-y-Coed, and one day while they were out walking they came to a signpost at the end of a lane, and Frank, glancing at it as they passed, halted as abruptly as if suddenly confronted by a wall. Susan looked at him—saw he was staring at the signpost on which was the name Bethesda—and saw too that under the tan his face had gone grey. "Why, what is it?" she said.

"Nothing," he said, and walked on.

She said no more but waited. Already she had learned that he was likely to answer her questions later if she refrained from saying anything; such silences seemed to force him to speak. It was as if they frayed his nerves and he had to escape into speech. Presently he said: "One of our chaps lived there."

She knew what he meant by "one of our chaps." She pressed his arm, saying nothing, waiting for him to go on if he would.

"Dai Evans," he went on, after they had walked quite a hundred yards without a word being spoken. "I remember the name so well because it seemed Biblical. His father keeps a garage there."

He said no more for so long that she ventured to say, and was immediately sorry she had done so: "Was he in the boat?"

"No." That was all he said and for several minutes neither of them spoke again. Every now and then she glanced up at his face and felt rather than saw its remote shut-off expression.

After dinner that evening they sat drinking their coffee and smoking in the hotel lounge. The wine he had drunk had lifted the depression from him and he was smiling and talking away with great animation. Presently, to her astonishment, he said: "You think I ought to go to Bethesda and see his people, don't you?"

"Why, no darling. I think that would be the

worst possible thing you could do. It would lead to talk and questioning and bring everything back."

"He wasn't in the boat." And suddenly all his gaiety and animation had gone from him. "I could tell them that."

"But they know it, darling. The names have been published."

"Yes, of course. Silly of me." She glanced at him, but he was not looking at her. Presently he said: "That would have been something."

She did not understand what he meant and forbore to ask him. "Do you think I might have another Benedictine?" she said. "They're so lovely I'm sure they must be bad for one."

"Look your last on all things lovely. Who wrote that?"

"I don't know." She smiled. "Ought I to know?"

He put his hand over one of hers resting on the table. "I should hate to have missed all this," he said quietly.

"Then don't you think I might have another Benedictine? It would give you an excuse for another brandy."

He smiled at her. "I wish I could think of the next line," he said, and beckoned a waiter.

They went from Wales over to the West of Ireland and stayed at Killarney for three weeks, and then were at Dublin for a fortnight. One day they were watching the shipping on the Liffey and he

fell suddenly silent. Presently she said softly: "You're not regretting it, are you?"

"Regretting? I'm thanking my stars and whatever gods there be that I'm alive."

They went to the zoo several times, and on their last visit, while they were in the reptile house, Susan said to one of the keepers: "I thought there were no snakes in Ireland."

The man smiled. "They're visitors to Ireland, like yourself. You'll be thinking St. Patrick drove all the snakes out of Ireland."

"Didn't he?" Susan laughed.

"He did not. They hid themselves. In the grass, in holes, in clefts in the rocks and crannies in the cliffs. And so the blessed saint put a spell on them: a spell of hunger, a hunt spell, a spell that set them hunting and eating one another all over the face of Ireland. Till at last only one was left. He was a great boyo, that last serpent. For all the rest were inside him. Where else could they be? But the holy saint's spell was still on him, this big boyo, and he set about eating himself, tail first. But when he'd got half down he couldn't get any further with himself and there he was, a round ring of a snake, and he upped himself on his rim like a wheel and away he went and couldn't stop, and over the cliff he went into the sea."

Susan laughed. "We've a saying in England that dog doesn't eat dog. But apparently it doesn't apply to snakes."

The man looked at Frank, who said: "Terribly funny. You're quite a Munchausen. Have a drink."

As they walked on Frank said: "I wonder what he sees if he gets D.T.'s. It wouldn't be snakes. Must ask him next time we come."

"You're not thinking of coming again, are you?" Susan smiled.

"Well, we might."

"You'll have to cultivate Mr. Hosegood when we get back," Susan laughed.

"That's an idea."

The keeper, staring after Frank and Susan, said to a passing colleague: "Who's Mumchaser, Bill?"

"Never heard of him."

"I spun the yarn about St. Patrick to that big boyo over there and his little piece and he gave me a funny look and slipped me a bucko and said: 'Quite a Mumchaser'."

"Perhaps it was Mumchancer."

"Who's he?"

The other grinned. "Fellow they hung for saying nothing."

"And that big boyo's a queer fellow, too. He gave me a nasty look. The evil eye, my old mother would have called it."

"You'd better see Father Byrne."

"I'll think about it. 'Have a drink,' he says, and slips me a bucko and a look. I wouldn't care to meet him in a blind alley on a dark night. Honey-

moonling by the looks of them. Now what could a pretty little piece like her see in a big boyo like him with the evil eye an' all? "

" Dough, perhaps. Slipped you a bucko, didn't he? "

" Honeymooning, Bill, honeymooning. Money's nothing. Pity it don't last."

They did not return to England until the end of August, and Frank began his work at the huge nurseries on the first of September. For the next twelve months he was to familiarize himself with all the many branches and activities of the large and prosperous business, and he would then become a partner. Mr. Roscoe had suggested that as the business would one day become his and the name Roscoe was a valuable asset, he might take the name by deed poll, and he would in all likelihood have done this had not Susan, rather surprisingly both to him and her parents, strongly objected; not, she admitted, for any very valid reason, but rather because she did not want it. Half laughingly, she said: " I shouldn't feel married if I were still Susan Roscoe." Her own suggestion, that when Frank became a partner, the firm should call itself Roscoe and Bowers, found no support, and Frank himself was quite vehemently against it. When pressed by her he said, with that expression on his face and in his eyes that she was already becoming familiar with: " I don't want my name blazoning round the world in a thousand

catalogues and on a million packets of seed. I've had enough publicity for a lifetime. More than enough." And so she said no more.

The purchase of the five hundred acres of land with the ruins of old Hayter's farm had been held up by missing deeds and the grotesquely high price asked by the only surviving relative, who had suddenly materialized as a horsey little man in a brown billycock and buff leggings, and demanding, in Mr. Roscoe's solicitor's own words, "the earth."

Frank had in fact been married sixteen months and was a partner before everything had been settled and a clearance could begin to get the land fit for cultivation. It had not yet been enclosed and the lane which led from the high road past the ruined farm was still occasionally used by children or by strangers who had got lost, or by visitors to the district, wandering, as is the way of visitors, anywhere and everywhere regardless of all but their own whim.

It was an afternoon early in November. Frank had been out shooting rabbits. It was one of his chief recreations, although it was business too, for rabbits were one of Roscoe's problems. He was sauntering down the lane by Hayter's farm, pipe in mouth, his gun under his arm, tired, but very pleased with his bag of twenty-three, which he had distributed among the men working at clearing the land.

Half way down the lane he came upon a large

red car so wedged across that there was no room to pass on either side, which was thickly hedged. Beyond the car were a dozen or so men and women of the Carfax Fox Hunt, the huntsman, and the hounds, which were running here and there sniffing and snuffling and whining as they tried to thrust past.

A man with a white face, blazing eyes, and a bristling shock of grey hair, was leaning out of the windows of the car's driving seat engaged in a heated and, on the one side, profane altercation. Frank recognized him as the eccentric Josiah Hosegood, the millionaire owner of the Zoo at Blewbury. As Frank strolled up he was shaking his fist and bawling: "Don't you use that language to me, you yahoo. You're not coming by, neither you nor your red-faced friends, your horsey females, nor your misguided dogs. *Ils ne passeront pas*. Verdun for ever. Buzz off." He caught sight of Frank and said: "Have you any religious convictions?"

Frank grinned, for the scene was inexpressibly ludicrous. "Not uncomfortably so," he said.

"I have. They handicap me in dealing with louts. Do you hear what that fellow is saying? I've never heard such obscenity. As you're not a religious man perhaps you'll do me a favour."

"Go ahead."

"Just tell them where to go in their own language."

"You're all trespassing. This is private land."

"Is it by — by Belial! Since when? And who owns it?"

"Since October the first, and it's owned by Roscoe's. I must ask you to go. Everyone."

The M.F.H. said: "Are you Mr. Roscoe's — er — manager?"

"I'm a partner."

"I'm sorry. We did not know. But of course any damage would be paid for."

"I must ask you not to use this lane."

The M.F.H. shrugged his shoulders and the party turned horses, the huntsman called the hounds, and they rode away.

"Which way do you want to go?" Frank asked Hosegood.

"My dear fellow, either way will do me, if you can suggest how I'm going to get unwedged."

"How did you get into such a position?"

"I saw the bloodsportsmen coming and slung the car round in their faces. You're not a bloodsportsman by any chance?"

"No."

"What's your gun for?"

"I've been rabbiting. Rabbits are our biggest headache. A pest."

"D'you know the finest poem in the English language?"

"I'm afraid I don't."

"'The Bells of Heaven.' It's by Ralph Hodgson. Ever heard of him?"

Frank was getting tired of this. "No," he said shortly.

"He should have had the Nobel Prize instead of all the nincompoops it's been given to. It's always the donkeys who get the prizes. Have you noticed that?" As Frank did not reply he went on: "Have you any ideas about unwedging me?"

"I'll bring some of our men along and they'll get your bonnet clear and lop the hedge away in front."

"That's very amiable of you."

"It won't do the coachwork a lot of good."

"I never worry over trifles."

A quarter of an hour or so later, the car being clear, Hosegood said: "Can I give you a lift?"

"I'm going the other way."

"Come and have lunch with me tomorrow."

Frank hesitated. He was not at all sure he wanted to make any closer acquaintance with this oddity who, he felt, might prove an intolerable bore, as so many of his kind were after one had become used to their eccentricities. They were like a record played backwards: striking at first hearing but soon tiring the ear and the attention by that very grotesqueness which had at first captured them.

Noting his hesitation, momentary as it was, Hosegood said: "I'm a strict vegetarian but I provide fleshpots for my guests. I'm no bigot." And he smiled disarmingly. The smile on the white,

lined face, and its reflection or counterpart in the intensely blue eyes, turned the scale and Frank said: "Thanks, I will. About one o'clock?"

"Just when you can get there. Don't make it a trouble."

That was the beginning of an association which soon became one not exactly of friendship but of a very pleasant friendliness on both sides. Frank took to dropping in at Hosegood's big house in the zoo whenever he happened to be in the neighbourhood; sometimes for a meal, at others just for a drink and a chat. He found the millionaire amazingly well-informed about whatever subject came up for discussion, and since one of the few subjects he could check up on was seamanship—and he found Hosegood had nothing to learn from him there—he assumed that he was equally sound on subjects of which he knew nothing.

Several times during the first twelve months or so of their association Hosegood asked Frank to bring his wife to dinner and he admirably played the genial and charming host. But Susan was not charmed. She could not bring herself to like Hosegood. Worse, he faintly repelled her, but for what reason she could not discover and concluded it was just one of those antipathies for which there is no explanation. Were these reciprocal they would be of no importance, but usually they are not, and certainly were not so in this case, for Hosegood obviously liked Susan and would have found plea-

sure in her company had he not been sufficiently sensitive to be aware of how she felt towards him. And so, much to her relief, after her third dinner at the huge house, the invitations were not renewed.

This did not come about entirely without comment from Frank. "Why don't you like Hosegood?" he asked her bluntly one morning at breakfast.

"That's the point, darling. I can't give any reason. I just don't like him. Just as I don't like spiders. I simply can't help it and can't overcome it."

"Have you tried?" "I've tried a lot."

"He likes you, you know."

"Yes. That makes it worse, doesn't it?" And then almost apologetically: "But he does do rather extraordinary things."

"Who doesn't?"

"O I know. But they seem, or some of them do, rather horrid—even ugly, and cruel."

"Not cruel, Sue. That's the last word you could apply to Hosegood. Look at that poem he's got engraved over the mantelpiece in his drawing-room."

"About tamed and shabby tigers, and so on. But isn't that utterly insincere in a man who keeps a zoo?"

"Not in his case. But what has he done that's ugly?"

"Well, there's that cage with the wax man and woman labelled: '*Homo Sapiens*, the most cruel most dangerous, most bloodthirsty, and most treacherous animal in the world,' or something like that. Isn't that all, well, ugly, and — and rather disgusting? If it's meant to be a joke it's in the worst taste."

"It isn't meant to be a joke."

"Then it's disgusting and ugly."

"Isn't it true?"

"That's absurd."

"Is it?"

"You're not surely serious?" She felt he was no longer listening and glanced quickly at his face and saw there, as if he had suddenly put on a mask, the remote shut-off frightening expression with which she was now so familiar; a familiarity which did not lessen its power to haunt her; rather, indeed, did it seem to increase with each manifestation. What greatly troubled her, and indeed terrified her if she allowed herself to think long or deeply upon the matter, was that these moods or attacks were so utterly unpredictable, so utterly, it seemed to her, without any cause. Often, after one of these visitations (as she sometimes described them to herself) had come upon him, had broken into some casual or even intimate talk, and he had presently gone out, she would hold a mental inquest, going over in her mind what they had been discussing and what each had said. But she

never found anything which pointed to any plausible explanation, nor, if two attacks were so close together that she could make a comparison, could she ever find any likeness. All she could do, and this more and more she tried to do without any great success, was to put it all out of mind as of any serious import by looking upon it as one of those hidden places of the heart that must always exist between two human beings however warm and intimate their association.

On the third anniversary of their wedding Susan had tea with her mother at *Five Elms*. No one else was there; Mr. Roscoe was busy in the gardens and Frank had that morning left for a fortnight in Holland on the firm's business.

Susan was unusually quiet during the meal, and after a while Mrs. Roscoe said: "Is anything the matter, my dear?"

"Why no, Mummy."

But the momentary hesitation was noted by her mother who said, after a pause: "Is everything right with you and Frank?"

"As right as it has ever been or, I'm beginning to think, ever will be." O don't look so tragic, darling. I don't mean our marriage has broken down or that we're unhappy. We're not. But the truth is, Mummy, that all isn't well with Frank and hasn't been ever since we were married."

"You mean he has never got over that dreadful experience?"

"Yes, I mean that, but I think it is more than that. It haunts him, I know, but somehow, after more than three years, I feel that there must be more than that to make him so strange at times. And he is strange and — well, sometimes frightening. I don't just mean his frequent moodiness. It's difficult to explain and I'm always telling myself that it is imagination on my part—and morbid imagination—but for all that he does seem to become at times an utterly different person. We'll be talking quite casually, or discussing something, and suddenly, without any reason that I can see, or without my saying anything that could possibly offend him, he — well — oh, I really don't know how to put it, but he seems to — to shut himself off from me and to become a different person, a person I don't know at all. Does that sound dreadful nonsense to you?"

"No, my dear; but perhaps, don't you think, you are seeing more in some side of his character than there really is? I mean, darling, that people never do get to know one another completely. There are sort of blind spots. I don't pretend to know everything about your father and I think I may say that I realized this years ago and accepted it as true about all human beings and ceased to think about it."

"I — I don't think that quite explains Frank. He sleeps badly quite often. I know that's nothing. Indigestion or some other trifling ailment the doc-

tors say, don't they? But it's more than some digestive disorder which is disturbing Frank. He talks and mutters and sometimes groans. I never know what he is saying. It is just a meaningless stream of words, or half words, pieces of words. And one night I woke up and the bed-light was switched on and Frank was leaning up on his elbow and looking at me in the most terrifying way. He seemed to be staring at my throat. I was so frightened and startled that I cried out and he then pretended my cry had awakened him."

"But darling, it may have done. People do sit up in bed in their sleep. Why, and get out of bed and walk about. It's quite common when people are worried or have something dreadful on their minds."

Susan shook her head. "No, Mummy, he was awake. I am sure of that. But what horrified me was that it was not Frank who was looking at me but someone else; someone I didn't know at all. Someone frightening and — and appalling. O I can see you think it's all my imagination. It isn't. It wasn't Frank. It was Frank's body but it wasn't Frank who was staring at me. And now you'll tell me to go and see a psychiatrist."

Mrs. Roscoe put down her cup and wiped her lips. "I think, my dear," she said sententiously, "it's a great pity, and for both of you, that you've not had any children."

"Well, perhaps that's true. For me. But I don't

feel it's true for Frank. I don't think he wants children or is fond of them. I think they just irritate him and — and I don't think children like him much either. I mean I don't think they feel at ease or happy in his company. He doesn't treat them properly. I don't mean he is patronizing or unkind but he's off-hand and indifferent and keeps them at a distance, not considering their wishes at all, and you know how hurting that can be to a child. You remember when Tom and Beryl stayed with us at Easter. Well, Frank took them to Mr. Hosegood's zoo. They only went once with him and I asked them if they would like to go again. Beryl said 'No thank you' very politely and very gravely; you know how old she seems for twelve. And then young Tom blurted out: 'I don't think Uncle Frank wanted to take us,' which of course made poor Beryl embarrassed and very much the elder sister. I said: 'What makes you think that, Tom?' and he said: 'Well, Auntie, Uncle Frank seemed to forget us altogether and went wandering round from cage to cage while the animals were being fed. Of course, it was terribly thrilling to watch them, but Uncle Frank took no notice of us at all and we felt—well, I know I did—sort of — of——' 'You felt snubbed,' I said, and he smiled and nodded. Of course I explained that that was only Frank's way. That he was like that with everyone but it all didn't sound very plausible even to me. I suppose because I felt it wasn't the truth. And I'm

sure it didn't deceive Beryl and Tom for a moment.

"Then Frank was out rabbiting one day and the children met him and asked if they could come with him, and he glared at them—that was how Beryl described it—and said certainly not and told them to run away."

"Well, my dear, I think he was quite right. I'm sure I should be nervous with children about when there was shooting. And Beryl was no doubt exaggerating when she said Frank glared. You know how children do. And of course Frank has a way of looking at one with a rather strange fixed look, which to anyone not accustomed to it might seem like a glare."

"I know, Mummy, and that all sounds reasonable enough and it certainly is true, I suppose, that children might get in the way when there was shooting and cause an accident, but sometimes there seemed no reason at all behind Frank's snappy way with the children. One day he was carving a piece of sirloin and it was rather underdone, and Tom said, pointing: 'Could I have a piece of *that*? I like it all bloody.' Frank stopped carving and looked at poor little Tom quite a long while and then said, in an odd, harsh voice: 'That's not the way to speak,' and then served him last and not with the red meat. Tom was really upset and I thought he was going to cry. Now how *can* you explain a thing like that. It wasn't Tom's

saying 'bloody' because even if he'd been using it as a swear word that wouldn't bother Frank at all. You know how often he slips into bad language and laughs at it. No, it was just—well, as I say, just something I don't understand."

Having started to unburden herself Susan seemed unable to stop. It was as if she had opened floodgates shut for years and now the spate rushed through. "You remember when the Bramwells stayed with us for a long week-end. At dinner on the Saturday we began discussing, as I daresay hundreds of thousands of families did that day, the verdict in the shocking Morton murder case, and Dick said something about hanging being too good for a monster like Morton, which after all was what everyone else was saying, and Frank looked over to him and said, in a most extraordinary voice, and so rudely that I felt ashamed and hurt: 'What do you know about it? What does anyone know about it? And how far back? You've got to know that before you can talk about monsters.' That perhaps isn't exactly what Frank said, not in those words, but I'm sure it isn't far out. Dick looked upset and so did Myra. You know what a decent sort Dick is and the last thing in the world he wants to do is to offend anyone. And, of course, he must have felt that somehow or other he'd upset Frank, and being our guest made it rotten for him. He said, with some embarrassment: 'Well, yes, of course that's right.' And I think it would

all have dropped then if Myra hadn't said quite innocently: 'But, Frank, surely one must accept responsibility for one's actions.' 'Responsibility,' Frank said, in quite a loud voice, 'there's no such thing as individual responsibility. We're all responsible for Morton. The whole human race is.'

"'In a way, well, yes, I suppose that's true,' Dick put in, as if to placate Frank to — well, sort of say: 'All right, let's forget it.' But Frank didn't answer. He seemed no longer to be listening or paying any attention to either Dick or Myra, and for the rest of the evening he was moody and restless, saying very little to anyone and going from one room to another as if he were looking for something. Only just before we were all going to bed did he become himself again and just as suddenly as — as he had become someone else. Don't smile, Mummy. It's the only way I can describe it. And if you lived with him you'd soon realize that it was true.

"We were having tea with the Leighs one day last May and in the middle of tea little Peter came bursting into the room to say the sow had just eaten three of her litter. Mr. Leigh got up and hurried out into the yard and we all followed and when we got to the sty Jackson was raking it and there was part of one of the piglets left all torn and bleeding. I cried out: 'O how awful!' and felt Frank gripping my arm and I turned to him and he was looking dreadful. His mouth was partly

open and he was breathing quickly and was deathly white. 'What is it, Frank?' I said, and without looking at me he said: 'Shut up.' It was like a snarl. He'd never spoken to me like that before and I'd never heard his voice with quite that ugly note in it. It frightened me and upset me and humiliated me in front of the Leighs. They pretended they'd heard nothing and presently we all went back indoors and went on with our tea, with the Leighs very obviously steering the talk away from it. I was furious with Frank and as we drove home I determined to have it out with him and, Mummy, to my utter astonishment, he said I must have imagined it; that he hadn't heard me speak to him, and he certainly hadn't replied. And he slowed down the car and said very gently: 'I should never dream of talking like that to you.' And I began to cry. I just couldn't help it. Already I half believed he hadn't said it or I was *trying* to believe it. He stopped the car then and took me in his arms and kissed me, and presently asked me if I was satisfied I'd made a mistake, and of course I said I was. But I hadn't, and at the back of my mind I knew I hadn't, however much I might pretend."

"You might have been mistaken, my dear."

"Do you think you would have been, if Daddy had said 'Shut up' to you? You know you wouldn't, Mummy. You can't mistake a thing like that. It's not that he always seems to be in a pas-

sion when he says these strange things. Sometimes he is very quiet and reasonable and seems as if all he wanted to do was to convince you, but not, as with so many people, just to win an argument or prove a point, but rather as if he wanted you to agree with him because it would somehow comfort him to have your agreement. How silly it sounds put into words like that; but that is just how I've felt at times. It was as if he were a child crying to be comforted. Do you remember that dreadful fire at the orphanage in Yorkshire when those fifteen little boys were burnt to death?

"We were sitting listening to the nine o'clock news after dinner, and the announcer said: 'It is now known that fifteen boys lost their lives in the fire at Selby.' When the news was over Frank switched off the radio and went back to his chair and I said what a shocking tragedy it was and he put down the book he had just picked up and took his pipe out of his mouth and said, as quietly and calmly as if he were saying the most ordinary matter-of-fact thing: 'Perhaps it is better that children die.' I must have stared at him blankly and I don't think I said anything and he went on, as if he were talking soothingly to a child: 'You know, Sue, children are not just projections of ourselves.' I said that I didn't think they were, but he went on as if he weren't listening, which is how it always seems when he is like that, 'they are vehicles of old taints.' And he looked at me as if he were waiting

for me to say something; as if he wanted me to say something. I said: 'But Frank, that may be true enough but it's only a part of the truth; aren't they vehicles of sterling qualities too: of good as well as evil?' And then he said, more loudly, 'I don't think so and if they are then not nearly as much.' Or something like that. Then he said: 'I think that Shakespeare's 'the evil that men do lives after them, the good is oft interred in their bones,' is based on a deep truth about humanity; and that is that evil is more viable than good; has more vitality, is more difficult to kill, to eradicate. If it's ever possible to eradicate it at all. And sometimes I think it's not possible.' And then he gave a faint smile. But it was a grim smile, as if he were facing something with pain and difficulty." She broke off and looked searchingly at her mother. "Does all this seem morbidly fanciful on my part, Mummy?"

Mrs. Roscoe did not answer immediately, and then she said slowly: "No, I don't think so, darling. When we are fond of people we can't help magnifying things a little where they are concerned and perhaps being over anxious and reading into what they say more than what they mean. But I think we all do that. Did he say any more?"

"He said: 'Isn't it like our work here in the gardens? The care and hard work and endless nursing to make things grow, the good things; but there's nothing of that needed to make the weeds

grow. They grow and flourish with no looking after and in fact defy all our efforts to kill them.' But I thought I saw where this was wrong, or — or fallacious I suppose the word is, and I said: 'But weeds are not evil and flowers good; I mean in themselves, in the natural state. It is only because we cultivate some and don't want the others that we call the latter weeds. We don't know that one day things may not change completely and the weeds be found to be more necessary to us and our lives, or perhaps in their way even more beautiful than flowers; and so *they* will be cultivated and all the others we now set such store by rooted out. And we shall then find them just as hard to kill. Now, isn't that so?' I said. He didn't answer and I looked at him and knew he was no longer listening; that — that, well, he wasn't there, Mummy."

Mrs. Roscoe rubbed her finger along the side of her nose. "Well, my dear," she said slowly, "I do think it's a pity you've had no children. A marriage isn't full and complete until there are children. You'll think perhaps I'm being old-fashioned."

"I don't think that at all. I think it is very likely true."

Mrs. Roscoe moved her cup and saucer a few inches. She seemed to be hesitating. And then she said: "There isn't anything — anything physical the matter with your marriage, is there?"

"No. I don't think so. I'm sure there's not."

"I was wondering if perhaps there were and that was why you'd had no children."

Susan shook her head. "No, Mummy, I am quite sure about that."

"None of us can be sure about that, you know. I mean laymen. Have you ever thought about asking Doctor Baines?"

"No, Mummy. There's nothing to ask about."

"You don't think Frank would mind?"

"He'd just laugh." "Laugh?"

"Well, it's true. He says the only way to treat love-making between human beings is to laugh at it. He says that's the only way of keeping it wholesome. And although I wouldn't have agreed with him before we were married I do now. I do think it's true."

"Well, perhaps it's partly true. But I think it's rather an odd way of looking at it."

* * *

It was about three months later that in the one o'clock news bulletin the B.B.C. broadcast the following warning: "During the night a fully-grown male cheetah escaped from the private zoo of Mr. Josiah Hosegood at Blewbury, Hertfordshire. This animal is dangerous and likely to attack human beings. If it is seen it should not be interfered with but its whereabouts immediately reported to the nearest police station."

The warning created considerable alarm in the county and especially in the region about Blew-

bury, Abingdon, Steventon, Didcot and Harwell. It encouraged, over a much wider area, sportsmen armed with shot-guns (damaging to a cheetah only pointblank) to spend the rest of the day and most of the evening harking back excitingly to boyhood days of trailing Red Indians with Buffalo Bill, or going on safari with Allan Quartermain.

Frank was out most of the afternoon and evening rabbiting, and did not get home until well over an hour after dark-fall; but late as it was he insisted upon having his customary hot bath before dinner, so that the meal was delayed and was not yet over when Susan switched on the radio a few minutes before the nine o'clock news. "There was nothing in the six o'clock about the cheetah," she said. "Perhaps we'll get something now. I do hope it's been caught. It's rather frightening."

"Idiots have probably been blazing away at it or what they thought was it all the afternoon," Frank said, "and have driven it half way to Scotland by now. It's probably scared out of its wits."

"You don't think it's dangerous then?"

"Only if it's cornered. It was born in a zoo and its environment has been artificial, confined. All its wants supplied—no call upon its mental or physical resources at all. And now it finds itself in an utterly strange environment: hungry, thirsty, confronted by all sorts of alarming phenomena. As I say, it's probably scared out of its wits and half way to Scotland, or cowering somewhere in a

wood. Don't forget they're nocturnal beasts as well as the fastest things alive on four legs."

"Yes, I remember the keeper at Mr. Hosegood's zoo telling us that before we were married. Do you remember—— oh, there's Big Ben."

But all the B.B.C. had to say was that the escaped cheetah was still at large and to repeat its previous instructions.

Late that night (or, more accurately, early the following morning, for it was nearly two o'clock) there was a caller at the police station at Steven-ton. He was the last person one would expect to call voluntarily at a police station at such an hour, and only a matter of the utmost urgency could have brought him there, although this was apparently not the thought first in the mind of Station-Sergeant Rushton when Constable Hooker (in shirt sleeves, and looking astonishingly unlike a policeman) ushered the late caller in. Rushton looked up from some forms he was filling in and said genially: "Hello, Snowball! Come to give yourself up?"

Snowball Dixon was a local poacher of notoriety and skill, and despite his depredations extending over many years he had only twice been caught red-handed, and the police of a dozen villages and small townships of the Berkshire countryside (for Snowball often went far afield), while not withholding admiration for his skill and resource, were

a little sore at their inability to defeat his stratagems.

But it was immediately obvious to Rushton that this was not the time for jesting. The poacher was plainly held by some strong emotion. He looked not only agitated but frightened and reluctant, as a man acting by an irresistible compulsion against his own interests.

"Take it easy," Rushton said quietly. "Sit down and we'll have a cup of tea." He looked over to Hooker. "Make a fresh pot," he said, "and don't forget the tea this time." And then, turning to Dixon, "Go ahead." He drew a writing-pad towards him.

"There's a kid been murdered in a wood just this side of Didcot—about a mile. A little girl about nine or ten."

"How do you know she's been murdered?"

"Her throat's cut." "Are you sure it's cut?"

"Well, it looked like it. It was all covered with blood. I didn't stop to look too close but just come straight here. I ran all the way."

"Why didn't you go to the police station at Didcot?"

"I don't know. Just didn't think of it. I suppose because I don't know Didcot like I know Steventon." "When was this?"

"Not half an hour ago. Not more'n twenty minutes I reckon."

"I won't ask you what you were doing in Olney

Wood at that hour, Dixon. We'll forget it. But you must tell me everything."

"That's what I am doing."

"All right. What time did you leave home?"

"About half after twelve or a bit later."

"Go on. Just tell me what you did from the time you left home. It won't be held against you. Unless of course you'd something to do with the child's death."

"Is it likely?"

"No, I don't think so. But go on."

"I went first to Sprenker's copse. After I'd worked that I went over to the coverts by Laker's farm. When I come out of the coverts it must 'a been about half-one and I went straight to the wood, and not more'n about thirty or forty yards inside I come upon the kid."

"Did you recognize her?"

"No. But I didn't stop to look. I just come straight here."

"Did you touch the body?" "No."

"There was nothing else there?"

"Nothing I saw."

"All right, Dixon. I'll read this over to you and you can sign it if you agree it's what you've said. It's just a formality."

The statement, having been read over, was signed by Dixon, who accepted another cup of tea and a cigarette. "And now," Rushton said, "I'll want you to take us to the spot. You can do that?"

"Yes."

"OK. Finish your cigarette. Take it easy. I'll get Dr. Manners to come with us." He called out to Hooker: "Get the car out. I'll drive." He turned to the desk telephone and rang up the police surgeon.

It was half-past two when the car stopped at the wood, and a minute or two later Dr. Manners was examining the body. He looked over his shoulder at Rushton, who was holding a torch. "This isn't murder, Sergeant," he said, "the child's throat has been mangled and partly eaten."

"Good God!" Rushton said, "the cheetah."

"Looks like it."

"It's little Daisy Crowe."

"Yes. We can't do anything more here. I think we'd better take the body to the station and then I'll go round and see the Crowes. It would be better, I think, that I should go."

Rushton nodded. "You'll stay here for the present, Hooker."

"I think that's rather risky, Rushton," Dr. Manners said. "Hooker's not armed. I don't know a great deal about the habits of cheetahs but it might return to finish its meal. It was probably frightened almost immediately after it killed the child and ran off."

"That's all right, sir," Hooker said, "I've my stick."

"I don't imagine a baton would be of much use

against a cheetah, Hooker. They weigh about three hundred pounds I believe."

"Well, all right, Hooker," Rushton said. "I don't think there's really any point in your staying here. I'll ring up the Chief Constable as soon as we get back."

"And Hosegood?" Manners said.

"Yes, of course. This is going to be nasty for him."

As they drove back, Rushton said: "I can't understand how the child came to be in the wood. You say she'd been dead six to seven hours."

"Yes, about that."

"That means she was killed between seven and eight?"

"Roughly."

"So she's been missing from her home since then. Then how is it her being missing hadn't been reported to the police by her parents?"

"H'm. That's a very definite point."

"I'll come along to the Crowes with you."

The explanation, when Mrs. Crowe was sufficiently recovered from the shock to give it, was simple enough. The Crowes lived in a cottage about two miles outside Steventon on the road to Abingdon, where Mrs. Crowe's married sister lived. Daisy had left home about half-past six to go and see her aunt and cousins, and would probably, as she often did, stay the night. When she did not return her parents had assumed she was staying the

night; and as her visit had not been arranged, but was just a casual one, her aunt—not expecting her—had not of course notified anyone of her non-arrival.

"It would be after dark by the time she reached the part of the road near where her body has been found," Dr. Manners said to Mrs. Crowe. "Can you suggest any reason why she would have gone into the wood?"

"Well, sir," Mrs. Crowe said, wiping her eyes, "I can only think it was a call of nature."

Manners nodded and looked at Rushton, who said: "I think that clears up that point, Doctor."

The news was too late to appear in the morning newspapers and it was the B.B.C. account in the eight o'clock news that first gave the story to a shocked and startled public. The afternoon and evening London, provincial, and local papers carried a fuller account, and the hunt was up for the escaped killer, not only in Berkshire, but so alarming were the accounts of the astonishing speed and range of a hunting cheetah, over a radius of a hundred miles or so from the Blewbury zoo. The characteristic pugs of a cheetah had been plainly traced for a considerable distance along the Steventon-Didcot road, disappearing about a quarter of a mile from where little Daisy Crowe had been attacked. There was no question now of capturing the cheetah alive. It had to be killed, and killed quickly, before there was a second vic-

tim, and the enthusiasts with shot-guns were now everywhere joined by men with rifles. Rifles were issued to a number of police throughout the county, and soldiers were sent out from several military depots.

A statement by Mr. Hosegood tended to restrict the area of search and to quieten nerves in counties adjacent to Berkshire and farther afield still. He said—and his words echoed what Frank had said to Susan—that the cheetah was a nocturnal animal and much more likely to remain in hiding than to be ranging the countryside; and that the best chance of finding it was to make, as far as was possible, an armed cordon around a circle within a ten- to fifteen-mile radius of the zoo.

Within twenty-four hours the truth of this was tragically emphasized when James Otway, a fifteen-year-old schoolboy, was found with his throat torn out in a copse midway between Harwell and Blewbury and not more than two miles from the zoo itself. Young Otway, a farmer's son, had come home from his grammar school, had his tea, and then, without asking permission, had taken one of his father's guns and gone out, apparently to look for the cheetah, as so many venturesome boys were doing, despite all the warnings on the radio and in the Press.

Young Otway's body was found about an hour after dark, twenty yards or so inside the copse from the road, by a hedger and ditcher named

Sears. The boy's double-barrelled gun had not been discharged. He had obviously been taken completely by surprise by the cheetah's spring and had dropped his gun, but had nevertheless put up something of a fight, for the undergrowth was much trampled and bloodstained. As in the former killing, the cheetah seemed to have been frightened almost immediately and to have made off with its meal barely begun.

Only twenty-four hours later the cheetah struck again, this time at the village of Benson, and the victim was also a boy of fifteen: Harry Pearson, out, like young Otway, with his father's gun without permission. He was found in a clearing in a copse just off the road by a gamekeeper. His gun lay near his body, whose mutilations were much more extensive than in the two previous cases. The cheetah plainly had more time, or was growing more bold.

This third killing began, not only in the district, but far afield, something of a panic, a terror; and for this the Press was partly to blame, for many newspapers on the day after young Pearson's death bore banner headlines: *Cheetah moves to Oxfordshire*. This, while factually correct, ignored the essential point that Benson was only just over the border into Oxfordshire, and indeed, no more than eleven miles from Blewbury zoo. But to the millions of people who read those headlines the news said only one thing: the killer was on the

move: was already in another county. Where, with its tremendous speed, might it not be in another twenty-four hours?

If the Press must be held to some extent responsible for the panic that stretched over half the kingdom during the next twenty-four hours, no blame rests on it for the appalling affair at the zoo itself. That was sheer mob hysteria and mob violence.

On the night following Pearson's death, a crowd, over a hundred strong, most of them men, and not a few of them drunk, broke into the zoo, and making for Hosegood's mansion, first attacked it with bricks and stones and bottles, and then, in an access of the utmost blind folly, set fire to it.

Hosegood, followed reluctantly by several of his menservants, rushed from the house, and turning on the crowd, screamed at them: "Fools! fools! look at the wind! Madmen! O my animals!" A stone struck him and he fell. Several figures clustered about him and began kicking him. He struggled to his feet, his face running blood, his clothes torn, and forced his way through the now sobered, half-ashamed and alarmed throng. They let him go in silence, no other hand raised against him, for they now realized what they had done. The flames from the mansion—already a torch—driven with torrents of sparks and red-hot embers by the high wind blowing towards the zoo itself, had already set alight some of the cages,

and there began an appalling noise which those who heard it were never likely to forget: the roaring and the howling and the screaming of frantic animals, the crack of rifles as Hosegood's guards and keepers did the only merciful thing possible, the tumult of the driving wind and the licking flames, and presently the wild clangour of the bells of the arriving fire engines. By dawn, Hosegood's mansion was a slowly fuming shell, the great zoo a chaos of twisted ironwork, drenched and smoke-blackened, from which rose and spread for miles an odour that filled the nostrils with a nauseating disgust yet touched the stomach to hunger.

And while these things were happening and a million ghostly cheetahs, bloody-fanged and horrifying, were nightly haunting every quiet road, every lonely lane, every wood and thicket and covert for fifty miles beyond the still faintly fuming ruins of the Blewbury zoo, Scotland Yard had a visitor. He was Mr. Arthur Straker, managing director of the Blue Cross line of freighters running between Australia and England. He said his business was of the utmost importance and he wished to see someone in authority. As five out of every seven callers at the Yard said much the same thing, it says much for Mr. Straker's imposing presence and authoritative manner that he was without any considerable delay shown into Superintendent Harley's office.

"Sit down, Mr. Straker," Harley said. "What is it you want?"

"Merely to tell you quite briefly a story and to hand over to you what I believe is called, or may be called, an exhibit."

"Yes?"

"Nearly a month ago—twenty-seven days to be exact—one of our boats, the S.S. *Tinta*, bringing a cargo of wine from Australia, broke down off Socotra."

"One moment," Harley said, turning to glance at a large wall-map of the world behind his chair. "Thank you. Go on, please."

"The propellor shaft had a crack and the engineers had to make temporary repairs. This meant the ship had to stay where she was for a couple of days. The weather was fine and hot and the men spent part of their enforced leisure fishing, and part swimming, accompanied by the bo'sun in the jolly-boat to keep an eye open for sharks. He saw no sharks but, an observant fellow, he saw a small object bobbing about in the water some thirty or so yards away, and rowing over to it fished out a corked bottle, by its shape a Johnny Walker whisky bottle. He opened it with some difficulty. Inside was the label from the bottle, quite dry and fairly clean, and on the label was some writing, evidently done hastily but quite legible."

Mr. Straker lifted his attaché case from beside him on the floor, and opening it, continued: "Here

is the bottle and in this envelope is the label. These were handed to me at half-past six this afternoon by Captain Wilder of the *S.S. Tinta*. He lost no time, for his boat did not berth till six."

"And you lost no time either, sir," Harley said. "You have our thanks for that. Time is so often the important factor." He opened the envelope, and taking out the label, read what was written on it. It was not a long message but it was quite two minutes before the Superintendent looked across to Mr. Straker and said quietly: "I think this may prove to be, as you said, a matter of the utmost importance. I cannot tell you any more at the moment, but we will keep in touch with you. You will please leave these with us."

Straker rose. "Of course. Apart from anything else, a most astonishing coincidence."

"Do you remember how long ago the *Vega* affair was?"

"About three years I should say."

"And from the Cocos to Socotra would be about what?" (turning again to look at the map) "three thousand would you say?"

"All of that," Mr. Straker said.

"H'm. Yes. As you say, astonishing. Good evening, sir, and thank you very much."

His visitor gone, Harley sent for Detective-Inspector Bredon, and after telling him the story he had just heard from Mr. Straker, gave him the label to read.

Bredon read it through several times, whistled softly, and looked up at Harley. "Do we know where Bowers went to live after he left the sea?"

Harley leaned his elbows on his desk, put his finger-tips together, and resting his chin on them said slowly, watching Bredon's face: "He went to live near Steventon in Berkshire. We've been checking up on people living in the neighbourhood."

Again Bredon whistled softly. "Good God!" he said.

"Exactly. Get down to Steventon right away. Take Hemmings with you. Arrest Bowers and charge him and bring him here. If he wants to make a statement take it at once. Take the Bentley and let young Milward drive and tell him to step on it."

But when they reached Steventon, Frank Bowers had already been under arrest more than an hour, charged with the murder, in atrocious circumstances, of a young woman, Mildred Carter, in a lonely lane near Chinnor, close to the Buckinghamshire border and but four miles from Princes Risborough, where he now was in a cell at the police station.

And there, in an ordinary-looking room with commonplace everyday furnishings, Frank Bowers, Mate of the *S.S. Vega*, made his fantastically dreadful statement to an impassive police sergeant, who took it down in shorthand, while Detective-

Inspector Bredon listened, and a young constable in shirt-sleeves, looking very boyish and English, homely and domesticated, brought in freshly-made tea from time to time.

The statement was then transcribed on the typewriter while Bowers chain-smoked cigarettes and drank several cups of tea. It was then read over to him and after he had made one or two corrections, he signed it. His statement on the typewritten sheets was preceded by the message written on the label of the whisky bottle, and which ran:

"Mr. Bowers Mate of S.S. *Vega* sunk two days sail from Cokus Is murdered and et in the lifeboat Curly Watson and Sos Dyer and Tich Hawkins all AB their only him and me left and heel get me to (sigd) Jack Finney fireman S.S. *Vega* 22 Robertson St Glasgow."

The statement ran: "I cannot tell everything from the beginning because I do not know where it began, but I will tell all I know of what happened in the *Vega's* lifeboat. Part of the story I told at the Enquiry is true, that dealing with the men in the lifeboat and our stores being limited to one breaker of water. I forgot that we had matches and cigarettes, and these, when dried out, were all right, but the cigarettes soon went. No one had any firearms and only two of us had knives: myself and one of the A.B.'s, Tich Hawkins.

"Peter Craig, the injured second engineer, died after about eight days, and we dropped the body

overboard. I was already turning over in my mind the possibility of eating any of the others who died, and the idea, to my intense surprise and shock, far from repelling me, had an attraction which I at first fought against, but after a while began to allow to occupy my thoughts with increasing pleasure and anticipation. I can best describe this feeling by saying I began to lust after the bodies of the men in the boat with me. It was a lust to put my teeth into their throats and tear and eat. How much this was due to the conditions under which we were living and how much to a taint in my blood I do not know, and the only pointer I have towards the latter hypothesis is that as a boy I had quite a passion for raw meat and often used to go into the larder at home on Friday night, when the big week-end joint was there, and cut off pieces of the raw meat and chew them up and swallow them. This chewing of the raw meat used to give me a queer kind of joy, almost ecstasy, and I wanted to go on and on eating, and only the fear of its being discovered held me back, for my father was a brutal man and thrashed me severely and frequently for very slight offences, and I guessed what a thrashing he would have given me for such an offence, and my fear of pain was then greater than my longing to eat the meat. I am not attempting to find excuses for what I have done. I do not know why I did these things, except that it was under the compulsion of an urge I could not resist,

because I did not want to resist it. I wanted to give way to it, to surrender utterly to it. But why I wanted this I don't know.

"By the time Craig died we were in pretty bad shape. We were blistered and burnt from the sun, for it was impossible to get away from it entirely and we were near the equator; some of us had boils; and all our tongues were a peculiar yellowish-white, and our mouths horribly out of taste. We also suffered from griping pains in the bowels, although most of us were terribly constipated, and we had intermittent gnawing pains in the stomach.

"Tom Smilby, the pantry boy, died about three weeks after the *Vega* had gone down, and when three of the men went to put his body overboard, not without difficulty, for we were all weak, I told them to leave it where it was. Then I said to them that we should all die unless we put our feelings in cold storage and did something which had often been done before and of which nobody need be ashamed, for a seaman's first duty is to survive. They were all watching me as I said this and I saw they knew what I meant, but as none of them said anything I said we were not going to throw away good food, and I was going to eat Smilby's body and hoped they would be sensible enough to join me.

"They were silent a long while and as I waited for someone to speak I kept looking at the boy's body and the lust to put my teeth into his flesh so began

to take hold of me that I could feel myself trembling.

"After a while, Watson, an A.B., and Levett, a fireman, said they agreed, but the others wouldn't have anything to do with it and several of them said they'd rather die. I told them that was certainly what they would do if they were such fools, but I didn't propose to die. And even as I said this I looked over to them and saw them, not as human beings and shipmates, but as future food for my hunger; as stay for my appetite; satisfaction for my lust; for I was already, before even I had eaten of the boy Smilby, a man possessed.

"We cut off pieces of the thwarts and made a fire and cooked some of the flesh, and all the while it was cooking I felt, I *knew*, that this was not what I wanted to do. I wanted, and with a tremendous longing such as I had never felt before, to put my teeth into the raw flesh.

"The meal ready, we started to eat. After a few mouthfuls Watson was sick and said he couldn't do it, and went away and joined the others in the bows. Levett and I made a good meal, but about half an hour later Levett vomited it all up and lay down looking deathly and went to sleep. I felt no ill effects and could feel the strength rushing back into me; yet all the time, at the back of my feeling of repletion, I knew that this was not what I wanted.

"That evening I cooked and ate more of the

flesh but with no very great appetite. No one else would have any. A few hours before the dawn I woke, my stomach gnawing hungrily, my mouth parched, my belly crawling, my heart thumping. I knew what I wanted; knew what I must have; and I crept over to the body and sank my teeth into the throat and tore out the flesh and chewed and swallowed it while an inexpressible ecstasy flooded over me, through me, into every fibre and nerve. It was like the fierce rapture of love-making, but not transient, over in a second. It went on and on, wave after wave, and then slowly ebbed.

"The next day I no longer cared what the others thought of me and fed openly before them all on the raw flesh. I watched them as I fed and saw them all watching me covertly; saw the fear of me in their eyes and their disgust and abhorrence; and I saw too that they believed I was mad. I did not believe they would attack me. I was the biggest and heaviest man there and I was fed and happy and strong and they were all weak. They were six against one, but I had the strength of fifty. I was a giant refreshed. And I had a knife. Tich Hawkins also had a knife but he was a shrimp of a fellow and no match for me. For some time after I had eaten I sat watching them and I saw them not now as food but as ministers to my future ecstasies.

"By the next afternoon the carcass had begun to corrupt and stank abominably, but I ignored

that and made another meal just before darkfall; but the meat was no longer really fit for eating, and I had a rather restless night with some pain and nausea, although I did not vomit. In the morning I threw the remains into the sea.

"Three, or perhaps four, days went by and I knew I must eat again. I decided that night I would kill Levett, for when I looked them over it was always on him that my eyes rested with longing and desire. He must have observed this, or perhaps he went mad, for just before darkfall he suddenly pulled himself up and climbing over the side let himself go. I could not let him go like that. I wanted him too much. I dived over after him but he must have gone under with his mouth open, for he had sunk like a stone and I could not get him. As I swam back to the boat the thought came to me that they would not let me aboard; would attack me with oars and thrust me down, or lean over and stab me. But none of these things happened. They were too weak bodily, too emotionally drained, too mentally sunk, to be able to plan or execute any action calling for vitality of the slightest. And so I climbed in and before the sudden darkness fell on the boat I marked down where Watson lay and decided to kill him in the night.

"And I did kill him. But he must have known I had chosen him and he was awake and struggled feebly and cried out and the others woke and tried with weak hands to grapple me and in the struggle

my knife went overboard although I had managed to cut Watson's throat first. And I dragged him to the stern where I was now left to myself and made a hearty meal, eating first at his throat.

"I had no fear of our being picked up. We had I knew from rough reckoning drifted well away from those lines from which year after year the ships that throng them deviate no more than a few miles. It was now a million-to-one chance, and being spotted by a possible plane was a million-million. Even if the million-to-one chance came off I was in no danger, for as soon as I saw that we had been sighted I should have finished off the others and cleaned up the mess. It would have been quite impossible to observe what I was doing from the ship or even from a boat being rowed towards me.

"I fed upon Watson nearly a week before the corruption of the body forced me to throw it overboard. It was about this time that I discovered one morning that the breaker of water was nearly empty. Whether this had been done maliciously, or the tap had been left running by accident, or someone had been stealing the water, were all possibilities. I did not bother. I had food and drink. But it was bad for the others, who were cut down to a few daily sips; and some few days later, Iden, a trimmer, dragged himself up, and leaning over scooped up handfuls of sea-water and gulped them down and suddenly screamed hideously and as I

leapt over the thwarts and rushed him he dropped overboard. A second later I should have been after him but I saw three huge dark shapes thrust themselves like lightning towards him while he was still some feet under water and there was nothing I could do about it. He was dismembered and eaten while one could have counted only up to twenty.

"There now remained only the A.B.'s Tich Hawkins and Sos Dyer, and the fireman Jack Finney, the man with the bottle of whisky. He had handed the whisky over to me when we first made our inventory and I had put it in the locker and forgotten all about it: entirely and completely forgotten it. There were more important and more attractive things to occupy all my waking thoughts. He had got possession of it again and had kept it as a sort of secret ration. To this, I think, he owed the endurance that kept him alive so long without any other sustenance than water.

"Later, I cannot say how long, a few days perhaps, I killed Tich Hawkins by biting out his throat. He put up no real fight and did not manage to draw his knife. As I made towards him he reminded me of a rabbit when a stoat is circling about it to attack. He was a skinny little man, much emaciated and weakened by his privations. He would in any case have died soon. There was little pleasure in him. It was as if I had bit into a dried-up fruit. And so, when in the darkness of the night I had dozed off, and Finney threw his body

overboard to give it a Christian burial, as he told me the next morning, I was not greatly put out and laughed at him. And at this he got up on his knees and showed his teeth at me and called me a bloody devil and said I wouldn't get him.

"There was now only he and Sos Dyer and myself left. I did not bother with them for some days. They were too weak to do anything; too listless even to conspire against me; they just lay in the bottom of the boat watching me. For a day, perhaps even two or three days, I did not hunger or lust and sprawled in the stern dozing and half-dreaming and occasionally talking to myself. During this time I had queer visions and hallucinations and frequently saw people in the boat that I had known years before: friends of my youth, cronies of my schooldays, and many others. But I knew they were only hallucinations and in this I was different from Finney and Dyer, who for hours on end would lie talking away to people who, it was obvious, they saw and believed were there in the body.

"How long this period lasted I do not know: perhaps only a few days, perhaps a week. And then the lust came upon me again and I pulled myself together and moved towards Dyer. I must have left myself long without nourishment, for I felt strangely giddy and weak, and found that I had to crawl over the thwarts and pull myself along the bottom to reach him. He saw me coming and

watched me, and tried to drag himself up the side of the boat and get into the sea, but he was too weak and fell back and rolled over. As I reached for him he squirmed away and crawled past me, and I had to go after him, but very slowly, because my head was swimming and there was a strange red mist which kept blinding my eyes for a second or so.

"But I had him at last and slaked my hunger and thirst and had my unbearable joy of him and then lay down beside his body and slept a long while. It must have been while I was then sleeping that Finney wrote his message on the label of the whisky bottle and threw it overboard and a day or two later, or perhaps it was three or four days, or even longer, he followed it, some time in the darkness of the night, for one morning he was gone.

"I kept Dyer's body a long while—far longer than I should, for it must have been rotten, and I was ill several days—and then I pushed what was left overboard. After that I remember very little. I think I must have slept most of the time or was in a coma, and it was not until I had been aboard the *Penelope* for some twenty-four hours that I came to myself. For some time I pretended to be still barely conscious and wandering in order to get the hang of things: to hear what had happened and to plan my story accordingly. This I was able to do, and when I came to give my account of what had happened in the lifeboat it was accepted with-

out question. It was a lucky accident for me that the lifeboat was sunk while getting her aboard the *Penelope*, for it was probable that some evidence of what had been done might have been found, for I had no recollection of the state of the boat when I lapsed into coma.

"I come now to my return to normal life. It was not, of course, a normal life, for such a life was impossible for me. It was not because I was afraid of what had happened being discovered. About that I felt completely safe. Nor was it because I suffered from remorse. I did not. Remorse did not enter into the matter at all. I had done the things I had done under an irresistible impulse. I could not help myself. I am aware that to plead such impulses as exculpation for what are called crimes is to shelve all human responsibility. I did shelve it. I do now. I am not responsible, for I am the result of seeds sown, of forces set in motion, long before I was born. It would be as sensible to blame a bullet for killing a man as to blame me. It is on the finger that pulls the trigger that the onus rests. And for all such as I, the seed sown may be hidden back in time a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand years.

"Yet, despite my convictions as to the truth of these things, I was, when I came back to the life of ordinary people, a haunted man: haunted, not by the past, but by the future. I lived, I may quite fairly say, during these first few months after my

return, in almost daily dread of circumstances arising which would compel me to do again those things so dreadful for normal people to contemplate, to think of even for a moment. But side by side with that daily dread there was, there lurked, try to hide and stifle it as I would, a desire for such circumstances.

"My marriage troubled me. Would my wife be safe with me? And there might be children. I ought not to father children. However hot my secret desires, however absent all feelings of remorse, I knew that fatherhood, the begetting of children, was of all things the one I should not do. Here was a responsibility I could not evade for I had no inner uncontrollable impulse to fatherhood and I knew I could do the unborn no greater wrong than to hand on to them the taint in my blood. Here was a decision I could make: to do or not to do. But although for some time I considered undergoing the comparatively minor operation of sterilization I finally did nothing: there seemed to me too many risks of setting off a train of enquiry, of questioning, which might lead me anywhere.

"Fortunately we had no children. As I began to settle down into married life and into my work I increasingly became less and less haunted by fear and by desire until I began to think that my possession had been exorcised by what had happened in the lifeboat. For I think the simplest explanation is that I was, I am, a man possessed;

and whatever or whoever possessed me had gone. How little I realized that what is bred in the blood cannot be exorcised or driven out, although it may lie sleeping for generations.

"I feel now that I took the first step backwards, if that is the way to put it, when I met Hosegood and allowed myself to drift into friendship with him; for very soon I found myself so fascinated by the big cats at their feeding time that I began more and more to find myself at the Zoo during these hours, until I realized that I was attracting the notice of the keepers, not so much, I soon felt convinced, by my mere presence, but by actions and facial expressions of which I was quite unconscious. And so I cut down my visits. But the mischief was I think done.

"When the cheetah escaped from the Zoo I barely gave it a thought. It meant nothing to me whatever. I insist upon the truth of this. What happened, so far as it concerned me, was pure chance. Of course, sooner or later, I now know, the thing would have happened; but the cheetah's part in the affair was fortuitous.

"I was not thinking of the animal when I stumbled on it in the wood. It had just struck down little Daisy Crowe and its muzzle was at her throat when I came upon them. It turned in a flash and I let it have both barrels point blank full in the face, blinding its eyes and momentarily nailing it where it stood. And before it moved again I was

smashing at its head with the heavy steel-shod butt of my gun. I killed it and then I turned to the child and shone my torch. Incontinently the uncontrollable lust gripped me and I knelt down and finished what the cheetah had begun.

"For a time I lay there sated and enraptured. It was during those few minutes, while I lay there in a trance of bliss that surpasses all other physical sensations, that I saw how the dead cheetah could minister to me in those future feasts I was already enjoying in anticipation. I dragged the beast's dead body on to my shoulders and made my slow way to the deserted quarry—Craddocks' quarry I believe it used to be called—and there I toppled the carcase down the sheer drop of over a hundred feet into the deep vegetation below. It was safe there for ever. You will find it if you search carefully.

"From then on, I was the cheetah. I killed and had my joy of the two boys Otway and Pearson, and I had just killed Mildred Carter as I had killed the others, and as a cheetah kills, when, by a chance in a thousand, a cyclist who had lost his way came upon us; and, by another chance as great, happened to be a bigger and stronger man than I and knocked me out before I could quite get to my feet. Had it been otherwise I should have killed him too.

"That is all. I am glad it is over, finished with.

For it will end now, this thing that possesses me, whatever it is."

The statement signed—and it was then long past midnight—Inspector Bredon wished to take Bowers to Scotland Yard immediately. Courtenay, the Inspector at the Princes Risborough Station, said this was out of the question as the Chief Constable of Oxfordshire had rung through to say he was coming in the morning to interview Bowers.

Bredon demurred, saying the charge had been laid at Scotland Yard; but to this Courtenay said he thought the murder at Chinnor would have precedence, and that even if this were not so he proposed to obey his Chief Constable and would leave him to settle the matter with the Yard.

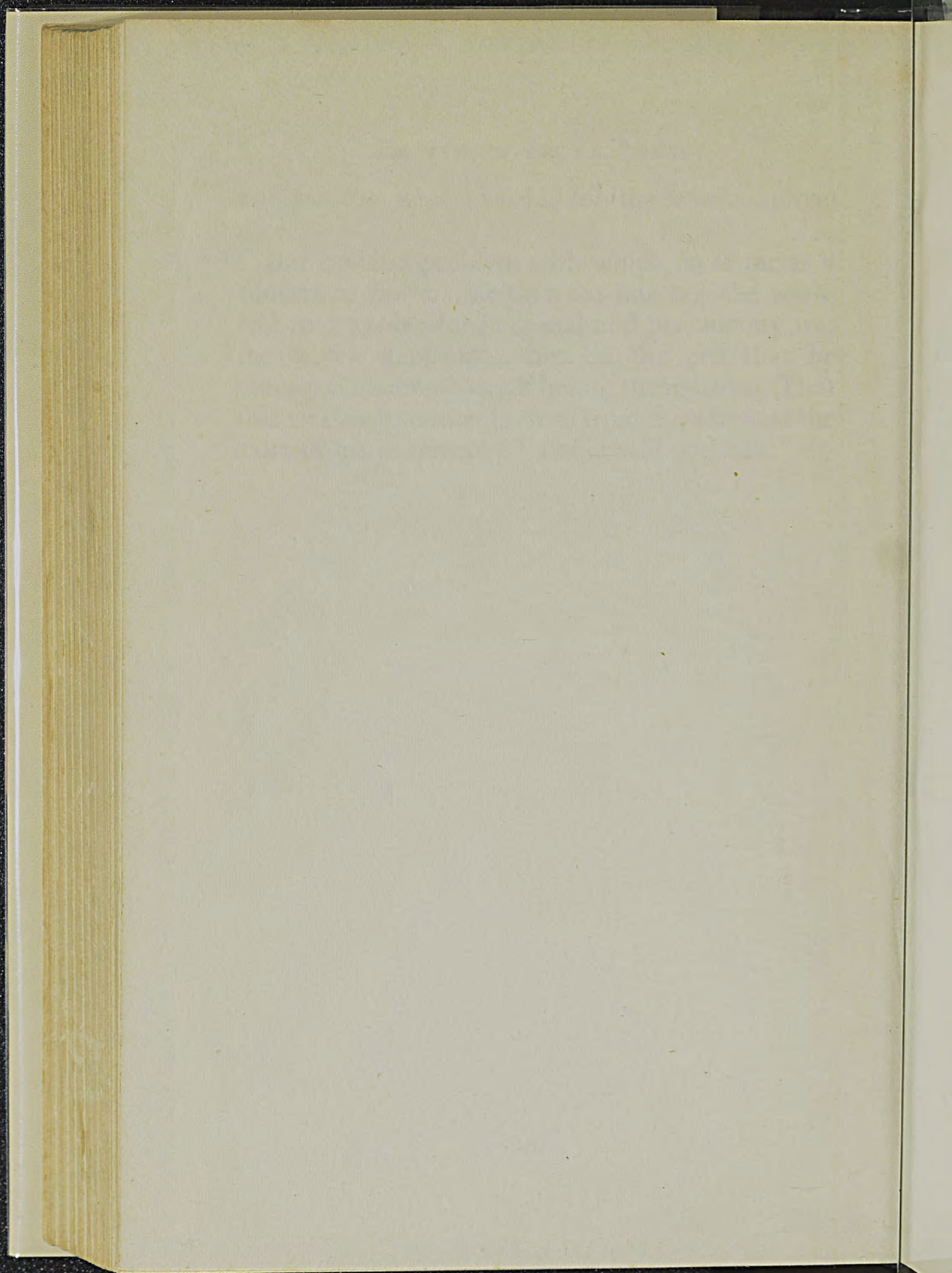
To this Bredon had to agree, but he said he would stay and see the Chief Constable. Meanwhile, Bowers would have to return to his cell.

Bowers, who seemed to be dropping with tiredness, a man at the last ounce of endurance, having been taken to his cell, Courtenay and Bredon sat for a while over yet another cup of tea, smoking and discussing the affair. "Yes," Bredon presently said, "he's obviously a maniac, but that only puts the problem; it doesn't settle it. What is the law going to do with a man like that?"

Courtenay nodded. "And for that matter," he said, "what is the world going to do with him and his kind? They're not just a problem for the law,

but for the whole world, for the whole human race."

But it was a problem with which, in so far as it concerned Bowers, neither the law nor the world had to grapple; for so casual and perfunctory was the watch kept upon him in the cell that he managed to hang himself before the morning. That this was his intention is clear from the words at the close of his statement: "For it will end now."



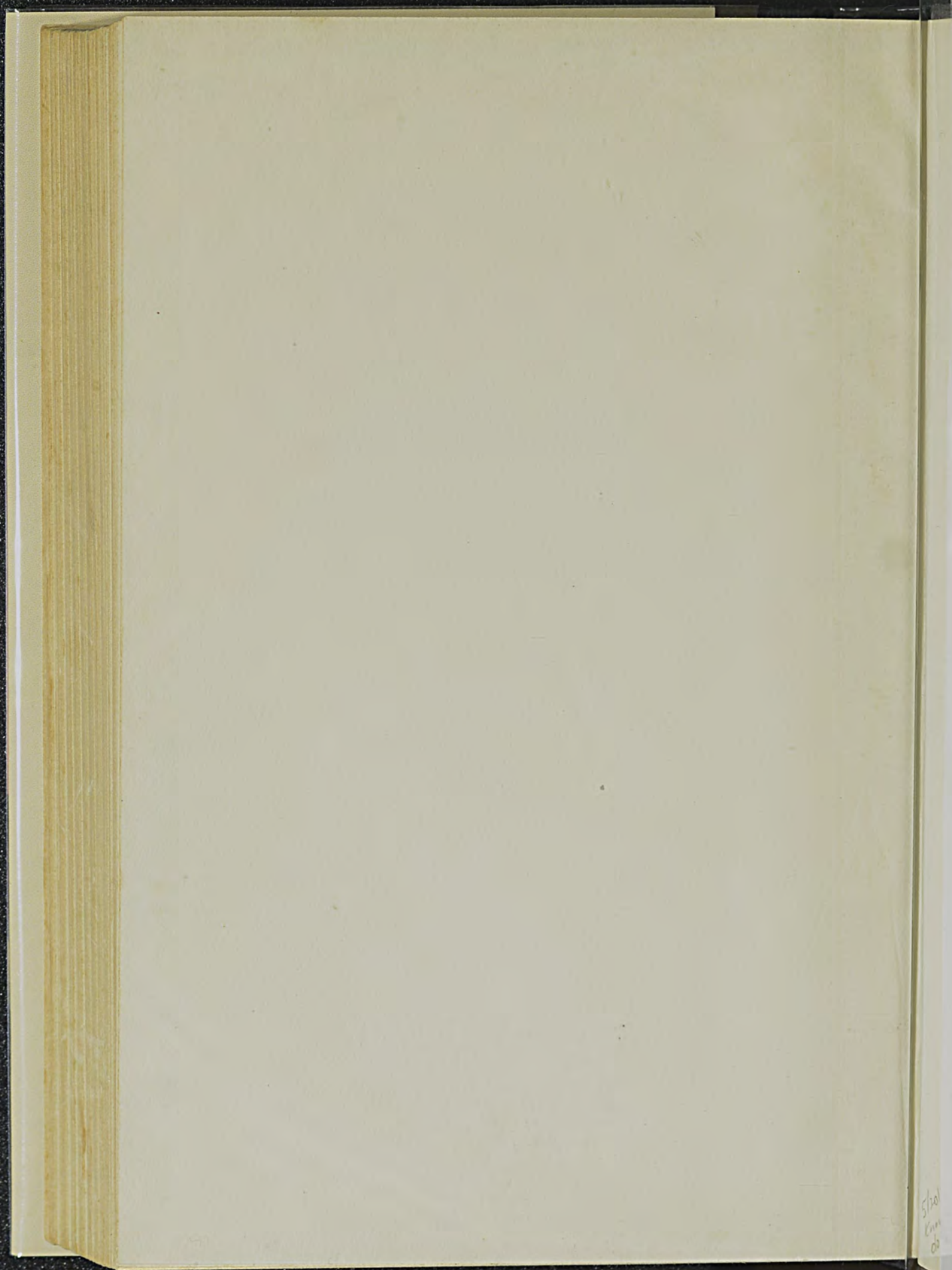




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