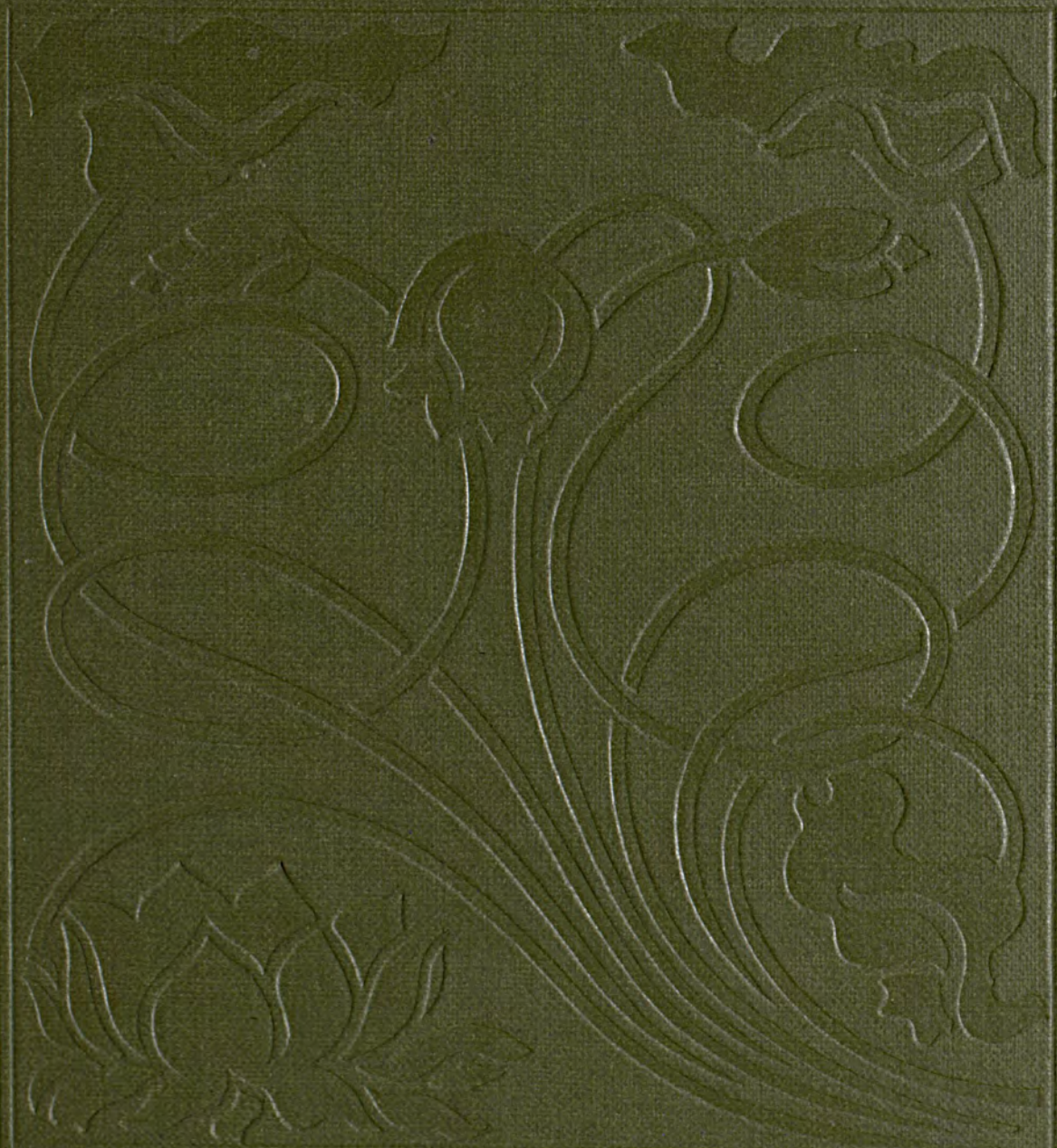


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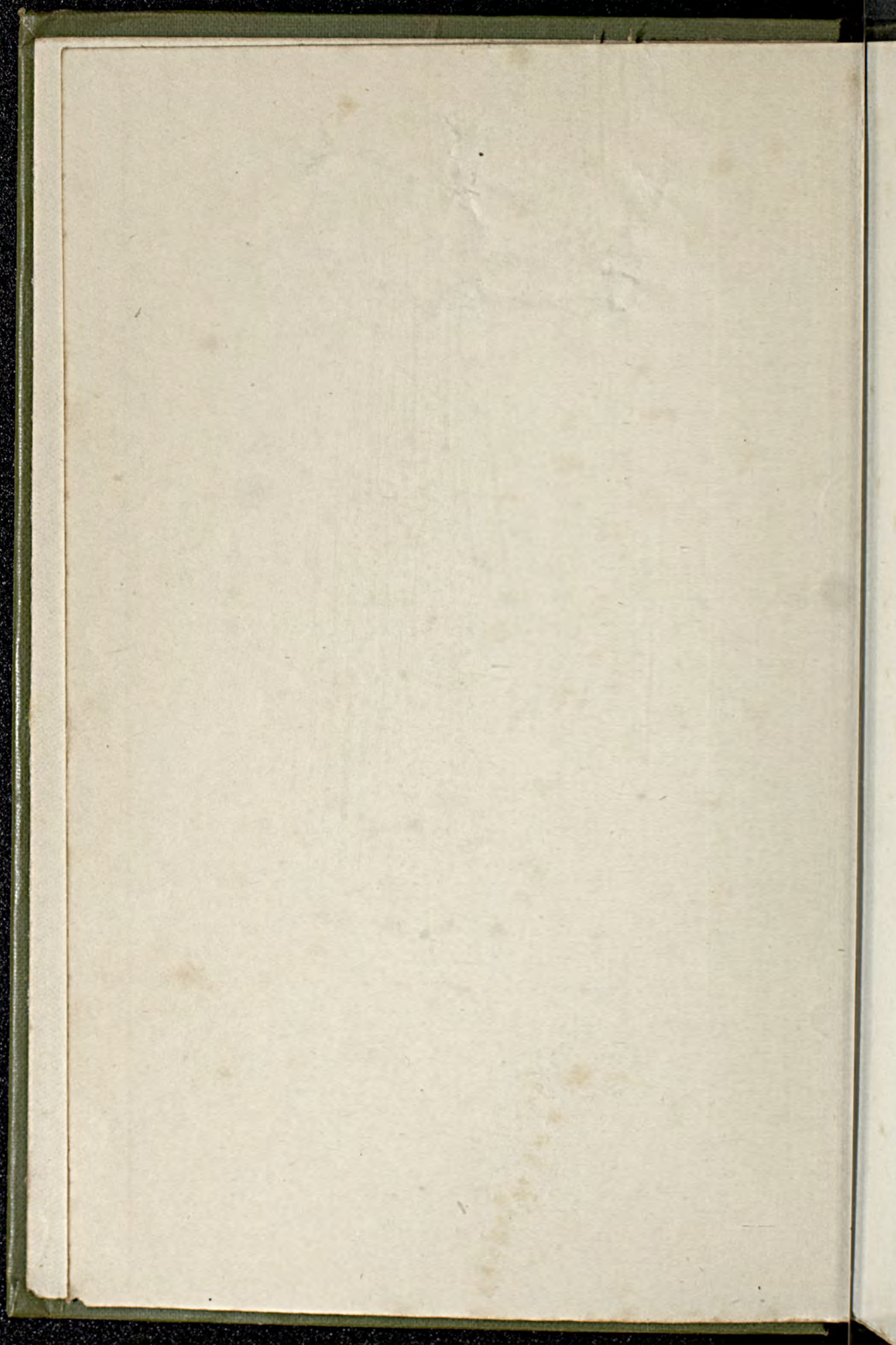
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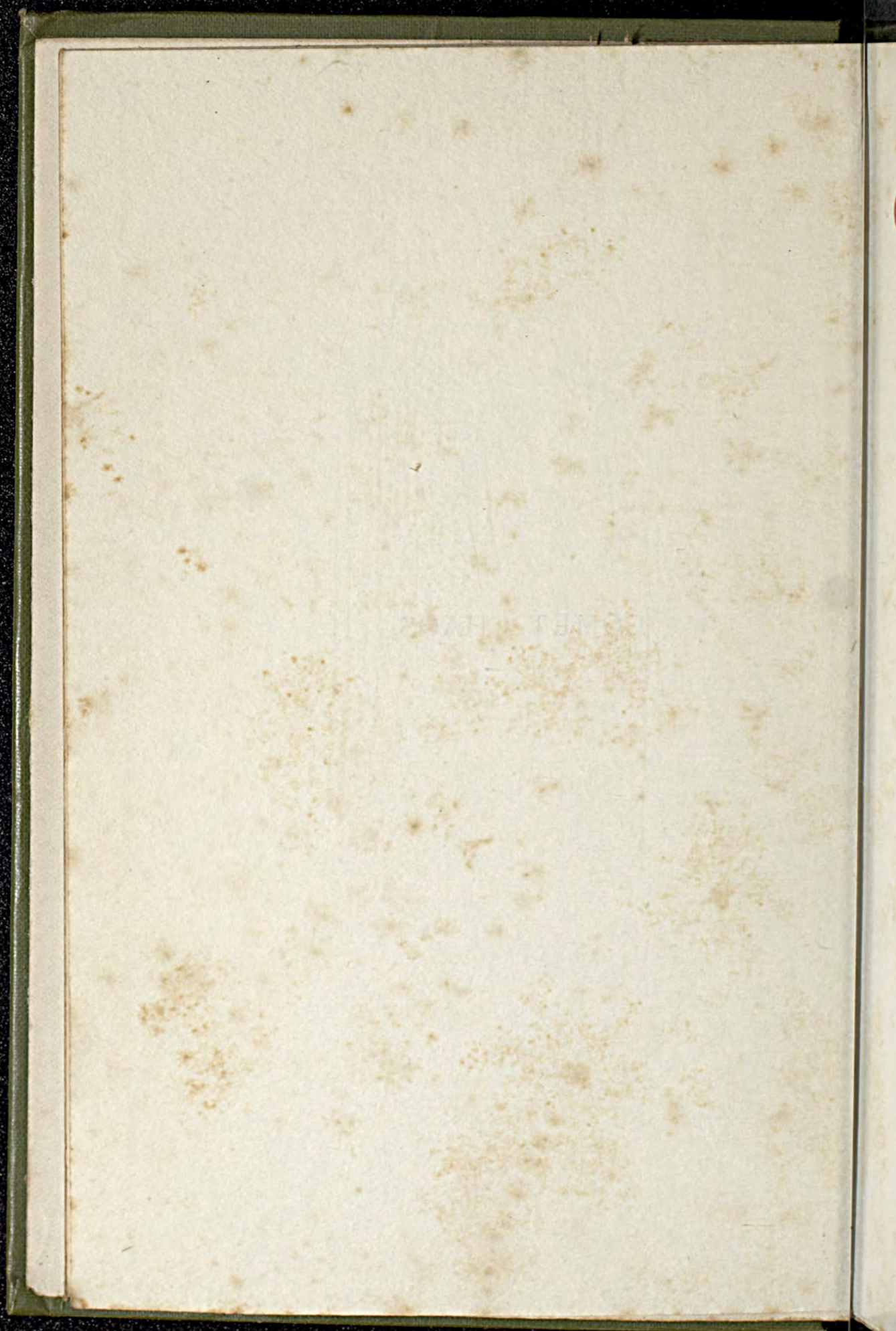
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COMET CHAOS



COMET CHAOS

A ROMANCE OF LOVE, TREASURE,
AND PROPHECY

BY

CYRIL SEYMOUR

AUTHOR OF 'THE MAGIC OF TO-MORROW,' ETC.



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COMET CHAOS

CHAPTER I

AN ISLAND OF PLEASURE

A TALL, dark, handsome man, of soldierly bearing, with a bronzed, clear-cut face, made his way slowly and unobtrusively down the steps of the hotel—steps almost completely obstructed by a triple line of cooing, oblivious lovers—and stood for a full minute on the edge of the outer pavement enthralled by the beauty and animation of the scene before him. Darkness had set in, and above him he saw that a full moon was turning to gleaming silver the light bank of clouds which drifted peacefully northward across a sky of deepest violet. Below him lay a sleeping, ozone-breathing summer sea, tremulous on his right with the innumerable lights of the sombre pier and the steamers moored in its vicinity. Directly in front of

him, across the whole breadth of a wide promenade, processions of light-hearted pleasure-seekers went slowly past in either direction to the alluring accompaniment of the swish of skirts, the hum of voices, and the sweet and musical laughter of women.

It was Douglas in the height of a season that is all too brief.

A girl in a pink blouse, with a snowy cloud coquettishly arranged around her yellow hair, leant forward from her place in the shadow of the hotel doorway and timidly touched the hall-porter on the arm.

‘Who is the gentleman?’ she asked. ‘I’ve not seen him at table.’

‘No, miss, p’r’aps not. He only came in by to-night’s boat—alone. He’s down in the book, miss, as Delaval—Mr. Gilbert Delaval.’

The man referred to, an absorbed spectator of sky and sea and gently-flowing streams of happy humanity, wholly unconscious that he was under observation, continued silently to drink in the beauty of the August night. It was all so strange and fresh and charming. Despite his wide experience, he could recall no parallel to the vista unrolled before him. The barbaric East, with all its splendour of colour and outline, could not touch

this. Perhaps, like so many of his fellow-countrymen, he was insular and prejudiced. Well, he could not help it. He could only thank God that he was once more among his own people, that he could breathe the balmy air of his own land, and blot out of recollection—for the time being, at any rate—the sinister faces of black and yellow men, their harsh and guttural voices, and the dirt and misery, squalor and vice unspeakable, of the odorous Orient.

Meditating thus, Gilbert Delaval—for the hall-porter was correct as to the identity of the newcomer—lighted a cigar, crossed the roadway, and merged himself in the human current that rippled merrily northward by the sweeping crescent of the low sea-wall. The tall, stalwart Englishman was thinking, as the best of folk have at times perforce to think, of wasted days that were gone for ever, of lost opportunities that would never again offer themselves. He had travelled for many hours that day by rail as well as sea, and perhaps his little sudden, unwonted mood of despondency was bred of mere mental and physical weariness. An old familiar friend had arranged to accompany him upon this holiday, but an imperative business wire had recalled that friend to London just as

they were in the act of stepping on board the big paddle-steamer that waited by the landing-stage at Liverpool to convey them to Manxland.

And so it came about that he was entirely alone.

Arrived at the further end of the long promenade, lost and lonely in the crowd, he wandered aimlessly up to the entrance of the public gardens close to the terminus of the old-fashioned one-horse trams, and, depositing a shilling on the turnstile counter, passed on through the illuminated grounds into a huge ballroom flooded with white electric light and gemmed with an overhead network of lamps of all the colours of the rainbow. Dancing was in full swing, and every inch of the great square expanse of polished floor was covered with the swaying mass of glowing youth and beauty, heaving and revolving in rhythmic response to the captivating strains of a languorous waltz.

A saloon opened on to the great hall near to the door by which he had entered, and he turned to the deserted bar and engaged in easy conversation with the affable damsel who attended to his call. Philanthropy was for the time engrossing a portion of her activities. She was collecting for the Royal Lifeboat

Institution, and drew his attention to a cunningly - devised slit in the shoulder of a mineral-water bottle, a slit provided by some local genius for the introduction of contributions. When she had done jingling the few coins, mostly coppers, in the novel collecting-box, Delaval responded with a shilling, to meet with a prompt reward. The lady leant forward over the bar and fixed into his flannel lounge-jacket one of those floral 'button-holes' that are ubiquitous in Douglas.

Presently a couple of youths came up and engaged the attention of the piquant high-priestess of Bacchus, and Delaval turned his back to the bar and gazed again upon the great white whirlpool of smiling, lovelit, upturned faces. How ineffably happy, how blissfully content, the myriad dancers seemed as they circled in all the hope and bravery of dauntless youth! Could it be possible, he asked himself incredulously, that there was a cold, matter-of-fact, strenuous world beyond the fairyland borders of this island of pleasure—a rude, realistic world of want and sin, misery and disease, into which every one of these happy dancers would be plunged on awakening from their brief butterfly hour of romance? Then he laughed at himself for a sentimental fool.

'Strikes you as a prelude to the Trump of Doom,' whispered a thin, steely voice into his startled ear; 'the inevitable end of all things earthly, doesn't it?'

He could feel a hot, clammy breath on his cheek, and swung round with a shudder, knowing neither what nor whom he was to confront. The prophetic menace of the sentence chilled him to the marrow.

A little shrivelled man in immaculate evening dress, with a seamed and fleshless face crowned with an abundance of silver hair that overflowed on his bent shoulders, stood before Delaval, fixing him with a pair of piercing light-blue eyes.

'Sir? I beg your pardon,' responded the younger man, knowing not what to say. 'Were you addressing your remarks to me?'

'Yes,' said the other, lifting his gray, drawn face, with its high waxen nose, ample brow, and receding chin, towards Delaval's. 'Have you ever seen that wonderful Judgment-Day picture by Martin in the National Gallery? Look at yonder crowd! How would it act were the dread awakening to come at this very moment? Martin was too classic. It won't be yawning graves and falling Greek temples. It will confront us in some flaunting haunt of

gaiety such as this. But, there, let's say no more about it.'

He turned to the counter and nodded to Hebe, who had just thrown a quick glance at Delaval, tapping her brow significantly.

The old man did not observe the signal, and went on: 'Let us eat, drink, and be merry, for to-morrow we die.'

He took up the glass of amber spirit handed to him by the girl, and, tossing off its contents at a gulp, turned on his heel and departed like a shadow with quick, catlike tread.

'Heaven help us!' cried Delaval, affecting to draw a deep breath of relief. 'Who on earth is the ancient death's head at the feast? He made my blood run cold when first he spoke. I thought for a second he had issued right out of the earth behind me.'

The girl laughed merrily.

'Silly old josser, isn't he?' she queried. 'He comes here every night. Quite frightened the life out of me the first time I saw him. Told me awful things of what was coming to pass soon. I had the nightmare when I went to bed.'

'He shouldn't be allowed at large,' remarked the man. 'Hasn't he a keeper?'

'Oh yes, he has a keeper—in skirts,' giggled the girl. 'He's an awful looney, but quite

harmless. Sort of fellow who'd go into a music-hall and prophesy about sudden death, and then take a front seat in a tabernacle and dance the can-can, or the cake-walk, for a change. If he wasn't a rich man he'd be in the 'sylum, of course.'

'Wealthy, eh?'

'I should just think so,' said the barmaid. 'Why, he could have taken that there pen and ink'—she pointed to a corner shelf—'and written you a cheque for the whole value of this 'ere blessed island.'

'I dare say I could do that myself,' remarked Delaval, with a smile, 'and so could most folk. It's only a matter of penmanship and a penny blank bank cheque.'

'Yes, that's all right,' responded the girl. 'I know all about that. But *his* signature would cause the oof to be tabled, you see. He used to be a college professor at Oxford or Cambridge, or it might have been Edinburgh or Manchester. I don't know what his line was, but his brother, who had emigrated, died somewhere in America and left him a mountain of solid silver out there, bigger than Snaefell, they say. You should see Snaefell. You can go up it on the electric railway. It's a jolly nice cheap ride now.'

'Indeed,' said Delaval, recalling the lady to her main theme. 'What's the old chap's name?'

'Bowgrave—Professor Bowgrave,' was the answer. 'You should see his missus. Now, she *is* a treat. There's nothing like her walking about the earth. They say the jewellery she wears at times would buy all the houses on the Prom. And her dresses! Oh!' Words failed the admiring envy of the lady.

'Doesn't dress according to her age, then, the old girl? But, of course, there are no grandmamas nowadays!' Delaval laughed.

'Grandmamma! Old lady, indeed!' exclaimed the other. 'Why, I'm sure she isn't much more than thirty, and she's got up for eighteen. She's dark, and tall, and stately—looks just like what a duchess is expected to be and generally isn't. If she had a title or was on the stage the world would rave about her.'

'Happy Professor Bowgrave!' sighed Gilbert Delaval, with mock emotion. 'I'm in love with her myself already, merely from your description.'

'I don't exactly know about "happy Professor Bowgrave,"' commented the girl. 'He was a bachelor until only a couple of years ago, when he married her. He might have taken a woman more of his own age. I don't hold

with such weddings. They come to no good. What he wanted was a sensible person of about fifty, a good housekeeper and thoroughly domesticated, as they say in the advertisements, and not a high stepper that makes every man-fool turn his head when she passes, and go just dotty if she even looks at him.'

'So you think it possible some bold bad burglar may break in by night and steal away the devoted Professor's radiant treasure?'

'Oh, dear no, I don't,' chirruped the barmaid pertly. 'She knows what's what, and on which side her bread is margarined, and don't you forget it. You need only look at her to see that. She'll never leave the old dear—unless she can safely carry off his fortune along with her; and, you see, a naughty eloping couple couldn't exactly slip off to nowhere with a solid silver mountain in the lady's travelling case. Besides, I'm told—though we mustn't believe everything we hear and only half what we see—that there's somebody quite near at home in the island in whom she is ever so deeply interested.'

The fair speaker coyly dropped a full and expressive lid over a dark-brown eye, an eye the colour of which contrasted curiously with her crowning pyramid of golden locks.

'Then she lives on the island?' said the man. 'Really, you *do* excite my curiosity. I shan't be able to sleep until I've seen the charming Mrs. Bowgrave.'

'Sorry for you!' laughed the girl. 'But you needn't have long to wait. She comes here sometimes with a friend, and I've even seen her dancing.'

'Not wearing that wonderful jewellery?' queried Delaval.

'Oh, dear no. Quite like any other girl who has been saving up to spend a fortnight's holiday on the island. But, there, it doesn't do to talk. I see a lot, you know, but I say nothing. Did you come in to-day?'

'This very evening,' answered the man. 'Good-night, I'm off for the present.'

'Ta, ta,' responded the girl merrily, raising her arm aloft, and archly waggling a plump, reddish hand after the fashion of latterday frivolity. 'Good-bye, dearest, and mind the paint on the Prom. seats. It comes off after nightfall if you sit too tight. See you on Douglas Head some morning, if you're good, and show you all the sights. You'll be quite interested, I know. Oh, those dear, sweet lovers on the top, sitting on the grass in the sunshine, dreaming the happy hours away!'

CHAPTER II

THE BEAUTIFUL MRS. BOWGRAVE

THE spacious smoking-saloon of a big hotel at the pier end of the promenade was crowded with well-dressed visitors, grouped in festive and exuberant parties at small tables scattered at seeming haphazard everywhere over the floor. The loud buzz of conversation, the jingling of glasses, and the peals of laughter from the more hilarious, drowned the sounds of the musical performance that was evidently proceeding in an inner apartment, judging by the odd bars of instrumental music, and the stray snatches of comic singing, which occasionally drifted in through an open arched portal.

Apart from the crowd, in a corner on the flank of the semi-circular bar at the end of the saloon, sat two men of between thirty and forty, leisurely discussing what in royal parlance is known as a bottle of 'the boy.' One of

them, of spare and sinewy frame, had a foreign cast of countenance, with glittering dark-gray eyes and a pronounced aquiline nose. The most casual student of humanity would have quickly decided that he was a distinctly dangerous man to unduly meddle with. It needed no expert to promptly class him as being at once courageous, intellectual, unscrupulous—an antagonist worthy of a foeman's steel in open encounter, and most probably a still more deadly enemy if he deemed it expedient to employ underground tactics in any conflict in which he became involved. The other was a bluff, broad-faced Englishman, of aldermanic girth, red-faced and cheery.

‘I’ve slipped off for a couple of days or so, Dare,’ the latter was saying. ‘We’re a bit slack down Wallsend way at present, waiting for plates that the mill folk have failed to deliver because of a strike in the steel trade, and, as I wanted a mouthful of sea air, I told the directors that I would have to see you personally about that queer craft we’ve just finished for ye. I often wonder what in the name of Noah’s Ark you’re going to do with it when you get it. But, of course, it’s no business of mine, so long as you keep meeting your engagements with the hard.’

The other man smiled cynically, twirling upward the while the fierce reddish moustache that substantially assisted in giving his face its Continental flavour.

'All you dream about, Lashley,' murmured his companion—'money, money, money! But, there, I sometimes do it myself.'

'Hello!' cried the other, suddenly, half rising from his seat. 'Yonder's a face I've often seen in King Street, South Shields, on a Sunday night. A remarkable chap he is, too—one of our bull-dog breed of Tynesiders, but a bit finer bred than some of the Geordies.'

He lifted his forefinger slightly, and pointed to a tall, athletic figure at the bar, now turned with its back to the watchers.

'Don't know him, do ye?'

'Not from Adam,' said the man answering to the name of Dare.

'Well, he's a lad we're proud of, and not without cause, let me tell ye. He served his time at Low Walker, and when he'd finished he went to Elswick, and afterwards to Barrow. He's been a chief for six or eight years past, and he's got a record, I can tell ye. That's Gilbert Delaval. Ye've seen his portrait in the papers, I've not the least doubt.'

'Can't say that I have,' answered Dare.

‘Well, I thought everybody had heard of him. That’s the youth who defied a British warship about a dozen years ago. He took a holiday one summer in a Tyneside steam-trawler that had found it profitable to fish in prohibited waters in Scotland. I think he worked his passage as a fireman for the fun of the thing. One fine morning a gunboat found the trawler at the game, and fired the usual blank charge over her bows to bring her to. Did she stop? Not much. “It’ll be fifty pound fine or three months, and perhaps the forfeiture of the blessed boat,” groaned the captain, who was part owner. “Couldn’t we make a break for it?” The old engineer shook his head. “No bloomin’ fear, captain,” replied that worthy. “We can’t do more’n ten knots all told, and that beggar ’ll do fourteen or fifteen. Besides, I’m a deacon at a respectable chapel in Westoe, and I ain’t going to be taken red-handed as a pirate, or be smashed up by a ten-pound cannon-ball.” But the young devil, Delaval, was spoiling for a fight. “I’ll put the steam through her, captain,” he shouted, taking in the situation as he swarmed out of the stokehole. “This job’s just my barrow.”

‘Well, to make a long story short, they got off a mile ahead of the gunboat, and ran the

trawler right round from the east coast of Scotland to the west, getting in the end quite clear of their pursuer. The blue-jackets took the stern chase quite as a joke at first, and refrained from real target practice, but when at the end of a couple of hours they found they had lost a couple of miles, they made up their minds to business. Happily, they hadn't had much practice about that time, and gun drill was decidedly off; but in those two days Delaval and his mates had at least a dozen narrow squeaks. They were hit half a dozen times in one place and another where it didn't much matter. The captain of the trawler, when at last in safety, went down into the engine-room to see what miracle Delaval had worked to get going on for sixteen knots out of the old tub. His device was quite a simple one. He had screwed down the safety-valves, and was working a common second-hand boiler, weighted for fifty, at exactly one hundred and thirty pounds. It was a wonder they hadn't all been blown to Kingdom Come hours before. He'd had a fight with the engineer to do it, too, and had ended by locking the old man up in the pantry. Of course, it was only a boyish freak. He's a full-fledged chief-engineer now, and daren't do such things. He only came back

from the Far East a month ago, after taking out a battleship to Japan on behalf of the firm that built the craft, and they say that whilst he was at Barrow he was the most daring of all the practical leaders in the experiments with the submarines.'

'He looks a man of force and determination,' said Dare, when the other paused for lack of breath.

'Yes; he's seen a bit of active service, too, between ourselves, on board a U.S. cruiser during the Spanish - American War. His picture was in the *Graphic*, under the name of Jack Harris, along with that of Lieutenant Hobson and a few other smart youths. Shall I introduce him before I go? I'm just off for the night.'

'Not to-night, thanks. I haven't time now, I've to look up some friends directly. I'll see you in the morning. Oh, by the way, what's the market value of a man like your hero, Delaval?'

'That depends,' was the answer. 'In a general way such a man would jump at £30 a month to go to sea; but ashore, as a works manager, he might get anything from £300 to £3,000 a year. Good-night.'

The portly shipbuilder arose, shook hands

with his friend, and, crossing to the seat upon which Delaval had dropped, gave a hearty greeting to his compatriot.

Dare, left alone, glanced at his watch. It was close upon a quarter to eleven. He lingered until the saloon clock had chimed, and then went out into the open. The moonlight-flooded promenade was crowded, for the various places of amusement were disgorging their thousands of patrons, who lingered contentedly in the fragrant summer air, reluctant to retire for the night to the crowded boarding houses. The people in the street walked mostly in happy pairs, with Panamas and big beflowered and beribboned flop-hats nestling side by side in closest communion. Popular merriment was at its height. A line of hilarious young men went past, trolling out the latest music-hall air, and a trio of unescorted girls danced with might and main what might have been a wild fandango, to the huge enjoyment of a ring of admirers overflowing with mild vulgarity in the way of friendly criticism.

A pair-horse carriage came slowly up through the dense throng to the front of the hotel. Dare, deftly forestalling the assiduous commissioner, assisted a lady, the only occupant of the vehicle, to alight, and promptly escorted

her through the hall into a private room on the ground floor. The door closed behind them, and man and woman stood for a moment in the centre of the apartment, face to face.

They were a picturesque pair—the man in rigid evening dress, broad shouldered and thin in flank, straight and upright as a grounded pike, with his auburn head poised proudly over that of his consort, and a look of expectancy in his flashing dark-gray eyes. The woman, dark as the raven night, with a complexion compounded of tenderest olives and rarest reds, the carriage of a young queen, and a form the ravishing perfection of which was intensified rather than hidden by the enswathing folds of an uplifted train and the clinging mantle of costly lace around her superb ivory shoulders.

Dare, looking down into the woman's face, realised, not for the first time, something of the overwhelming passion of a certain great citizen of Rome for Cleopatra. Here was a Cleopatra indeed—rich, young, and beautiful beyond compare—and it occurred to him for one audacious moment that some day it might be his to play the part of Antony. But she drew away from him the next instant, retreated to the end of the room, unloosed her shimmering mantle, and sat down on a dainty Chippendale chair. Her

beauty was supreme, and the strong dash of *diablerie* in its composition, veiled though it was by an assumption of hauteur and distant pride, enthralled the man. Her every movement was eagerly followed by his envious eyes.

Suddenly he realised that he must appear to her a rude, glaring, gaping fool.

'Ten thousand pardons!' he stammered. 'I forgot. You have called for your husband? I will go and tell him you are here.'

'You needn't hurry,' came her reply, in low, liquid tones. 'I did not expect the opera to be over so soon, and I fixed the time for eleven. He is upstairs, I suppose, playing one of those dreary games of chess with General Dallas?'

'Yes,' said Dare. 'He came in an hour ago, after a stroll on the Front.'

He could not understand how any man of ordinary flesh and blood could quit the society of such a wife for a whole evening willingly and of his own accord to indulge in a stupid, scientific pastime with a woolly-witted warrior who had been retired from the service for his country's good. And she had had perforce to attend the opera alone, to sit all the evening solitary in a box. But, of course, there was no accounting for the tastes of crazy senility.

'Excuse me a moment,' added Dare; 'I will go up and tell the Professor you are here. The absorbing game will probably have to be adjourned until to-morrow night.'

The lady laughed at the little sarcasm, and Dare left the room, to return almost immediately with Professor Bowgrave. The latter ran up with an air of solicitude and kissed his wife, who, to Dare's scrutinizing eyes, seemed to shrink from the effusive embrace.

'I never dreamt how late it was, darling,' said the old man. 'How time does run on when one is pleasantly engaged. I've been here two hours, and it doesn't seem ten minutes. I had a walk along the Prom. as far as the castle before I turned in. Come, love, let us hurry.'

He linked his arm in his wife's and led her forth to the waiting vehicle, Dare bringing up the rear.

The Professor touched the latter lightly on the arm as he followed Mrs. Bowgrave into the carriage.

'I want to see you particularly to-morrow, Dare,' he whispered—'about our great project. Everything going well?'

Dare nodded, and the carriage drove on. He fancied that Mrs. Bowgrave was regarding him with an air of special interest for the second

that elapsed before the departure, and he turned back into the hotel to directly encounter in the corridor the man whose exploits as a militant engineer his friend Lashley had just been singing so loudly. The pair passed, of course without recognition, Dare noting again the engineer's stalwart figure, gallant bearing, and resolute face.

CHAPTER III

'TO THE GOOD SHIP "ATALANTA"'

GILBERT DELAVAL, after leaving the hotel—it was not the one at which he had taken up his temporary abode—crossed over through the crowds and gazed for a few moments at the moonlit bay. Before him, only a few hundred yards from the shore, on a wave-encircled throne of rock, rose a little magical Norman castle, grim and hoary with age, as it seemed, its turrets gilded with quivering silver, whilst its tide-lapped base was flooded with a strangely beautiful belt of rolling phosphorescence. Had it not been that he was wide awake he would have set down this fortress of Liliput as but the vision of a dream. As it was, it might easily have been a brilliant bit of theatric art, conjured out of paint and lath and canvas.

The structure was, of course, the Tower of Refuge, on the islet of Conister—a delightful

bit of sham-antique architecture, set up some time in the nineteenth century, which serves, nevertheless, its scenic purpose admirably under Luna's melting and romantic rays. The enchanted true lovers who, night after night, linger for hours by the shore in mute ecstasy, hand in hand, cheek by cheek, gazing out seaward, must go back to the workaday world with its image imprinted on the mind's eye. How many fugitive episodes, retaining the faint fragrance of the withered rose, its suddenly recurring memory must recall in the leaden prosaic after years, when the immortal nectar of the gods of glorious youth no longer passes the lip.

Delaval lighted a cigarette, and idly decided to move off to his quarters. It had turned the hour of eleven. The doors of the big hotel were being closed against casual custom, and the crowd was rapidly thinning. As he lifted his elbow from the sea wall he became conscious that there was standing in his vicinity a tallish man wearing a long, loose, dark overcoat, with a gray tweed cap pulled down over his brows so as to leave nothing visible between the projecting peak and the upturned collar of his wrapper but a pair of bright eyes.

Instinctively he felt that he was under

espionage, but it might only be imagination. However, forewarned was forearmed, not that he expected anything serious to ensue, but he resented the idea of being watched, even for the gratification of purposeless curiosity. So he crossed the road, dropping a glove as he reached the curbstone on the other side of the thoroughfare. He stooped to pick it up, and looked hastily around. The unknown was almost at his heels, but turned aside to light a cigar. It might be pure coincidence.

Delaval went on again, betraying no sign. The stranger followed, at the discreeter distance this time of some thirty yards. The situation was becoming interesting. It was something quite new. Could anyone in all the wide, wide world have the slightest personal interest in him? Perhaps it was some erring private detective, endeavouring to earn his retainer and fees on behalf of a forlorn and suspicious wife. Such cases were not unknown at seaside pleasure resorts. But instead of being a case of mistaken identity, it was just barely possible that his strange pursuer might be an ordinary lawless bandit in quest of such spoil as a purse and watch and chain. And it suddenly occurred to our hero that a little bit of exhilarating exercise was the very thing he

needed at that particular moment. If his mysterious pursuer were seeking trouble, he was about to apply to the very man who was eager and willing to oblige him. He turned up a side street, but, glancing swiftly around, saw that the man who had aroused his suspicions continued along the main thoroughfare. No, the fellow was lurking in the shadows at the further corner of the street. Delaval went on unheeding, looking neither to the left nor the right. From behind him came the sound of regular footfalls. He turned again into an unfrequented by-road, by the side of a great blank wall perhaps a hundred yards long. The second man followed suit. Not a soul was visible.

A man who can hold his own with a navvy of a pugilistic turn, or a hardened bully of the stokehole, does not usually shrink from an encounter when it is thrust upon him. So Delaval suddenly halted, wheeled round, and calmly awaited the stranger.

The latter came also to a standstill, drew back in apparent confusion, and then laughed aloud in a genial, boisterous fashion.

'Good-evening,' he began. 'It's my own fault if you've taken me for a footpad. I've been ass enough to creep after you in the dark

in this way to find where you were hanging out, instead of asking our mutual friend, Lashley, of Wallsend, for an intro. My name is Kestrel Dare, stockbroker in the City, and I wanted to see you very particularly about a bit of business.'

'Oh,' responded Delaval, somewhat reassured, but still eyeing the other in the keenest fashion. 'Yours is rather a curious way of doing business, and I certainly don't admire the place selected for it. Let us go back to the Front, and I'll hear what you've to say in a suitable place. Don't come any closer, please, but walk on a few yards in advance, and I'll follow.'

'Still suspicious, eh?' laughed the other. 'Well, I cannot complain. I'll go on before. I really merely wanted to note down your address so that I could call on you some time to-morrow, after I had thought over what I had to say to you. But now, I suppose, I'll have to speak out without premeditation.'

The pair went quickly onward down the hill in Indian file until they had regained the Promenade, and halted together under a lamp. Dare removed his cap, turned down the collar of his loose overcoat, and revealed himself in the glare of the gas.

'Here's my card,' he said. 'You probably saw me with my friend Lashley, of Wallsend, in the Villiers?'

Delaval nodded, and took the other's extended hand, his doubt now entirely dispelled.

'Yes,' he said, 'of course I did. Old Lashley pointed you out to me when he came over to where I was sitting. But what on earth do you want of me? You aren't a shipowner, seeking to rob a poor devil of a holiday that as yet hasn't begun?'

'Oh no,' was the response. 'I have no evil designs in that direction. But I cannot answer your question with a direct yes or no. I am a shipowner, and I'm not a shipowner. At least, I'm not one in a professional sense.'

'You interest me,' laughed Delaval. 'Go on with your conundrum.'

'Hadn't we better go along to my hotel?' queried Dare. 'I'll put my case fully before you there.'

'With the greatest pleasure in the world,' responded Delaval. 'Do you know, you've aroused my curiosity. I scent adventure in the air, and adventure by sea or land is the very breath of my nostrils.'

'You've hit it first time,' said Dare a moment

or two later, as the pair seated themselves in a horseshoe alcove in a spacious smoke-room, around the bar of which a dozen other individuals were congregated. 'I want to hire your professional services for a period—say for six months. You can sign on, so to speak, for salary purposes first thing in the morning, but you'll have a week or two of holiday before I require you, if we come to terms.'

'Oh!' breathed Delaval reflectively. 'I'm not sure that I am taking the job, even if the terms are right. These things want consideration. What's the name of your ship? Where is she going to? And what's the purpose of the voyage? I take it that it's something out of the common run.'

'Yes, you're right again. The job decidedly *is* out of the ordinary, and if it's adventure you're after you'll get your fill of it. At present, however, I am under the pledge of secrecy to a third party to maintain silence in respect of certain details. However, I'll tell you what I'll do. I want you not as the ordinary chief engineer of the ship. You'll get together a complete engine-room staff; but for special reasons, hereafter to be explained, I want a man of thorough technical knowledge, of originality, of initiative, and of courage. From

what Lashley says, you've got all these qualifications.'

Delaval blushed slightly.

'I know my business,' he said rather confusedly; 'but I'm not putting myself up as a V.C. hero. Are you recruiting for war purposes for a foreign navy? If so, I'm having none of it. I wouldn't mind the risk if it were a call from my own country; but I am certainly not going to put myself up as a target to be shot at on a purely cash basis. I've had some before.'

'Quite right,' said Dare quietly. 'I'm asking nothing of the sort from you. It is an adventure of peace—though, of course, you can't embark even on a ferryboat without taking chances. There is nothing contraband about the venture; no running of blockades, or piracy in any shape or shadow. But, all the same, it is a gigantic undertaking to which I have committed myself, and I am going to see it through, and to personally participate in it into the bargain. I could get a hundred good average men to-morrow to fill the situation I have to offer; but I want an exceptional man, and I feel assured that I have got him in you. It's six months' service—I mayn't need you three—and the figure is a thousand pounds

down in advance to your banker. Do you take it ?

'Well,' answered Delaval, 'I should be mad if I didn't. Granted that it's a fair, legitimate, lawful transaction, I'm your man ; but I think there ought to be a little confidence displayed. Where are you going, and from what port ?'

'Yes, I'll tell you that. We start from North-umberland Dock on Tyneside, and our nominal destination is New York. Where we really *are* going I shall tell you later when the voyage has begun. The issues depending on my project are so tremendous that not a syllable of the truth must be allowed to leak out, and what you don't know you can never by any possible chance tell. I mean no disrespect. You would, I feel convinced, be the very last man to open your mouth ; but the secret is not entirely mine, and I am bound to maintain my present reserve. It shall be all satisfactorily explained in due course, and, given success, of which there should be little doubt, I promise you a very much bigger amount than the figure just named by me.'

'I am satisfied,' said Delaval. 'Nothing venture, nothing gain. I accept your terms. When shall I be required ?'

'We'll discuss details to-morrow, meeting

here at eleven, if that time suits you.' He held out his hand, and the other gripped it firmly by way of sealing the bargain. 'You can have a clear fortnight here, anyway.' The speaker turned about. 'Here, waiter!' he shouted. 'Bring in a bottle of Mumm. To the good ship *Atalanta!*' cried Dare solemnly, raising his glass in the air. 'May her maiden voyage realize to the full its mighty promise!'

The two men tossed off the toast, and Dare eagerly filled up the glasses again, delighted with the success of his negotiations.

CHAPTER IV

DOROTHY COLLINGWOOD'S DANGER

It was early afternoon, a mile or two out of Douglas to the west. Only one human being was visible in the deserted pastoral landscape. She was a girl—a rare example of budding womanhood in trim walking attire—who had come to a halt at a line of high stout rails. She glanced eagerly around. No one was in sight. Therefore she might make the venture in safety. Her eyes were set on a cluster of wild flowers nodding their delicate, starlike heads in the faint breeze. They grew just on the other side of the barrier.

Gathering in her skirts gracefully, she lifted her left foot and addressed herself to the task. She paused on the topmost rail to survey the land, her clear and open deep blue eyes blinking in the sun. The whole prospect was one of profound peace, broken only now and then by the

plaintive lowing of cattle—big, sleek, gentle creatures, spotting the greensward with crude blotches of brown and red and black and white.

She sprang lightly off the rail into the enclosure—an idyllic meadow, with a silver thread of water, fringed with willows and alders, running through its centre. In her eagerness to gather the flowers she dropped upon her knees to the grass. As she crouched, engrossed, she was startled by a heavy, regular thud that caused the very ground beneath her to tremble. She lifted herself half upright, suddenly possessed by some vague dread, and turned about to look in the direction whence the strange sounds came. But ere she could push aside the heavy loose folds of sun-kissed hair that partially obscured her vision, as the result of her exertions the moment before, she was conscious of being gathered unceremoniously up, like some unconsidered bundle, and precipitated bodily over the railings on to the other side.

Pulling herself together as she sat—a crumpled, crimson-faced heap of astounded femininity—she became gradually aware of the close proximity of a tall, lithe, masculine figure in a gray Norfolk suit. The stranger, whoever

he was, had followed at a bound the fair burden he had flung before him with such surprising dispatch.

With a struggle she arose to her feet, full of commingled humiliation and indignation. She could not speak, but her eyes sparkled with apprehensive interrogation.

Then a great brute form flashed across her line of vision, and came with a crash against one of the stout posts. A huge, bellowing bull, with widespreading horns sharp as a hay-fork, raged in vain fury behind the fence. It was all clear to her now. By a hair's breadth she had escaped imminent death in one of its most dreadful forms!

The man who had come so opportunely to her aid—she could see him clearly now—turned slightly away so that she might recover herself. A second later he was speaking in a low, sympathetic voice relieved with an under-current of humour.

'I'm awfully sorry,' he began lightly, raising his cap. 'I know it was extremely rude of me, for we hadn't even been introduced; but there was no choice.'

'Oh, thank you—thank you a thousand times!' cried the girl, reaching out both hands unreservedly.

The touch of her warm, sof, ungloved palms thrilled the man to the core.

The girl cast her eyes behind her for an instant, and shuddered as she saw the fearsome red-and-white monster, the incarnation of blind rage and brute force, fuming behind the impregnable rails. What a narrow escape had been hers! Sudden death had veritably rubbed elbows with her. She swayed slightly, and would have fallen had not the man taken her in his arms. But a moment later she recovered herself, and he reluctantly withdrew his support.

'It was all my own fault,' stammered the girl, lifting her downcast face, now gone pale as ivory, and pushing back her abundance of dishevelled hair. 'I was a trespasser, and ought not to have climbed the fence. How horrible it would have been but for you!'

'Thank God!' said the man earnestly. Then he added in an easier vein: 'However, all's well that ends well. Perhaps I'd better go after the flowers and your parasol, now that the enemy has suspended hostilities.'

Nervously the girl approached the palings. The bull, having vented his impotent wrath, had trotted off to a distance of two or three hundred yards.

The man vaulted over the rails, picked up the parasol, which had suffered severely under the stamping hoofs of the infuriated beast, and held aloft a most forlorn tangle of shredded silk and twisted wire.

The fair owner of the ruin relieved her overcharged feelings with a laugh that sounded like the tinkling of a silver bell in the ears of her enraptured companion.

‘How ridiculous it looks!’ she cried. ‘Throw it away. I couldn’t take it back with me.’

‘You won’t have it?’ he queried, passing the flowers over to her, and striving to smooth the shattered sunshade somewhat into shape. ‘Then may I beg it? May I keep it as a memento of our meeting?’

The girl nodded and laughed merrily. She stole a second glance at the stranger. He was a tall athletic man under thirty, with a strong, dark, handsome face full of intellect and glowing with vigorous health through its tan. Her timid, furtive scrutiny over, she turned about.

‘I must be returning,’ she said. ‘I’m a stranger to the island, and I’m almost afraid I’ve lost my way.’

‘Can I be of any further service?’ asked the man eagerly. ‘You are staying in Douglas, of course?’

'Yes, thank you,' said the girl. 'My name is Collingwood—Dorothy Collingwood.'

'Mine is Gilbert Delaval,' said the man. 'Our road lies together.'

She drew aside the skirt of her graceful clinging dress with a little enchanting swirl, and together the strangely introduced pair went on over the pleasant pastures to gain the main road, side by side, as like a pair of lovers as could anywhere be found on that August afternoon.

It was quite an hour before the pair reached the town, and sauntered along the Front to the boarding-house where Miss Collingwood was staying with her aunt, a sweet-faced, rosy old lady with silver hair. Dorothy took him straight into the deserted drawing-room, and returned five minutes later with her relative.

'My niece has just told me,' said the elder lady, 'of the gallant service you have rendered her this afternoon. I don't know how to thank you for your bravery and promptitude. You saved her life beyond the shadow of a doubt. Some day we may see our way to repay you in a slight measure.'

She wrung Delaval's hand warmly.

'Don't mention it, madam,' faltered the young man in confusion. Then he turned to

go. 'I will take the liberty of calling in the evening, if I may,' he added.

'We shall be heartily glad to see you at any time,' responded Dorothy's aunt, and Dorothy herself seconded the invitation with an irresistible blush.

The girl accompanied him to the door, and shook hands with him as they parted. Then he went slowly along the Promenade, unconsciously humming a love-song. The sky was blue and full of exhilarating lights, the sea sparkled in the sun, and the air was heavy with summer's incense. What a radiant being this Dorothy Collingwood was! Never before had he set eyes on so sweet and fair and pure a woman. He had been smitten by a very ancient and deadly contagion—love at first sight.

'A penny for your thoughts,' said someone, bursting in suddenly upon his thoughts.

Kestrel Dare stood before him, smiling.

'You were going to pass without speaking. You appeared to be in the brownest of brown studies.'

Delaval made an easy, offhand answer, and the two men stood chatting for a while on the edge of the side-walk.

Presently a stately woman, in the full pride

of her charms, went by. Dare lifted his hat and bowed before the lady, who threw him a bewitching smile as she sailed onward like a princess. Momentarily her splendidly faultless nut-brown complexion had gone red as a rose.

‘By Jove!’ ejaculated Delaval, ‘that’s great! What a subtle look her eyes have! Did you see the downward droop of those exquisite lashes? She’s not my style, but she’s certainly perfect in her own magnificent type. You are acquainted with her?’

‘Yes,’ said Dare, ‘I know her well. I’ll be candid and tell you something that will interest you. She is one of the intending passengers of the *Atalanta*. The information is strictly private, remember.’

‘You surprise me!’ cried Delaval. ‘Who is she?’

‘Well, the name her godfather and god-mother gave her was Felicity Christian.’

‘Felicity Christian!’ echoed Delaval. ‘Felicity is a charming name, but it becomes her indifferently. It would fit a demure little Quakeress like a glove. But that stately creature yonder! Why, she has the carriage of a queen and the pride of one, I’ll warrant. How splendidly she is dressed! Tell me all about her.’

‘ Yes, I’ll tell you, but don’t let the story pass your lips again. She’s a country girl, bred and born in the remote Northumbrian village of Long Framlington, though not a native in the real sense. Her father and mother settled there some thirty years ago, in a small detached cottage at the western end of the village. They’ve both been dead ever so long. The old man, before he went to live in retirement in the country, had been a minister of some dissenting denomination or other. He was approaching fifty when he married. His wife was going on for twenty-five years his junior. It was a strange match in more respects than one. He was, or had been, a sour, stern religious fanatic. She was a music-hall artiste, a light comedy actress, or something of that sort. I don’t know exactly what, but something of the tricky type on the stage. The parson had to cut the pulpit immediately after his curious experiment in matrimony. His devout congregation were shocked and horrified beyond measure at what was to them an outrageously unseemly union, and his choice lay between resignation and unceremonious expulsion. He chose the former, and went to Long Framlington, to live in retirement on his own moderate private means.’

‘And the girl he married? Was she a facsimile of this regal Felicity?’

‘Nothing of the sort, Delaval. I used to live in the village myself, and often saw them walking together in the country lanes. He was a shy, plain man, wrapped in icy reserve, whilst his wife was just one of those gilt-haired butterflies, all paint, powder, and giddiness, that you may see any morning about noon at the doors of our third-rate provincial theatres and music-halls. She was, further, a heartless, vicious, worthless little baggage. Of course, I was only a mere child at the time. I gathered all this after I had grown up. Even to my infant eyes she looked decidedly queer, but to her husband she was nothing short of absolute perfection.’

‘Love is ever blind,’ interjected Delaval.

‘Yes,’ came the response—‘blind, deaf, and idiotic, usually. At any rate, *he* was all that. The pair were more like father and daughter. He was never from her side. He held her as his most precious possession, and would scarcely allow the air of heaven to blow upon her. But the winter after Felicity was born trouble came. Christian was laid up with illness for a few weeks, during which time his wife made full use of her liberty. She had grown weary of

rural domesticity, and formed a liaison with a sport of some sort at Newcastle, and the upshot of the business was her flight. She returned to her old haunts and profession. The devil only knows what became of her, but it's generally accepted that she's been dead a dozen years.'

'Quite a romance, Dare.'

'Ah, you may call it that. Christian never looked up afterwards. It would have killed him straightway, without a doubt, but for the child.'

'She did not take it with her, then?'

'What do *you* think? She hadn't a heart in her, and the child would have been merely a clog. After his wife eloped Christian hardly ever left the grounds of his cottage until the day of his funeral. He devoted himself night and day to the woman who has just passed.'

'Your story surprises me,' said Delaval. 'But there's nothing of the fluffy-haired giddy-pate about the black imperious beauty I have seen to-day for the first time.'

'You come to quick judgment,' laughed the other. 'Why, you've only had a passing glance at her. Whence she inherits her flawless presence is a mystery to me. She's married now.'

The men shook hands and parted, after making arrangements for another meeting.

'I'm as mad as they make them,' Dare was reflecting. 'I cannot keep her out of my mind. I shall have to walk very warily, or I may deliberately throw all my great expectations to the winds by madness for a fair face—the face of a woman who may easily, on both her pedigree and her looks, prove a man's ruin. They say that even fools grow wise by experience. It's a lie! Man never reforms. The moth returns to the candle as long as it can fly.'

CHAPTER V

STRAYING COMETS AND STOLEN KISSES

THE electric standard lamps gleamed pleasantly as the beautiful Mrs. Bowgrave swept into the magnificent drawing-room of Graymere House, her charming old-world home, to which she had come as a bride but two years before, on the upland outskirts of Douglas, some two or three miles from the heart of that centre of holiday gaiety. The golden index finger of the little clock on the mantel crept close to the hour over its exquisite dial-plate of iridescent blue. Then a tiny bell rang out the hour of nine.

She glanced at the clock, and idly sought confirmation of the record by consulting the tiny bejewelled watch affixed like a medal on the left strap of her low corsage, immediately above her white, lifting bosom. She had just quitted the dining-room, where she had left the Professor and Kestrel Dare to their cigars and a

dry, seemingly interminable discussion on the wonders of astronomy—matters of not the slightest moment to her, in view of her firm conviction, arrived at in spite of her associations, that neither the sun, moon, nor stars were in any way likely to have the slightest effect upon her present or her future.

She walked across to the great bay window and drew apart the hangings. Then she passed into the darkened embrasure, permitting the curtains to close behind her, and looked out upon the night. A heavy drift of dark-green clouds, fringed with silver, was scudding across the face of the moon, and the undulating pasture-land without was veiled in misty shadow. Not a star was visible. Yet the chief features of the lonely Manx landscape were clearly discernible—on the left a great black belt of forest trees, and to the extreme right a gaunt, gray, stony hill of basaltic rock. Immediately before her the open country swept away downward to a distant horizon, with a long yellow flare rising above its black extremity—the lights of the town.

A curious perception of her isolation from humanity fell upon her, and, with a shudder, she drew back into the cheerful light. She ran up to the mirror and threw a faint smile to the

fair apparition that greeted her in the glass. The wan semblance of mirth quickened into life, and a dainty dimple set itself in either dusky cheek. The full lips contracted into a rosebud, with what seemed a drift of pearly snow in its heart, and her soft, fathomless dark eyes, erstwhile veiled in shadow, lit up with the fires of pride and triumph. What charms were hers! A single lingering glance told her how radiantly those charms had shone that very afternoon in the crowded street, in the open daylight. Ah! she could hear his footstep, coming with her husband into the room. What would he think of her now, when he could dwell undisturbed on her loveliness, softened, sweetened, idealized by the lamplight?

The two men entered the room, and Mrs. Bowgrave swiftly arranged her billowy skirt and sank like an open rose into a low chair. The Professor came up to her and kissed her on the lips. Then he went across the room to take a book from a table, and her eyes flashed unwittingly in the direction of Dare, who returned the swift look, and then turned to the Professor and the thin quarto volume he was consulting.

‘This is the original edition, Dare,’ said the old man, ‘of David Milne’s “Essay on Comets,”

published in Edinburgh in 1828. Listen to this eloquent passage : " With how little reason, then, has man been accustomed to look upon the puny ball on which his lot is cast as the most distinguished among the multitude of works scattered over the expanse of the heavens ! With how little light does he presume to arrogate to himself the highest place in the scale of animated being, when the whole universe teems with life and with intelligence ! The human species form no more than a link in that chain of existence which, without visible termination, stretches over the boundless fields of creation. Where, then, we may ask, are the proofs which philosophy can advance of the vaunted and exalted nature of man ?" What do you think of that, Dare ?

The man thus addressed suppressed a yawn, and answered :

' It is sublime, Professor.'

Mrs. Bowgrave threw a look of humorous disdain at their deceptive guest, and the engrossed reader went on aloud :

' Here is another telling passage : " A few brief years spent in the pursuit of vanities make up the whole sum of the life of man ; and then, like the plants or the beasts of the field, he sinks down into his native earth.

Thus it is that one generation makes way for another in rapid and melancholy succession. And yet this same pitiful creature, man, delineates the tracks which the countless orbs rolling through space will pursue for thousands of years, and can predict those terrible catastrophes arising from the crash of worlds, which will not only cause the annihilation of his species, but disorganize or alter the whole fabric of the system." That is what Milne says, Dare. It only leads up to my great theme—a theme on which I shall never tire of dilating—the approaching end of the world!

'Oh, Philip!' protested Mrs. Bowgrave, with what appeared in the eyes of Dare a most delicious shudder. 'You don't know how you frighten me with those awful predictions of yours!'

'Ah, you do not understand, darling,' answered the old man. 'Besides, Dare is specially interested in this subject. Are you not?'

'I am fascinated by the profundity of your speculations,' said the younger man with a bow.

'Who could not be?' asked the Professor. 'What does Proctor say—not that I am enamoured of him, for both his philosophy

and his astronomy are of too popular a type? I have his book here.'

He took up another volume.

'He tells us that about a million meteors are gathered up every day by the earth—commonly called shooting stars—and that almost all these bodies enter the earth's atmosphere with velocities compared with which that of a rifle bullet is at rest. These terrible missiles, however, are dissipated into vapour long before they reach the earth's surface by the resistance of that efficient shield the soft and yielding air. Listen. This is how he predicts the possibility of the destruction of the world's inhabitants: "If at any time a great comet falling directly into the sun should, by the swift rush of its meteoric components, excite the frame of the sun to a lustre far exceeding that with which he at present shines, the sudden access of lustre and of heat would prove destructive to every living creature, or at any rate to all the higher forms of life upon this earth. And though in a few days the sun might resume his ordinary lustre, and no longer glow with abnormal heat, he would pour his rays on a family of worlds in which not one of the higher forms, either of vegetable or animal life, would remain in existence." That is Proctor's theory. But

it is not mine. When the end comes, the earth itself may be smashed into chaos by direct contact with one of those great white wandering ghosts from outer infinitude, or it may not.'

The Professor threw down his book and turned upon his audience of two, aglow with his subject, his diminutive form transfigured for the moment, and his great shock of snow-white hair flinging itself out horizontally as he wheeled around.

'I have more to say,' the old man went on, recovering his breath; 'but the work I need is in the library. Perhaps, Felicity dearest, you will oblige Mr. Dare with a little music whilst I am hunting it up. I shall not be more than five minutes.'

As Bowgrave was leaving the room Dare led his brilliant hostess to the piano, opened the instrument, and busied himself in arranging the music. Felicity sat down and their cheeks touched involuntarily.

In a mad moment his arms were around her, and, ere he could realize it, he had planted a passionate kiss upon her red lips. She drew herself away fiercely, sprang to her full height, raised her long, rounded arms aloft, and faced the dismayed, presumptuous man with flashing eyes.

'Oh, Felicity—*my* Felicity!' whispered Dare, going on towards her as she retreated a step or two. 'I am stark, staring mad for love of you!'

She stood still for a moment, with a stony look in her brilliant eyes, motionless as a statue, on the verge, as it seemed, of a paroxysm of hysteria. Only her white bosom, heaving with excitement, testified to the life within.

'Forgive me, forgive me!' the man went on. 'I knew not what I did. I know not now. My only consciousness is that I love you, that I have been your willing slave and worshipper from the hour we first met, and that I shall always love you, whatever happens!'

Ere she was aware of it he had her in his arms again.

'Am I to go?' he pleaded.

He kissed her again, and her arms folded themselves convulsively around his neck.

'Stay,' she murmured, almost below her breath, lifting her face to his.

He kissed her a third time, and held her slightly away from him to feast his eyes on her raven, roseate loveliness; but, with a sudden turn, she disengaged herself from his embrace, and ran lightly toward a further door leading

to her boudoir. Her hair was crumpled in disorder, and there were tears in her alluring eyes.

'I cannot stay. I will return in a few minutes. I go to bring some music.' Then she was out of the room.

He was startled by the flapping of the wings of a heavy bird, as it seemed, on the outside of a window-pane, and there came a sound of footsteps in the outer corridor leading to the front of the house.

The Professor came hurriedly in. The old man thrust his pince-nez astride his high waxen nose slightly askew, and looked inquiringly at Dare.

The latter, composing himself with a mighty effort, spoke calmly out :

'Mrs. Bowgrave has gone in search, I believe, of some favourite piece of music of hers.'

'Indeed,' said the Professor, staring steadily at his guest. 'How would you deal with the traitor who had dishonoured your wife and home?'

'I do not understand you,' stammered Dare. 'Explain yourself. I—I—I utterly fail to follow you.'

'Surely my question is a plain one?' went on

the Professor stolidly. 'Some husbands have recourse to the divorce court. That would not be my mode. I should seek an infinitely deadlier vengeance.'

Dare stood appalled. There could be no doubt whatever that his falsity had been discovered.

'Speak, speak out,' he faltered, in the steadiest tones he could command.

'Hush!' cried Bowgrave. 'Here comes my wife. We will talk of the matter later.'

Mrs. Bowgrave came sailing into the room, serene and unruffled, though paler than usual, with a quiet smile upon her face. She threw a happy, innocent glance at the Professor, and held out a sheet of music.

'I am going to sing your favourite song, dearest,' she said quietly, almost tenderly. 'Will you accompany me?'

Without a word, Bowgrave laid down the shabby, well-worn book in his hand, and led his wife to the piano.

Dare dropped back into his seat, in a fever of apprehensive expectancy. Could he even hope that the episode through which he had just passed had gone undetected? Such a hope was vain indeed. His host's abrupt slow-spoken query rang in his ears like a

funeral knell: 'How would you deal with the traitor who had dishonoured your wife and home?' It was a merciless question. Were all his great dreams of boundless wealth and power on the point of crashing into ruin and utter nothingness? What an insensate fool he had been to wantonly risk his whole future—the great venture of his life—for the touch of a woman's lips!

The opening notes of the Professor's prelude—a sweetly sentimental theme—startled Dare from his reverie of self-accusation and despair, and then the low, rich contralto voice of Felicity burst upon his ears. She was, he knew, utterly unconscious of the fateful words that had just passed her husband's lips, and gave the most soulful interpretation of her ballad of true and faithful love. She turned and looked him full in the face, and, dropping her eyes, sang her message directly to him. Surely Fate was bent on pelting him with bitter mockery and savage satire! The Professor, biding his time, played on like an automaton, his eyes fixed stedfastly on the music, apparently oblivious to everything but the haunting sirene melody.

The song over, the Professor led the faithless Felicity back to her chair with what, to the

watcher's eyes, seemed the malice of a cold-blooded mockery.

'You look tired, dearest, and pale,' said her husband. 'Are you retiring?'

'Not just yet, Philip,' she answered. 'Tell us something more about the comets.'

'I forgot,' the old man answered readily. 'Another matter distracted my attention. Where did I put that book? Oh yes, here it is.'

He arose, regained the shabby volume, and slowly turned over its pages. Dare was thankful that the Professor's piercing eyes were not now fixed upon himself, but the suspense was dreadful. What form was the wronged man's outpouring of wrath to take? A grisly host of hideous notions passed through his brain.

'This is Amédée Guillemin's classic work, "The World of Comets," translated by Glaisher,' explained the Professor. 'He quotes Maupertuis, writing in 1742, as to the horrors that might ensue, not merely from an actual collision between the earth and a comet, but from the radical change in the earth's orbit that might follow the mutual attraction of the two bodies should they pass in close proximity. But I will only to-night deal with the possible advan-

tages of such a rencontre. Maupertuis tells us that the axis of the earth might be changed, so as to maintain perpetual spring, whilst the eccentricity of our orbit might be so diminished as to cause a more equable distribution of light and heat. But, of course, Maupertuis is entirely out of date. He was more of a romantic speculator than an astronomer, and it is nothing short of amusing to note his amazing suggestion that, in the case of a small comet, the collision would only be fatal to the inhabitants of that part of the world with which it came into contact, and that its debris might prove, to the surprise of everybody, to be formed of gold and silver and diamonds! This is almost as bad as the imaginative science of Jules Verne. I will tell you the truth some day, soon, for I alone know it. It will make your blood run cold when I do. We are but helpless midges dancing in the sunbeam, awaiting that wholesale death that will neither be denied nor delayed.'

'Oh, Philip, Philip, you are on that dreadful path of doomful prediction again. I shall not sleep if I hear more. I am going to my room. Good-night, Mr. Dare,' she added, extending her hand to her guest, who took the proffered palm and pressed it fervently, unnoticed by its owner's husband.

Bowgrave, with a brief apology, went out with her, and Dare was left alone to his own sinister reflections. The Professor would be back directly, and the crisis would confront him.

His respite was briefer even than he fancied, for, after the lapse of but a few seconds, his host returned.

Anything was better than this continued suspense.

‘What did you wish to say?’ he began hurriedly. ‘You made some strange remarks to me about the honour of a wife.’

‘Did I?’ laughed the Professor genially. ‘Oh yes, I had quite forgotten. Here is the paper. I wanted to show it you. It is a report of that scandalous divorce case in high life. The so-called justice of the law courts would never appease me, were I to suffer similar injury, which, thank God, I know I never shall. I am an old man, unfamiliar with the rapier or the duelling pistol; but I should strike with the leaden hand of my enormous wealth. The villain should be hunted through the world with death ever before him, but hovering long over his head, and I should be merciless and implacable to the last degree. But, there, my tried and

trusty friend, I am talking utter foolishness. Come into the library, and let us spend a pleasant hour. I want you to try a wonderful brand of cigar that I am importing direct from Havana. We shall need some creature comforts on that great expedition of ours. I'm delighted you've got hold of that man Delaval. In the tremendous time of crisis that lies before us we shall need the very finest instruments, human and material, that money can procure. What did you say was the amount of the final instalment due to Lashley's people? Twenty thousand pounds? Well, I may as well write the cheque to-night, and you can hand it over to him to-morrow morning when you settle the other matters.'

With a heart lifting with intense relief, yet beating like a hammer in his breast, Dare followed his millionaire principal along the dimly-lighted corridor of the quiet house into the library.

CHAPTER VI

WITH DOROTHY TO DOUGLAS HEAD

A GLORIOUS morning sun tinted sea and air and earth with liquid gold, as Gilbert Delaval came out of his hotel from the breakfast-table at which he had made a rather tardy appearance. He looked round with untroubled and buoyant heart ere he crossed towards the shore, upon which the tide was slowly advancing. The corner of the island in which Douglas lay, snug under the shoulder of the uplands, charmed him from every point of view. A white lighthouse stood high upon the left, and the solid pier below it, around which two or three big paddle-steamers were moored, was crowded with visitors, incoming and outgoing. On the north, a great ridge of velvety hills ran out into the shimmering water—hills clothed with a fresh, dark-green verdure, marked freely with grays and blacks, in strongest contrast with

their towering canopy of snowy clouds marching majestically through the summer blue of heaven.

Wholesome, smiling, saucy British girls, in bewitchingly cool and airy toilets, topped by sunshades of brightest colour, went daintily up and down along the embankment, not, perhaps, entirely unconscious of their attractions, and the one-horse trams jingled merrily along the great sweep of crescent roadway, with the pier at one end, and Derby Castle at the other.

An ancient, grizzled mariner, in a blue guernsey and sea-boots, the latter artfully speckled with the scales of some finny denizens of the deep, fixed the wanderer with a glittering eye as he went slowly towards the pier, and strove to fascinate him with a well-garnished version of the delirious joys of mackerel-fishing in the bay.

A yacht was starting that very minute. Its complement of passengers was fifteen, and already fourteen were on board. Only another was therefore needed to complete the party. But Delaval was not to be beguiled, not even when a second longshoreman approached with a defunct yard-long baby shark in his hand, which had been taken that very morning. The boatman spread the fish full length along the

wall, and declared that, for the modest investment of a shilling, their intended victim would come back to *terra firma* in the possession of at least a dozen of the finest and freshest mackerel in the world. But he resisted the blandishments of the pair, uttered though they were in the low, soft-spoken accents of Manxland. On this particular occasion even the bait of a royal sturgeon itself would have availed the mariners nothing. He had other business in hand.

Delaval passed on to the pier. A big, burly policeman or two, who responded to casual inquiries in distinctly sweet Hibernian tones, hovered peacefully at the landward end of the structure, but, further on, the crowd of goers and comers, laden with all manner of parcels, boxes, and portmanteaux, had things entirely their own way. But nobody worried over a muddle that would have speedily ended in something exceedingly like a riot at any ordinary centre of business traffic.

There was no need for hurry or excitement. Were they not all on holiday? So long as they got eventually where they wanted to be, time was in no sense of the essence of the contract, as the legal mind phrases it. So they wandered contentedly on through the maze of

gates, rails, and roped gangways in quest of the exit, or of the particular flight of sea-washed stone steps where they were supposed to embark. White-jacketed porters—some in the open way and others shut out like excluded peris behind iron barriers—pleaded softly and persuasively for hire, whilst friends who had got separated from each other by some mischance lifted their voices in their endeavours to attract the attention of the lost sheep.

The whole outlook was indescribably amusing, and Delaval, leaning idly against an outer rail with a cigarette in his mouth, enjoyed it to the full.

The doings of the openly-confessed lovers interested him most with—their frank, demonstrative joy at sudden meetings with dearest ones new landed from the boats, and loud and uncontrollable grief at irrevocable partings. In some of the little circles every man seemed to be tenderly kissing and fervently embracing every girl, and the ordinary hum of a crowd was punctuated everywhere with the sweet, sibilant sounds with which pledged affections were being sealed and resealed, varied with little hysterical, spasmodic outbursts of commingled rapture and pain. The spectator turned away townward, to find himself slightly

misquoting Juliet's words: 'Yet I should kill thee with much cherishing. Good-bye, good-bye! Parting is such sweet sorrow that I could say good-bye till it be morrow.'

He looked at his watch as he regained the Promenade. It was a quarter past ten. For three days past now he had met Miss Collingwood every morning here, accompanied by her aunt, to whom (after the fashion of astute masculine deceivers of his class) he paid most assiduous attention. His divinity's chaperon had readily responded to the manly, handsome young fellow's approaches, and had usually contrived to keep him in full conversation, controlling the choice of topics with such matronly skill that, after but a couple of walks, and an evening at the theatre, she had learnt more of him than she could have gathered in a month of ordinary social association.

And all the while Dorothy the demure had walked or sat in silence—silence broken only at rare intervals—wondering at the gaiety and animation of her two companions. She had really quite under-estimated the magnetic virtue of her aunt, she concluded. Mr. Delaval seemed to have become animated by a burning, incomprehensible desire to spend every possible moment in her guardian's society.

But this morning there was to be a change in the programme. As he approached, at the tacitly appointed time, the girl tripped out of the boarding-house unaccompanied. His heart sank momentarily. Then he saw that she was in full walking attire, and evidently ready for an outing.

'Good-morning,' she said, graciously extending her hand. 'You'll be awfully disappointed, for poor, dear auntie is unable to come out for her stroll this morning.'

'Indeed,' he responded with a look of concern. 'I hope she is not ill?'

'Oh, dear no, thank you,' came the smiling response; 'only slightly fatigued. It was past eleven, you know, when we got back from the theatre, and she is not used to late hours. But she is up and about all right, and is now in the drawing-room, where she intends to write some letters that are rather overdue.'

'I'm glad to hear it's no worse,' said Delaval. 'I feared at first that something serious might be the matter.'

'I'm afraid I'll be a very dull and uninteresting companion for you,' began Dorothy, with a spice of coquetry in her voice. 'I haven't a tithe of auntie's fund of conversation. I told her so when I came out, but she just laughed

at me, and said that all I wanted was a little practice.'

He offered the girl his arm, and she took it for the first time. He thrilled with joy at the loose touch of her little, firm, well-gloved right hand as it fell shyly into place on his strong arm.

'Supposing,' he said, 'that we go up to Douglas Head?'

'Dare I?' she asked. 'I have never been there. Auntie told me, when I proposed it once, that it was no fit place for old folk, and that in any case she couldn't possibly climb the hill. I suppose we can get back in time for early dinner—at one?'

'Oh, certainly,' he answered. 'We go across by that little barge-like steam ferry, with the glaring toffee advertisement plastered round its bulwarks.'

'Is it safe?' she asked. 'Oh, and those horrid steps, I don't think I dare walk down them!'

She clutched his arm involuntarily as they gazed down at the waves rippling many feet below against the edge of the pier.

'Take my other arm,' he said, 'and you'll be next the wall and quite safe.'

She clung to him with pretty trustfulness,

and together they descended to the crowded deck of the little vessel. At one point someone in the crowd behind them jostled slightly against Dorothy, and her escort's lithe arm went suddenly around her waist, and he held her there for one precious moment without protest. The seats were all occupied, and they had to remain standing close together. The rarest happiness was his on this delightful summer day. A party of musicians were on board, and when their financial emissary came round with the collecting-box, he deposited within the receptacle the first coin that came to hand.

'Oh, you extravagant man!' whispered Dorothy, her lips almost impinging on his ear in the crush. 'Do you know you've given them half a crown?'

'Yes,' he said mendaciously—'a bit of silver for good luck. By the way, there are real gipsies on the Head. You must have your fortune told.'

What a morning that was! Would it not ever remain as the red-letter day of his life? They landed, and, disdaining the crude cable tramway, marched up the rugged steps cut in the side of the hill. It was a long way up, but the view from the top was well worth the

trouble. Here the proud and stately Dorothy unbent sufficiently to sit down on a grassy shelf to recover her breath. He promptly took a place beside her, and they looked down on the pure blue waters far away below them. The sea was dotted with small boats and white-winged yachts, and from a little jutting pier on the left, strong swimmers could be seen cleaving the air as they dived, and then shooting like fishes through the water, with streaks of silvery foam in their wake. Lotus-eating loving couples, lost to the world, were everywhere in evidence on the heathy sward.

Later, on Delaval's urgent solicitations, Dorothy visited the gipsy encampment, where she crossed with a piece of silver the yellow palm of a venerable crone, who probably owed much of the brilliance of her guinea-gold complexion to a liberal use of walnut juice. The forecast of her future was delivered to the girl behind a curtain drawn across the aperture in the mysterious shadows of one of the little cluster of red tents, but it is to be presumed that the quick black eye of the heavily jewelled dame had taken a swift mental synopsis of Delaval's points as the pair had come down together over the crest of the hill towards her.

When the séance was over, Dorothy came out of the tent with a deep blush upon her erstwhile clear complexion. She looked for a second intently at her companion, and then her eyes fell in sweet confusion. 'Do you think these people really *are* genuine?' she asked, her fair face half-averted as she put the query.

'Of course they are,' he responded gravely, guessing the purport of the gipsy's forecast. 'It is a gift peculiar to the daughters of Egypt. And, if I am not impertinent, I should like to know just a little of what she has told you. But perhaps it's strictly confidential?'

'Go away!' she laughed, turning her back upon him whilst she opened her sunshade. 'I don't believe a word of such foolishness. But, remember, on no account must auntie know of this.'

'I shall keep my mouth like an oyster,' came the reply. 'But, here, supposing I go in and consult the weird witch myself?'

He turned, as though to give effect to the suggestion, but, to his surprise and delight, she caught him by the arm and maintained her hold.

'No, no,' she cried, with a sudden accession of earnestness, 'you mustn't leave me, or I shall run right off and disappear in the crowd.'

Oh, look at that great revolving tower ! What a splendid view there must be from its summit of the sea and the shipping, and of the island, too. You see it's right on the top of this high hill, and so it will probably be a hundred feet at least higher than the Blackpool tower, reckoning from the level of the sea. Let us make the ascent.'

The wily Dorothy's diversion was successful, and together the young people went gaily onward to the new point of attraction.

CHAPTER VII

TRAGEDY IN THE MOONLIGHT

THE dark oaken upright clock in the library of Greymere House—an antique example of chronologic ingenuity designed to exhibit the minute, the hour, the day of the month, and the phases of the moon—marked the imminence of midnight, but its two occupants, Professor Bowgrave and Kestrel Dare, still sat in close conference. They were together on the same side of a great mahogany table, on which were scattered various documents, some opened and others tied with prim red tape. At Dare's elbow were two or three rolls of tracings on a semi-transparent fabric, and near the curtained window a chart was outstretched and pinned upon an easel set up immediately beneath a pendant electric lamp, with a white shade upon it which concentrated the cool, steady light full upon its lines of longitude and

latitude, and its mysterious outlines and details of land and water, dotted in various places with hasty and more or less illegible pencilled autographic notes.

The air of the apartment was heavy with gray vapour, made clearly visible where it slowly turned and twisted in fantastic streaks and curves under the fragile pear-shaped lamps suspended from the painted ceiling by thin, flexible cords, both men having been smoking steadily for about a couple of hours. Two decanters, now well-drawn upon, half a dozen glasses, a soda siphon, and an open box of cigars stood on an occasional table close behind the pair, in the outer angle of the projecting chimney-piece.

‘Then we may look upon it as settled?’ said Dare, interrogatively, rising and placing his forefinger upon a point on the chart indicated by a cross, marked boldly in green crayon. ‘This sheet, of course, is entirely reliable?’

‘There is no doubt whatever about that,’ answered the other. ‘It is the result of the very latest survey of that section of the floor of the ocean, amplified, as I have told you, with those notes by Sir George Bennion, of the Admiralty, specially at my request. He merely fancies I have been seized by a sudden craze

for submarine zoology. Sir George and I were at Oxford together. I would have asked him to come with us, for he is one of the few friends I have ever had in the world. But science knows nothing of friendship. He would have laughed my great theory to scorn. What is worse, he would probably have written a scathing letter to the *Times* on the subject, and followed it up with an exhaustive paper in the *Contemporary*. My retort, for I could not have held silence, would have created a world's panic, and, in the universal terror and confusion that would certainly have ensued, we should have been overwhelmed with intending passengers fleeing from the wrath to come, if, indeed, the *Atalanta* had ever been allowed to leave the shores of England. I should have been denounced as a homicidal maniac, as a public pest and peril, and would probably have been shut up in a madhouse. Therefore, I have held my tongue, and we shall be safe. The dominion of the earth will be ours—absolutely ours—for kings, princes, ministers, and peoples will have vanished as if they had never been. What a mighty prospect! Oh, that I had a son upon whom the undivided heritage of Adam could descend!

As he ceased speaking, the old man sprang

up and stood erect, his shrunken bloodless hands uplifted over his streaming nimbus of silver hair. The small frail figure in black dominated the room, and in his piercing light-blue eyes, normally cold and icy, there burned wild, flaring, supernatural fires.

Kestrel Dare shuddered in spite of himself—in spite of the knowledge that was within him of the tangled web that he had assisted to weave—and for a time he could not supply the response for which it was plain the frenzied Professor waited.

‘Yes,’ he said, at length. ‘Your great day of triumph over the fierce elemental forces of a universe will soon be at hand. According to your calculations, it is the thirteenth of the coming month. We have not long to wait now. But the hour is late. It is past twelve. I had better be getting back to my hotel. It is rather a long road, and a dreary one even under the moonlight.’

The Professor moved towards the bell-pull.

‘I can have the carriage ready for you in five minutes.’

‘No,’ said the other, restraining his host. ‘I won’t disturb your servants. The exercise will do me a world of good.’ He walked to the window and drew aside the curtains. ‘See,’

he added. 'It is almost as light as day. The moon is up.'

'One moment,' urged Bowgrave, as Dare was making for the door. 'According to our calculations we have only a bare four weeks remaining. Everything will be ready for us to sail on the day named?'

'Yes,' responded Dare, 'we shall have a clear fortnight—sufficient to allow for any little unforeseen delay. Indeed, the *Atalanta* could be ready to lift her anchor and put out to sea at twenty-four hours' notice. When I left her last week she was practically finished, and the painters were busy gilding her name on bow and stern. She left the wharf of the builders' yard at Wallsend yesterday, and is now coaling and taking in stores at Northumberland Dock. After she has coaled at the staithes there, I have given instructions to have her berthed off North Shields, a few hundred yards to the west of the horse and cart ferry. We can thus get our party aboard without attracting general attention, as we certainly should at the dock at Howdon.'

'Good,' said Bowgrave. 'Your services to me at this great juncture have been inestimable. They shall not be overlooked when the proper time comes.'

Dare murmured a few words of appropriate response as the pair walked to the front of the house, where they shook hands, and the visitor was left alone to pursue his silent way along the deserted road eastward in the direction of Douglas and the sea.

He had scarcely turned into the main highway, and was crossing to the crown of the road, when a female figure in a hooded summer cloak of flimsy silken material sprang out of the shadow of the tall black hedge, and halted defiantly directly in his path. The sudden apparition threw back the hood of the wrap and bared to the flood of moonlight a pale, thin female face, with the determination of commingled rage and despair imprinted on its every lineament.

Dare started back with a loud oath.

'You fiend!' he cried hoarsely. 'In Satan's name, what brings you here?'

He stood aside, and made a quick movement forward, as though to elude her, but she turned, and the next instant was running by his side.

'In Satan's name!' she laughed aloud mirthlessly, repeating Dare's words as she caught up to him. 'You do well to invoke your master! Need I tell you what brings me here? Have you forgotten that but two short

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years ago you took me for your wife at God's own altar, "for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part" ?

She hissed out the familiar words in bitter mockery.

'No, curse you! I shall never forget it!' he answered, going on rapidly.

In her breathless fury she could not speak for a minute.

'When did you come here?' he asked.

'I crossed in the *Ben-my-Chree*,' she answered, 'and landed about four. I have not found lodgings yet, and have no luggage; but now that I have met my dearest husband, I will go with him. I soon discovered your hotel. The hall-porter obliged me with a clue to your whereabouts.'

'Damnation!' hissed the man. 'I suppose you told him who you were?'

'Oh, no; I felt inclined to do so at first, but I refrained. You can give full explanations when we get back. They will come better from you. I should scarcely pass on my own unsupported word for the wife of Kestrel Dare, the false friend and guest of millionaires!'

'What do you mean?' he asked, struck with a vague, sudden fear.

'You ought to know,' she said. 'Look at my rags beneath this cloak, which I bought with my last five-pound note, using the loose change to bring me to your side.'

Now that she was slightly calmer her speech was becoming thick and confused.

'Bah!' he sneered. 'You have been drinking again. Cannot you leave that cursed brandy alone?'

'Drinking?' she shrieked. 'I might have done worse, for all you cared. I might have descended to the street.'

'Be warned,' he said quietly. 'You might go too far. Don't arouse the spirit of murder.'

'Murder!' she echoed. 'I have no fear of that. You are not man enough to risk your precious neck.'

'Say no more,' he said. 'Listen to me. You will back to your cottage at Hammersmith this very morning. The *Ben-my-Chree* sails at nine-thirty. I will find a way to pass a letter into your hands on the pier containing fifty pounds in notes.'

'How generous you are!' she answered. 'How good and kind and true! Fifty pounds?'

'Yes; that or nothing. I could easily find a way to rid myself of you by the law, but I don't want the exposure.'

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'I don't suppose you do. You might scarcely have it entirely your own way.'

'Fifty pounds,' he went on, unheeding her last remark, 'and a Government annuity of a hundred pounds, with one strict condition—that I suffer no further molestation.'

'And if I decline?'

'That is your own affair. I have gone to the furthestmost limit. If not that, nothing. You have made me so desperate that I don't care a straw for publicity. No reasonable being would put the slightest credence in your statements.'

'Ah,' she said, coming close up to him, and whispering the words into his ear. 'And what will Professor Bowgrave say when I tell him what I know—what I saw with my own eyes but two hours ago?'

'Wretch! You have been spying upon me! I will kill you!'

He gripped his wife fiercely by the arm and dragged her half across the deserted road. Then he flung her away from him, and she staggered and almost fell. But she was back upon him in a second, with hands clenched as if intent on burying her nails in his throat. She paused, however, and Dare also stood still.

There was a low hedge by their side on the left—a hedge composed of fuchsias growing

freely in the open, as they do in many parts of Manxland. He noted that the clustering waxen petals of the plants, wet with dew, glistened in the moonlight. His eyes wandered over the hedge, and he suddenly realized that they were standing within less than a dozen yards of the brink of a disused stone quarry. Far below he could see a great pool of dark water in which the moon shone up to him as from a mirror. The woman was standing with her back to the yawning, inviting gulf.

He was constrained to sudden, irrevocable action ; but with an effort he controlled himself.

‘I will make it a hundred pounds,’ he said, ‘and double the yearly allowance.’

‘No,’ she replied in grim, dogged tones. ‘I hold the trump card for once, and I am going to play the game. I have done with secrecy for ever. I either go back with you to your hotel as your acknowledged wife, or I turn straight again to Greymere House, arouse its inmates, reveal myself, and tell its master of the tender passage which I witnessed between yourself and the beautiful Mrs. Bowgrave. Did you not hear my alarm at the window ? In my passion I nearly burst through the glass upon you. Quick !’ she concluded. ‘What is your choice ?’

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'Will nothing else satisfy you?' he urged, in low, ominous tones.

'Nothing. My rightful place or bitterest revenge! The old dotard is your banker, isn't he?'

She jeered maliciously in his face as she spoke.

Ere the speaker knew it he was upon her, ruthless, blind with suppressed fury, irresistible. He lifted her slight figure high in the air with both his hands, burst through the thin hedge with his writhing, living burden, and crossed the uneven pasture-land in half a dozen giant strides. On the very lip of the fearsome pit he stumbled and fell. The woman slipped partly from his grip, and remained suspended face downward over the chasm. In a lightning flash of thought she saw the death that was before her on the rugged rocks below, and whipped round like a wild cat, to sink her nails deep into his right wrist.

'Mercy, Kess, mercy!' she wailed. 'Forgive me! I will—I will——'

The sentence ended in an awful, long-sustained shriek that rang for an hour afterwards in his ears. He had beaten her thrice savagely in the face with his clenched left hand. She had disappeared, and there came a rush of cool

air in his fevered face, and he knew that the deed was done.

He sank into the wet spongy turf, and lay prone and almost unconscious for some time. Then he dragged himself to his feet, and staggered along by the edge of the precipice until he reached a point where descent into the depths was practicable. A more hideous task than murder in hot blood lay before him, but the summons to it was all compelling. So, bruised and bleeding, he groped his way to perform his last awful ministrations in the moonlight, now gone green and ghastly.

CHAPTER VIII

ON THE SUMMIT OF SNAEFELL

IN the early afternoon of the third day following their visit to Douglas Head, Gilbert Delaval and Dorothy Collingwood contrived to elude the vigilance, now somewhat relaxed, of the fair maid's chaperon, and to arrange for a trip by themselves to the summit of Snaefell.

It was a warm, bright, entirely lovely summer day, and Dorothy came out to meet her admirer in a simple dress of low-toned linen, topped by a fluffy Tam-o'-Shanter that matched her sunshade and set off her roses and golden hair to perfection. He was, perhaps, the proudest and happiest man in all that island of pleasure as he escorted her northward to their starting-place. In his own mind he was absolutely certain on the point.

He glanced again and again into her dear face as they went along. He was recounting

to her the pleasures that lay before them, and at the same time wondering inwardly how, in what words, and under what circumstances he would find himself putting to her the fateful question that was now ever trembling on his lips. In one moment he had no doubt whatever as to what would be her answer, and in the next he would silently dub himself a presumptuous fool for daring to imagine that the gracious words and pleasant companionship she had generously deigned to bestow on him during these few brief holiday days by the sea entitled him to confidently hope that she would ever yield entirely up to his unworthy keeping the unsullied treasure of her maiden love.

Delaval's meditations were interrupted by the bustle and mild excitement consequent on the purchase of tickets in the festive crowd around the open-air booking-office, and then there was the scramble for seats. They had to wait until two or three cars had gone outward, and even then had to contentedly submit themselves to a process of packing akin to that employed by the canners of the savoury sardine. But none of the passengers—exclusively young folk in assorted pairs—troubled themselves about the unavoidable, whilst several of the more daring of the swains showed themselves capable of

self-sacrifice for the common good, and did their best to minimise the pressure by boldly taking their blushing and reluctant partners upon their knees, to a variously-keyed chorus of giggles and faint, ineffectual protests.

The two friends broke the journey at Groudle, where they explored the recesses of the little romantic glen, with its bewildering windings and miniature canyon, and afterwards at Laxey, where the 'big wheel' that keeps an adjacent lead mine dry, and which has attained a reputation as one of the sights of the island on a woefully slender basis of intrinsic merit, is approached by a path leading past a line of cottages, the tenants of which are all bent on luring in the passing tourist with the unending refrain, in piteous accents, 'Tea and bread-and-butter, sixpence—egg, sevenpence.' Gilbert and Dorothy ran the gauntlet shamefaced, and breathed freely when they were out of danger.

'I never experienced anything like that before,' said the girl.

'Rather trying, isn't it?' he responded. 'But it's quite mild to some of the places where I have been, such as, say, the ham-and-egg terrace at New Brighton, where, at one time at any rate, you had the choice between going voluntarily into one of the innumerable restaurants

for refreshments and being forcibly carried in.'

The ascent of Snaefell soon began in earnest. The ride was a charming one, skirting the coast for a greater part of the way, the route affording every now and then wonderful glimpses of restful green hills and ever-changing water, sparkling in the intense sunlight. The car the pair had now entered was of the toast-rack type, with open sides and a top cover to guard travellers against the sudden torrential showers incident to the hilly uplands.

It was quite a new experience to Dorothy to be whisked along at fifteen or twenty miles along the edges of quite respectable precipices in the absence of the closed and fastened door of the orthodox railway carriage.

'Oh, look!' she cried, with a little shiver. 'Look down there! It terrifies me! I feel every moment as if I were going to be flung out on to those stony tracks, or over the cliffs into the sea.'

Delaval laughed.

'That can easily be avoided,' he said, slipping his strong arm around her dainty girdle. 'You are quite safe now, Miss Collingwood.'

She looked up and smiled as she nestled in his arm.

‘What would auntie say if she could see us now?’ she asked, glancing shyly into his bronzed face.

‘Under the circumstances, nothing,’ he made easy answer.

So she continued to sit in his embrace mute and confident. What possible harm could come to her with such a man by her side?

Soon the line began to skirt Snaefell, and steal in spiral fashion towards the top of the mountain, giving even the well-protected Dorothy occasion for further thrills as various precipitous points were in process of negotiation. But at last all seeming dangers were safely passed, the train came to a standstill, and the voyagers found themselves practically at the summit of the great elevation.

They alighted, and, parting from the little crowd of their fellow-passengers, who made prompt tracks for the hotel, struck off over the yielding, wiry grass which clothes the crown of the great beacon of Manxland. Dorothy, exhilarated by the action of the pure and rarefied air upon her exuberant youth, skimmed off like a bird over the turf, bent on being first at the very topmost point, and Delaval followed with a furious show of pedestrian energy, but discreetly contenting himself with the rôle of pursuer.

Presently, her object accomplished, she halted and looked eagerly around, to the north, the south, the east, and the west, with her shapely hand upraised to shade her eyes from the brilliant sunshine. What a perfect picture she made, as she stood boldly outlined against the blue sky, her skirts fluttering in the breeze, and her closed sunshade pointing to the landscape that lay stretched away below! In Delaval's adoring eyes, she was a nymph of the mountain, composed of air and sky and the sweetness of surrounding nature, encased in the twentieth-century habiliments of a holiday-making maid—a big hat, and a dress that clung to her exquisite figure like chiselled drapery to the contours of a classic statue, finished off with firm, trim ankles and little, high-instepped feet encased in boots of bronze that fitted like gloves.

The enraptured man went close up to her side, and together they surveyed in prolonged silence the enchanting prospect that surrounded them. The sun was beginning to sink into the west, tinting sky and water with rainbow hues. Below them lay unfolded a panorama of velvety slopes, extending for miles in all directions, and ranging in colour from green to yellow, and brown and purple and black. Further away

to the west they could just discern a faint, silvery, fairyland glimpse of land and water, set in a frame of clouds low on the horizon. It looked like a mirage.

'Can that possibly be Ireland?' she asked, in a voice of awe. 'Yes, it is indeed!' She wheeled round and went on: 'And yonder is Scotland, and England, and that will be dear old Wales, where I spent so many happy hours of childhood!' Her deep-blue eyes danced with delight as she spoke. 'There are five kingdoms lying visible before us,' she said—'Man, England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales. The Manxmen, you know, claim that they can see a sixth from this great elevation—the Kingdom of God.'

'And I see a seventh, darling,' added Delaval—'the Kingdom of Truest Love!'

'Where?' the girl asked eagerly, unheeding apparently the strange, new, tender word.

'In your own sweet eyes, Dorothy dearest,' the bold man made reply.

At last he had screwed his courage to the sticking point.

'Oh!' she gasped, red as flame now, for he had taken her in his arms, and she knew that protest would be unavailing. 'It is only a reflection, not a reality,' she whispered, with

indifferently assumed gaiety. 'Let me go, please.'

'Yes,' he said, scarce knowing what he did, 'when you have given me my answer. Oh, Dorothy, Dorothy, I had so much to say; but I cannot now say another word, excepting that I love you.'

He kissed her as he spoke, and she did not shrink away, but kissed him in return. And thus, with neither a question asked nor answered, the twain had plighted their troth.

'God bless you, my own, precious little darling!' he murmured, saluting her uplifted lips a second time. 'You are mine—mine, are you not, forever? I knew it from the first moment I set eyes on your sweet, winsome face. But I should just like you to take my question as asked, and answer "Yes."'

'No,' she whispered. 'It isn't necessary, Gilbert; but—but I think you had better kiss me a third time for luck. The gipsy queen said you would.'

They sat down together in a cosy, westward-facing nook, where they were sheltered from the wind, and cooed on for a full hour in the first delirium of their new-found joy. Then, out of the solicitude of his increased responsibility, it occurred to Gilbert that the mountain

air was becoming raw and chill. Sudden anxiety for his fair young partner overcame him, and he hurried her away to the shelter of the little primitive hotel near to the solitary railway-station.

The place was deserted, and there was only one waiter on the premises, who informed his tardy visitors that their fellow-passengers, who had departed by a previous train, had practically eaten up supplies. However, he could give them something that might serve until they had got back to civilization. He placed them in a little room, where he left them in peace, and Dorothy proudly took her position at the head of the table with the air of a matron. And in both their mouths the tea tasted like nectar, and the simple bread and butter like ambrosia, that fabled food of the gods which confers immortality on all who partake of it.

CHAPTER IX

SOME REFLECTIONS, AND A DREAM

It was close upon noontide when Kestrel Dare languidly arose from his unquiet couch, and gave a nervous glance into the mirror on the dressing-table by the window. What he saw in the glass did not reassure him. His eyes were leaden and sunken, and tinged in the whites with red, and there were deep crowsfeet in their puffy outer corners. He had aged a score of years in that single night of dreadful unanticipated tragedy.

He had reached his hotel between one and two in the morning, and had turned straight into the smoke-room, where he discovered a couple of late-sitting guests, who willingly accepted his invitation to join him in a drink. Then he suddenly became horribly aware of the disordered state of his attire. His patent-leather boots were heavy with mud, and the

cuffs of his shirt were stained and bedraggled. He stole off to the lavatory on the ground floor and hastily adjusted matters, washing himself, and turning up his cuffs so that they were entirely concealed by the sleeves of his coat. Then he joined his two friends in a bout of hard drinking that lasted until gray, ghostly dawn had fairly broken, when they staggered off to their respective apartments and left him alone, the hapless, helpless prey of unholy thoughts and torturing fears.

He had entered his room, undressed unsteadily, and drawn down the blinds and closed the heavy curtains to entirely shut out the broadening daylight. Then he had crept into bed and turned off the electric light by means of the switch placed conveniently on the wall within easy hand's reach. The profound darkness had given him relief and, for the moment, a sense of security, as though he were in a hiding place which no foe could discover or enter. It did more. It shut out of sight a pale, phantom face, with horror-haunted eyes, that lifted itself ever and anon above the rail at the foot of his couch. His slumbers had been accompanied by a succession of appalling nightmares. The strain of the early hours of that awful morning had so wearied him that physical

sleep was easily wooed. But whilst his body lay in repose, his mind burnt at white heat in a perfect hell of things unspeakable.

And now noonday was here, and it was his to face the world. He dressed himself and turned to the door to descend. Then he retraced his steps and looked again into the glass. Surely each person he met would read his black secret in that drawn face and those haggard eyes? The crowded Promenade below him blazed in the sunshine. He opened the window wide, for the air of the apartment had become insupportable to his awakened senses, and a cheery hum of voices and occasional ripples of light, heedless laughter floated up to him.

He nerved himself at last to the trial of openly facing his fellow-creatures. What had he to fear, what indeed to regret, if the hasty grave did not give up its dead? And that was in no way likely. So, with an air of unconcern, he leisurely descended the stairs and crossed the hall at the front of the hotel. As he did so, he caught sight of a police constable standing on the flags, just without the portico. The officer of justice—a big, muscular, fleshy, red-faced man, with nothing of the sleuth-hound of popular romance in his composition—seemed to eye him curiously. But perhaps the thought

was a mere figment of self-accusing fancy, for Dare walked straight out into the street unmolested, and was swallowed up in the crowd that swept slowly southward. But swift steps hurried after him, and a hand touched him on the shoulder. He halted, and turned about with gray face and palsied jaw. His pursuer was the hotel porter.

'Beg pardon, sir,' began the man, 'but I did not see you until you had got outside. A lady called for you about nine o'clock last night.'

'Indeed,' responded Dare, setting his teeth and striving to speak indifferently. 'Did she give her name?'

'No, sir. I asked her to, but she said it didn't matter, and that she would see you herself. I told her that I thought you were up at Professor Bowgrave's place; and she wanted to know where it was, and I directed her.'

'Oh,' said the other. 'She never came near Greymere House that I know of.'

'I scarcely expected she would, sir. But she was really very anxious to see you, and asked me to say that she would call here about noon to-day. If she does, have you any message, sir?'

'Oh, yes. Say I shall be in to lunch at one,

and am remaining in the hotel all the afternoon. You would know her again, of course ?

‘ I could tell her in a thousand, sir—brown hair and eyes, and pale face, with a long silk wrapper, such as ladies use when in evening dress. She hadn’t a glove on her left hand, and, as she stood under the electric light, I saw that the little finger was missing at the second joint. Oh yes, sir, I could swear to her anywhere—dead or alive.’

Dare’s heart sank within him at the porter’s inept remark ; but he maintained his outward calm, and, thanking the man, went on his way. He turned into a public-house bar near the pier, drank off a brandy and soda without setting down the glass, and ordered another. Then a new terror assailed him. A lad peered in at the open door with a bundle of papers in his hand and a contents bill before him, bearing the bold legend, ‘ Shocking discovery in Douglas.’ He took a paper from the boy, called for a third drink, and, turning into a quiet corner of the bar, sat down and deliberately unfolded the sheet. The same glaring announcement faced him on the principal page ; but the leaded matter below the headline was no concern of his, and he breathed freely once more.

He had often contemplated such an act, in

the coldest of cold blood, as a kind of remote, yet possible contingency, working it out to his uttermost satisfaction in every detail of a vivid fancy ; but the actual deed itself had been performed in so different a fashion from that casually planned out by him for the removal of his incubus, and the dread of what might follow detection now that it was done exceeded his most sinister imaginings. Murderers may commonly have dulled and hardened consciences, but they are acutely sensitive to the faintest prospect of retribution, and he knew that the evidence of the porter alone would go far towards putting a rope around his neck.

He roused himself at last, went back to the hotel, and sat down to lunch. The splendid weather had drawn away the bulk of his fellow guests into one or other of the many pleasant little excursions about the island by road and rail and sea. Only half a dozen other persons were present at table, and they were engrossed in each other's company. So his uncanny reflections were undisturbed. He made merely the faintest pretence of eating, but drank copiously of champagne, and, as the meal progressed, his leaden spirits grew somewhat lighter. But he was dull, heavy, and fatigued, and entirely disinclined for society, and when

the repast was over he ascended to his own apartments, lowered the blinds of the sitting-room, and threw himself upon a couch, in a determined effort to gain the rest and oblivion he needed so much. His eyes closed, and soon he slumbered fitfully.

Peace, however, was still mercilessly denied him. In his fevered, unrefreshing sleep, he was re-enacting his crime of the early hours of darkness. Bruised and scratched by thorns and jagged stones, he was stumbling fearfully forward in the uncertain light of the moon, over all manner of obstacles, into the black depths of the pit. His limbs felt paralysed, and he could only drag them slowly and painfully along by the mightiest of efforts. But at last he contrived to gain the slimy, uneven bottom of the quarry, to then climb up on to a shelf of level rock that projected above the motionless inky pool in which he hoped to hide his guilt forever.

'God in heaven!' he gasped. He stood transfixed at the horror before him. Did he see aright? His victim rose up before him in her shimmering cloak, with an outstretched hand, welcoming him to the sombre nook of death! Hastily he passed his hands across his clammy brow, and dug his icy palms into his

burning eyes. Then he looked again, and another consciousness entered into and took possession of his tenement of craven clay, for, entirely against his will, he ran desperately forward until his fingers were pressing into the soft fabric of her dress. Then he saw that she was dead, that a flood of blackness veiled her face, and that in her sheer headlong descent she had been smashed against an outstanding cleft tongue of rock that held her suspended in a limp, grotesque, yet upright posture.

He raised himself to his full height and lifted the body down, took off its enshrouding cloak, and tore the latter into broad strips, which he knotted together and tied tightly around the slender waist, after fixing a great stone in the folds. This done, he launched the body over the shelving rock and watched it disappear into the pool with a gentle splash faintly re-echoed by the walls of the quarry. All was over. The water rippled, and a few bubbles appeared on its surface for a moment. But these passed away, and the image of the silver moon, that had erstwhile danced before him in its disturbed mirror, looked up once more from the depths, fixed and serene. He stepped back with a shudder, and his foot

slipped slightly on a little gout of moisture that he instantly divined to be blood, and then he raced away upward on the wings of the wind, with a legion of laughing devils at his heels.

But at this point the vision was blotted out. The dreamer awoke with a great start. He had been aroused by a gentle, persistent knocking at the door of his chamber.

He got up and glanced apprehensively into the corridor. But his visitor brought no new alarms. She was merely a white-aproned maid, with a small, square, white envelope in her hand, which she passed over to him with the words: 'I was asked to let you have this at once.'

He closed the door again, and went over to the window of his sitting-room. The letter was superscribed in small and delicate feminine characters, evidently a lady's writing. It was a communication from Felicity Bowgrave, making the first assignation of unlawful love, and requesting him to meet her that night at nine on the swing bridge crossing the dock channel to Douglas Head.

CHAPTER X

THE ASSIGNATION

THE hour of meeting was at hand, and darkness had fallen. Kestrel Dare, attired in a gray lounge suit and cap of similar material, which gave him an aspect identical with that of hundreds of the everyday visitors who strolled under the gaslight through the crowded main thoroughfares of Douglas, quitted his hotel, and, leaving the bustle and the gaiety of the Promenade, turned up a side street to the right in the direction of the Dock.

Various couples, linked amorously together, were straying on behind and in front of him along the route he was taking, and he kept a keen eye in every direction, as it was quite possible he might encounter his fair correspondent at any of the numerous corners in the somewhat ill-lighted locality. Of course, the letter came from Felicity. Of that there

could be no manner of doubt. Yet he could not know this for an actual fact, seeing that the brief missive bore neither prefix nor signature, and that Mrs. Bowgrave's calligraphy was wholly unknown to him.

A public clock was striking nine as he came up to the turnstile at the town end of the bridge, but she whom he sought was not in sight. So he halted, and then retraced his steps across the roadway, lighting a cigar as he went. The appointment had followed swift upon the episode in the drawing-room in Greymere House, and, for reasons sufficient of his own, he would have preferred the postponement of the tryst; but he could only take things as they were.

Five minutes went by, then ten, as he waited in dreary suspense, and at last the clock he had previously heard chimed out upon the night air the first quarter of the hour. Might it not be that he had been befooled, that he was the victim of some as yet inconceivable plot, or, indeed, that Nemesis herself was dogging his heels in the guise of Venus? The atmosphere was thick with shapeless shades and forms that had their own significance for him; but suddenly they were brushed aside, and light took the place of darkness, for a rare, yet now

not unfamiliar, perfume had struck upon his senses.

He turned about. The woman for whom he waited had come upon him unperceived, and her sleeve brushed softly against his arm. He looked into her radiant face and forthwith closed and barred the gates of hateful memory. To-morrow might come, bringing he knew not what, but the paradise of the present was his, and it sufficed.

They entered the turnstile, and he noticed, as they passed under the lights, that she had discarded the luxuriant flamboyance of attire which became her regal beauty so well for a plain, dark, walking costume and a simple sailor hat with a soft, thick, brown veil around the edge of the straw. A minute later they were swallowed up in the gloom, and were making their way slowly up the narrow roadway leading seaward to the rugged cliffs on the right. She clung silently to his arm, not venturing on speech.

‘My angel!’ he whispered. ‘How delighted I am at your coming. I thought for a while that the cup of new-found joy had been dashed from my lips.’

She looked up into his face, but he could not see her in the prevailing darkness, and then he

kissed her upturned lips. He could feel her trembling slightly.

'You are not afraid of me?' he asked.

'No,' she breathed softly, 'I am not afraid of you, but I am afraid of myself, and of the consequences of this rash adventure. If the Professor were to come upon us now?'

'That is not at all likely,' he answered. 'He is safe closeted at chess with the General for full two hours to come. You are supposed to be at the theatre?'

'Yes,' she replied—'at the Gaiety. There is a brilliant musical comedy there that I really never intended to miss,' she added archly, recovering something of her normal brilliance.

'How good of you!' he whispered fervently, kissing her again, and placing his arm around her waist and holding her so tightly that he almost fancied he could hear the beating of her heart.

'You would think it bold of me,' she ventured, 'to send you such a note?'

'Bold, dearest! How could that be? Not bold, merely gracious and kind to your unworthy but devoted slave. I can't help it. I love you with the love of madness. I would do anything, dare anything, for you! I only need your orders.'

He seized her almost fiercely, and devoured her with hot kisses.

'Let me explain how it comes that I am here,' went on the woman, shrinking before her companion's outburst of passion. 'I could not rest without seeing you to-day. I wanted to know, to see for myself, that you were safe and well.'

'Safe?' he echoed, looking round as though at the touch of invisible fingers. 'Oh yes, I was never safer in my life—or happier—than I am at this moment.'

'Do you know, Mr. Dare'—she was beginning again, but he broke in abruptly upon her utterance.

'“Kestrel,” not “Mr. Dare,”' he protested. 'And may I say——'

'No,' she interrupted, in her turn, 'not “Felicity,” but “Folly.” It was my pet name when I was a child, and has never been used since my father died. It suits me well, doesn't it, Kestrel?'

He laughed his dissent, and kissed her once more.

'Folly be it,' he said, 'sweetest Folly; but it scarcely fits your majesty, my queen.'

'But I want to tell you,' she began again impatiently. 'I was at my bedroom window

when you left, watching for your departure. It was after midnight when I heard the hall door close. I was reading a book, but I switched off the light and set my face close to the pane. It was bright moonlight, and I could see you clearly until you had left the grounds and gained the public road. Then—how full of creepy fancies I must have been!—a ghostly female figure rose up out of the earth before you and flitted along by your side as you went down the hill until you were entirely swallowed in the misty light. I knew it couldn't be anything but the sheerest delusion, yet I could not get the thing out of my mind, and dreamt of it after I had fallen asleep.'

'How silly of you!' he managed to respond in a dry whisper. 'A mere optical illusion, of course, bred of morbid night thoughts, assisted by the phantasies of moonlight.'

She had brought her face close to his, and he kissed her soft cheek with lips suddenly gone harsh and parched; but she did not notice the change, and turned the talk to trivialities.

They had reached the foot of the cliff by this time, and strayed off upward along an uneven path until they were lost in the trackless night among the furze and long, coarse grass, to find

at last a resting-place, and sit down in a secluded hollow on the hillside, with faint snatches of music drifting now and again to their ears on the soft southern breeze from the open windows of the concert-hall attached to the hotel on the top of the great bluff. They could not now even see one another's face, but in the distance the myriad lights of the pier and the shipping blazed before them in gold and other hues against a sea and sky of purple, whilst the great sweep of tall houses and palaces of pleasure on the Front extended before them on the left like a giant scimitar of yellow flame.

CHAPTER XI

THE PARTING OF TRUE LOVERS

THE tide was lapping gently in the summer night air against the seawall on the Front, for it was nearly at the flood. A little flotilla of yachts was moored safe under the shadow of the pier, and the twinkling lights of stray shipping could be dimly discerned far out on the horizon, where sky and sea seemed in the misty moonlight to melt into each other.

Delaval and Dorothy sat together on one of the innumerable seaward-facing benches, and gazed idly out over the quiet water, the girl's fair head nestled in the man's shoulder. They were alone, intensely alone, though every seat along the great esplanade appeared to have its occupant, and gay, chattering crowds went continually up and down before and behind them. Lovers can somehow find sweet, unbroken solitude even in the busiest thoroughfares.

‘Oh, that to-morrow would never come!’ he whispered; ‘for to-night brings our dream to an abrupt, if temporary, ending. As I have just told you, my orders have come to me to-night, and they are imperative. I leave the island by the first boat in the morning. I have been occupied for an hour past in preparing for departure.’

He furtively tightened his grip on her little firm, bare hand as he spoke, and she returned the pressure under cover of the indulgent darkness.

‘I can scarcely realize it, Gilbert,’ she murmured, with what sounded like a suppressed sob. ‘Must you really go, dearest? What will become of me in your absence? When you turn your back all the light will have gone out of my life till I see your dear face again!’

‘Darling!’ he sighed. ‘And what of myself? Don’t you think that I shall suffer, too?’

He could feel her warm, moist, fragrant breath stealing upward past his cheek, and he turned imperceptibly and held his lips against her soft face.

‘I suppose you will,’ she answered fretfully, almost petulantly. ‘But you are a man. You will have the affairs of life, of your profession, to occupy you, whilst I—I shall have little or

nothing to do but mourn the absent and vainly recall the memory of happy days that are gone.'

'Nonsense, darling — gone but to return. At the very uttermost I shall only be away six months; and, indeed, if all goes well, we shall eat our Christmas dinner together. Besides, the opportunity of my life is open to me. I shall come back with quite a bursting purse, and won't you and I spend it royally? We shall be married in the spring.'

'You appear to have it all cut and dried?' she said, with coy pretence of protest.

'Yes,' he said in a masterful whisper. 'Of course, it is the man's part to see to these things. You don't know what a long way I can look ahead. Do you know Tynemouth?'

'I have been there once, but it was several years ago.'

'I know of such a sweet little place there about a mile inland from Cullercoats, with big, glorious gardens all around it. It belongs to an uncle of mine, and it is an understood thing in the family that I have merely to ask for it when—when I am lucky enough to find a mistress for it.'

'Selfish man!' she cried, patting his face, and making believe to push him away from

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her and to escape from the close embrace in which he had unconsciously taken her. 'And if I consent——'

'If you consent?' he echoed. 'You little rogue! Consent, do you say? Why, you have consented!'

'And if I consent,' the girl began again, in a saucy strain that was intended to disguise her emotion, 'if I consent, you will love me, and then leave me there to mope alone in misery, as that most forlorn of all forlorn things on earth, a sailor's wife, with a husband in a foreign port!'

'And that's exactly where you are entirely out of it, Dolly darling!' he retorted. 'After we are married, I'm going to be so frightfully jealous that I won't ever let you out of my sight again!'

She pulled herself partially free from his encircling arms, and, pressing her warm palms over his mouth, pushed him slightly away.

'That would be horrid!' she laughed—
'worse than the other!'

He drew her to him again and kissed her, oblivious to his surroundings, though, as a matter of fact, not a soul in the great assembly was paying the slightest attention to their little interludes.

'You contrary puss!' he went on. You know I didn't mean that. But after we are married, so far as my profession is concerned, I am going to sea no more. I have the offer next year about April of an appointment at Lashley's, with a salary attached that ought to amply provide for love in a cottage, with a little luxury thrown in, unless Mrs. Gilbert Delaval should suddenly develop a taste for diamonds and Paris frocks.'

'And who is she, pray—who is Mrs. Gilbert Delaval?' interrupted Dorothy.

'You'll know her very well later on,' he continued mysteriously; 'a dear, sweet, wilful, tease of a girl, with a dimple in her left cheek, that I am going to kiss here, now, at once, before the whole of Douglas!'

The speaker promptly carried out his alarming threat, and then the happy pair arose, linked arms, and went off along the Promenade, halting in the deep shadow of the pavilion where the Pierrots performed to take the last fond farewell. Then they crossed the road together, and Dorothy went reluctantly up the steps of her boarding-house with tears in her eyes, and her little head full of the foolish fears of fond, solicitous love. She turned as she reached the top and waved her hand towards him. He

responded to the salute, and then she passed away into the interior and vanished entirely from his longing, lingering gaze.

The first chapter of Delaval's romance was ended, and the book was shut for the time—it might even be irrevocably, he told himself, for who can divine the dim, uncertain courses of the future?

Reaching the Villiers, he turned into the big smoke-room on the right, and went straight up to the semi-circular bar at the further end.

Lashley, red-faced and genial, rose from a chair as he came up.

'Glad to meet ye, my lad. Must congratulate you on your appointment,' began the elder man as they seated themselves. 'You got my note, of course? Sorry to hurry you off so sudden; but business is business.'

'Don't mention it, Mr. Lashley,' said Delaval. 'I've been expecting the call for a week, and I'm ready.'

'Hope I haven't interrupted any little love affair,' proceeded Lashley, winking an expressive eye. 'You've been here quite a time now, and of course you've fallen in love half a dozen times. It's a way they have in the island. No young fellow of your looks that was worth his salt could help it.'

Delaval blushed slightly, and turned the subject.

'When did you come back from Tyneside?' he asked.

'Only this afternoon. I had to arrange certain little details about the sailing of the *Atalanta*. She goes out from North Shields on the twenty-eighth of this month at the very latest. She ships her crew next week under Captain Humphreys. There's a full engine-room staff without you, as you're perhaps aware? You're nominally chief, but there'll be no regular duty for you. Your services will only be required on special occasions, the nature of which will be explained to you after you have sailed.'

'There seems to be a lot of mystery about the job,' suggested Delaval.

'Well, there is,' acquiesced the shipbuilder. 'But I think it's a kind of much ado about nothing. You're sailing in a splendid ship, at any rate. Money has not been spared. Indeed, to my mind, it has been spouted over her in all directions, from bow to stern, like Whittle Dean out of a hose-pipe. She's not a big boat, has a displacement of a bit more than two thousand tons, but is fitted internally like a palace. The Czar of Russia or the Kaiser hasn't better sea-

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going quarters on his finest yacht. Indeed, I doubt whether there is anything floating that could equal the *Atalanta* in this respect.'

'Is she of great speed?'

'No, she has nothing exceptional about her there. She did her eighteen knots without the slightest forcing on her trial over the measured mile a fortnight ago, but she hasn't been built as a flyer. After luxury, stability is her chief feature. One might almost imagine that she had been laid out on lines suited to Polar exploration, to smash her way through frozen seas. An iceberg couldn't crush her. Engines? Oh, there's nothing remarkable about them. They're turbines—by Parsons, of course; but that was simply to save room.'

'And where in the name of goodness is the *Atalanta* bound?' asked Delaval. 'And what is the purpose of her voyage?'

'Ah, there you have me, lad. She's a grand yacht, and you'll have a fine time on board of her, I'll be bound—mostly as cabin passenger, too, I fancy. She's supposed to be going to New York, but she will probably never see the coastline of the States anywhere. In some respects she's as much a mystery to me as to yourself. She's the property and toy of a millionaire whose name I haven't leave to

mention, though you'll know it soon enough. I'm told he's going out to take certain astronomical observations, and I'm convinced that he's deeply interested in submarine zoology. But there, I'll be saying something that I oughtn't directly. You've a good ship under your feet, and she'll do all that is asked of her, and all that she has been designed for. Remember that, should it ever strike you that you're in an ugly hole, and go forward with your duty like a man. Your immediate employer and director of the enterprise is Kestrel Dare, though, of course, I may tell you without breach of confidence that he's the acting agent, not the principal. You're in luck's way, you young dog. You'll have some prime company on board, too, if all that I hear be true. I only wish I was outward bound with you. I'd go like a bird if I only had the chance and could spare the time. But, whatever happens, pin your faith to the *Atalanta* !'

CHAPTER XII

UNCONSCIOUS NEIGHBOURS IN THE NIGHT

A CLOCK in the gay town below, picked out far away below in outlines of fire, struck ten, in doomful deliberate notes, which rang up through the intense darkness that engulfed the heathy hollow in which the lovers sat ensconced.

The woman shivered slightly.

'We shall have to be returning soon, Kestrel,' she said. 'It grows late. My carriage is ordered for the Gaiety at a quarter to eleven. How long will it take us to get there? I suppose we shall have to go a roundabout road?'

'Scarcely half an hour,' he answered. 'Our route lies through the quiet side streets almost to the door of the theatre. But you needn't be afraid. Were it desirable we could go boldly along the Promenade. Nobody could recognise my princess in her present disguise.'

'Is that equivalent to saying that fine feathers make fine birds? Fie on you!' she laughed.

'You know it isn't,' he responded quickly. 'But you really *are* transformed, Folly darling.'

'I suppose I am like some chit of a tripper—maybe a little school-mistress on her summer holidays—in this attire. I bought it as a present for one of my maids, but I shall keep it now in remembrance of this happy night of romance, Kestrel dearest,' she said, clinging to him. 'But we really must be going. It has gone quite chilly, and the grass is thick with dew. Feel how wet my hand is. It might have been plunged into water.'

'Hush!' he whispered. 'Someone comes this way.'

Two male figures loomed darkly through the gloom. They had come unnoticed over the soft grass, and were now barely three yards away from Dare and his companion, clearly visible against the purple sky. The newcomers, seen but unseeing, halted immediately in front of the silent watchers. Then one of the unknown sat down on a boulder, and took from the other a curious cylindrical object, which he drew out to thrice its length and pointed to the sky. The thing was apparently a

telescope. For some minutes its user surveyed the heavens without a word, and the man and woman behind him waited in a fever of expectancy.

Would the intruders never go? Were they to be delayed to a point behind which there would be danger? But neither spoke. They were almost within arm's reach of the strangers, and the exchange of a word, even the exhalation of a heavy breath, would have attracted attention. So they sat on side by side, mute and motionless. There was no way by which they could escape unnoticed, for the little nook in which they sheltered was blocked by the two unconscious figures before them, and in the absence of speech they could not even take concerted action.

Presently the explorer of the sky passed his telescope to the other, and spoke aloud in thin, high tones that struck terror to the hearts of those behind him.

'No, John,' he remarked. 'I cannot find even a trace of it; but it is as I expected. I have only come up here into the clear air to make assurance doubly sure. It will come upon the world at large as a thief in the night, but not upon us. We are forewarned and, happily, forearmed.'

‘Yes, sir,’ said the speaker’s attendant, for they were master and man. ‘I do not know so much about these things as I ought.’

‘No,’ went on the other, ‘you can have no idea of the marvellous rapidity of the flight of this and other mighty worlds that swing around in yawning space. Our globe travels in a single hour a distance of nearly nine times its diameter, or about sixty-seven thousand miles. The comet of which I speak is travelling in our direction at over ninety-four thousand miles an hour. We and it are, therefore, approaching one another at the enormous speed of over a hundred and sixty thousand miles an hour—between three and four million miles a day!’

Dare and Mrs. Bowgrave sat appalled. It was the Professor who was speaking. By some mad freak of malicious fate the dotard’s craze for astronomy had drawn him absolutely to their feet!

‘Look at it!’ went on the Professor. ‘Look at yonder countless flaunting lights lying before us in the valley like shells on the seashore. Ere a month has gone by they will be quenched in black and ghastly ruin, and this little island, the home of heedless pleasure, will be bare and barren as on that day, millions of years ago,

when a fiery volcano vomited it up from the depths of the sea !'

'Yes, sir,' said Bowgrave's attendant, humouring the visionary's fancies. 'Yes, sir ; but had we not better be a-going ? It is about half-past ten, and the mistress will be delayed with the carriage if we stop here much longer.'

'Right, John. I had forgotten your mistress for the moment, though she is always in my mind. A dear and noble woman, a true and faithful wife.'

'And the best mistress in the world, sir,' added the footman, feeling it was incumbent on him to add his respectful quota to the eulogy.

'Ay, that she is,' said the Professor. 'I sometimes think that I have a sense that is wanting in most human beings—a gift that instinctively tells me when I am in her proximity. I could fancy she was here with me now !'

The watchers held their breath in supremest tension. What was coming next ? It was the rare perfume peculiar to Mrs. Bowgrave's personality that had started the unwitting Professor on his present train of thought. Dare could feel Felicity trembling violently in his arm, but it was impossible to soothe her with a single word.

'John,' went on the Professor, 'there is someone close behind us.'

He wheeled round as he spoke, and would have taken a step forward, but the attendant caught his arm as he was in the act of striking a match, and led him slowly down the hill.

'Yes, sir, there is,' he said soothingly; 'they are lovers. You will find them everywhere about the Head at night; but they're harmless—quite harmless.'

As in a dream the speechless pair watched the old man and his companion go slowly down the hill, and ultimately disappear in the depths of the declivity.

The woman spoke first:

'Kestrel! Kestrel!' she cried. 'Am I awake? Is this reality, or is it only an awful nightmare?'

'Come, dearest. Quick!' he answered. 'There is not a moment to be lost. Don't tremble so. There is no danger, for they will go direct along the Promenade. We can easily get to your destination in time if we hurry. He walks slowly, and is almost certain to go straight into the hotel to await your coming.'

He kissed her as he spoke, and put his arm around her, lifting her bodily over the awkward

places in their trackless descent over the long grass and entangling whins.

'What a miraculous escape!' she sighed. 'I shall be thankful indeed when I am safe in my carriage. I have quite a lot of wraps in it, and will drop off this skirt and throw on an opera cloak in a couple of seconds. But I don't know how I shall face him. What mad, bad conspirators we are!' Her spirits were recovering, and she laughed musically.

They parted in the town, close to the Gaiety, and five minutes later, Mrs. Bowgrave, with a smile of sweetest unconcern on her rich, ruddy lips, stepped gracefully out of her carriage at the door of the hotel, went on unattended into the inner room where her husband waited, and held her fair face to his for the customary kiss.

'And what do you think of the new comedy, darling?' the old man inquired. 'Is it worth seeing? You must tell me all about it as we go home.'

'I'm afraid I can't,' she answered—'at least not to-night. I have got a splitting headache, and it really prevented me from following the plot, if there be any plot at all about musical comedy.'

‘Poor dear!’ he said with much concern; ‘you had better have a glass of wine before you go.’

There came a knock at the door, and Dare entered with a profoundly respectful bow, directed to the lady, who responded with the light indifference of a queen acknowledging the obeisance of a humble subject as a mere matter of form, whilst the Professor continued to gaze proudly upon the ravishing beauty of his young wife. How she loved him! With what gracious assumption of faint impersonal interest she viewed the approach of all other men!

And Dare, standing apart, and pretending to be occupied in the perusal of a playbill upon the wall, read the thoughts of the infatuated husband like a book, and smiled sardonically to himself.

CHAPTER XIII

THE LURE OF BLOOD-MONEY

A COUPLE of flaring, naked gaslights made visible the interior of the narrow, squalid bar-room, the dingy walls of which were adorned with pictorial masterpieces, in crudest colour, of the prize ring and the turf. Along the length of the uninviting apartment ran a patched zinc counter, behind which stood two or three glass rum and whisky kegs, a dozen or so bottles with faded, fly-spotted labels, an odd box of cigars, and an open basket of clay cutties. The muddy floor was strewn with sawdust and littered with straw, and at occasional intervals unkempt women and bare-footed children came in for domestic supplies with jugs and spirit flasks.

The landlord, pasty-faced and pot-bellied, waited ready for business, with uprolled shirt-sleeves, behind the beer-pumps, a crumpled evening paper in his hand.

'Any news yet, boss?' asked one of the two individuals who loafed at the outer edge of the counter—a weather-beaten, thick-set man with a grizzled beard, in a ragged guernsey and grimy, discoloured canvas pants; 'have they collared Vanberg yet?'

'Not a trace of him to be found,' answered Boniface. 'Since he managed to give them the slip at Durham he appears to have been swallowed up by the earth. The authorities think he's in the Newcastle district. Aw see they're offering a hundred reward for him to-night. But aw don't expect as ever they'll get him. He's far too fly for 'em. This is his portrait. Look!'

'An' hoo's Vanberg?' queried the second customer—a waterman in glistening yellow oilskins, taking the proffered newspaper and looking at the rough outline sketch in its columns. 'Don't know as aw ever 'eerd o' 'im.'

'W'y, Geordie,' cried the other incredulously. 'Nivvor 'eerd o' Vanberg? The whole North-country's ringing aboot 'im. 'E 'scaped fro' Durham gaol aboot a week ago, ware 'e wor doin' a stretch o' fourteen fo' sumthin' varry like murder or piracy. Which was it? Aw should say the likeness is a good un.'

'A bit o' both murder and piracy, aw reckon,'

said the landlord. 'At the time of his conviction he held a master mariner's ticket. He tried to scuttle a ship, of which he was captain and part owner, for the sake o' the insurance. He didn't succeed, but one man lost his life and another was badly hurt. It was believed, too, that he was concerned in the firing of a Spanish steamer, outward bound for Cuba, before the war, which went down in the Atlantic. They say she had millions on board in gold coin, not a stiver of which has yet been recovered, or ever will be.'

'An' hoo did 'e get oot o' quod?' asked the man in the oilskins. 'Did 'e bloomin' well dig a hole in his cell wall wi' 'is tin skilly spoon, in the usual way, an' then scale the wall wi' a rope made oot o' 'is knotted bedclothes an' lace winder curtains?'

The waterman laughed in loud appreciation of his own modest satire.

'No, Geordie, 'e didn't. It wor what the lawyers call a case o' mistaken identity. A short-time man was kept in, an' Vanberg wor let oot in 'is place, by accident like. At least, that's what they say.'

The owner of the guernsey jeered incredulously, and placed a sceptical forefinger to his red, bulbous nose.

A foot sounded in the sandy passage without, and passed on into the little parlour at the rear of the house, and the landlord followed to attend upon the newcomer, who halted by the firegrate of the room he had just entered, turned his back upon it, and ordered a small Scotch.

It was Kestrel Dare, in nautical rig—that of a ship's officer—stout blue serge and a navy cap without a badge.

'This is the Samaria Tavern, I believe?' said Dare.

'Yes, sor—one of the oldest licensed houses in North Shields,' answered the landlord, as Dare filled up his glass with water, preparatory to depositing its contents in the spittoon at the earliest convenient opportunity.

He had little faith in the virtue of spirituous liquors purchased at obscure public-houses in doubtful neighbourhoods. His call here was for other purposes than the obtaining of refreshment.

Dare, left alone, glanced at his watch; then he walked to the window and looked out upon the night. As he had anticipated, the room in which he stood was situated right on the brink of a broad river, now rising quickly to the flood, along the ample channel of which the great

spectral forms of ships went inward and outward through the foggy air, under the faint, straggling moonlight, to an accompaniment of the hollow screams and booming hooting of a limitless variety of sirens and foghorns. On the other side of the broad flood were black irregular blocks of tall warehouses and other maritime business premises, with the myriad roofs, rising confusedly one behind the other, of a great town spread east and west along the distant southern shore-line.

It was ten o'clock. The man for whom he waited was due. Would he fail him at the last moment? Could he have given way to the cursed drink from which the law had kept him for years, or had even worse befallen him? Dare went out into the cramped yard behind, which opened directly upon a little quay, with a flight of crazy wooden steps slung diagonally down the side of the wall into the dark, lifting water but five or six feet below the level of the land. He puffed vigorously at the cigar he was smoking, and then waved it in the air, twice with a horizontal sweep, and twice with a vertical movement. It was a signal to some unseen watcher out in the stream.

A row boat hove into sight, and its single occupant drew up at the stairs.

'Anything fresh?' asked Dare, bending down and speaking in a whisper.

'Nothing special, sor. 'E won't be 'ere till a quarter past. 'E's been lying low at my place up by the Bull Ring for three days past, as 'e'd p'raps tell ye in 'is letter. Aw've given 'im the clothes. Aw wish it were ower. Shields is thick wi' cops on both sides, an' the pollis boat 'as jus' gone past. Aw know ivory inch i' this wettor, sor, 'tween the Black Middens and the Slecks, being born and browt up on't—suck't it fo' pap, ye might say—but aw've nivvor seen it watched at neet as it has been durin' the past fower days. Aw'm told it's the same from Jarrow to Newcastle. It's a big reward, sor, ye see. Many a chap 'ud dee murder fo' much less than haff the money.'

Dare stooped and looked suspiciously in the boatman's stolid face, and a sudden fear fell upon him.

'You aren't going to give us away?' he asked in eager, ominous tones. 'Perhaps I have let you know too much; but, by Heaven, if you *do* turn traitor——'

'Traitor, sor! Don't use such words to me! Wasn't 'e my much-beluv'd captin fo' ten 'eers? Aw'd go through fire and water and lay down me life to serve 'im.'

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‘Hush!’ whispered the other. ‘We might be overheard. You never know who is lurking about. There’s someone in the passage. I’ll go back. Let me speak plainly. It isn’t worth your while to earn the blood-money. You’ve had two fivers from me already. I am going to make it up to two hundred if you get him safely landed on the ship as we are starting. You remember the signal—three short blasts, followed by five?’

‘Ye’r a Rothschild, sor!’ was the low-spoken, enthusiastic response. Then the man murmured below his breath, as he pushed his little craft off eastward: ‘Two hundred punds! It’s a fortune. An’ aw wor just a-goin’ to play the silly divil’s double game!’

He pulled on for a couple of hundred yards till he came to a police-boat at a landing-stage, and was hailed as he passed. He drew in to the shore.

‘Well, Bunter, I’m waiting for you. They said ye were coming. Got a bit o’ valuable information and want five bob in exchange?’

It was an inspector in uniform who spoke thus.

‘No,’ said the man addressed as Bunter. ‘Aw don’t want five bob. Aw want a lot more—about a tenner, aw should say.’

'A tenner? Have ye found Vanberg himself?'

'Wish aw 'ad, worse luck,' said Bunter. 'Them's windfalls as doesn't come to me. It's a smuggling case. You know old Barker, o' the Wooden Dolly Quay, fireman on the *British Queen*, trading to Hamburg?'

The inspector nodded.

'Well, get across to Mill Dam at once. He's arranged to land near the ferry-stage there at eleven with a hundredweight o' rifle cake, and a dozen boxes o' cigars. It'll be a ten pund fine and treble duty, wi' costs, and aw owt to get at least a tenner, as aw tell ye. There'll be two in the boat, and ye can't mistake Barker. Poor old Barker!' he added, making preparations to draw away. 'Aw've got a throat like a chemical worker's. Give us half a dollar fo' a wet.'

A shilling changed hands, and then police and informer parted company, the former striking off without delay with their broad sweeps in a south-westerly direction across the great river.

'Sorry for old Barker,' soliloquised Bunter—
'at least as sorry as aw knaw 'ow to be; but aw had to say something to get those blasted river rats oot o' the way, an' if aw 'adn't put

them on a proper lay, aw'd 'av 'ad no further peace i' my life wi' them. An' to think aw varry nearly gov Vanberg away for the reward, only half what aw'm to get—to say nowt of the gory mess he or his mates would 'a made o' me if they'd got to know aboot it. Let the sharps say what they like, honesty's both the best business and the right thing!

A quarter of an hour later the virtuous philosopher put back to the steps at the rear of the Samaria Tavern, moored his boat, and walked into the little back room, nodding casually as he did so to its sole occupant—a man seated in the further corner below the window, with a newspaper before his face, which he dropped to his knee on recognising Bunter.

The stranger, close-cropped and rather pale of countenance, of spare yet sinewy build, was attired in a well-cut tweed suit of gray, brown bowler, and tan boots. He was a professional man of some kind, perhaps a lawyer, judging by his keen dark eye and high, narrow, shining brow.

The landlord came in, looked blandly at the stranger, and served Bunter with a glass of hot rum and then went leisurely back to the bar.

A minute later he was upstairs in a tawdry

sitting-room, rousing his hard-featured wife from her uneasy slumbers in an armchair.

‘Here, Poll,’ he whispered, drawing on his coat. ‘Get down into the bar fo’ ten minutes. Mum’s the word. Aw’m going out to earn a hundred pund!’

‘You’re a few minutes behind time, Bunter,’ said the stranger in the back parlour downstairs, in a low quiet voice. ‘We’re to lie out in the shadow yonder. She’ll come down as close inshore as possible. We’d better be getting on board.’

Bunter nodded acquiescence and led the way. His fare took his seat in the stern, and leant forward to where Bunter sat amidships with an oar in either horny palm.

‘Bunter,’ he said, in the coolest, most ordinary tone. ‘Don’t make any mistakes, please. If you do they’ll be fatal. I’m a judge of character, and I may as well say that I didn’t quite like the look in those gin-sodden eyes of yours when you left me an hour ago. I don’t want to misjudge a simple and honest heart, but, if another boat even approaches us suspiciously before I get where I want to be, I’ll plant a bullet right between your eyes. The word is death before recapture—death for both of us, understand! And, I may as well

tell you that you're going along with us, out to sea, as far as I think fit. Don't trouble to reply. Get over yonder !'

The grim speaker pointed his finger over the starboard bow, and Bunter, bending himself over his oars, gasped with unutterable indignation. And this was man's gratitude ! Oh, if only he had known ! He was helping a criminal to liberty, and was himself being crimped for his pains ! But, he did not deem it opportune to express his surging thoughts, for he noted that the passenger in the stern was displaying in his right hand, with entirely superfluous ostentation, the blue barrel of a revolver of heavy calibre.

CHAPTER XIV

THE LANDLORD'S REWARD

THE landlord of the Samaria Tavern stole noiselessly out into the darkness and looked eagerly up and down the narrow street upon which his hostelry abutted. A sailor in his cups and a woman with a shawl over her head were approaching his establishment with an arm clasped affectionately around each other's neck, but nobody else was in sight. He went quickly past the pair. There would be a policeman on duty at the quay in front of the Custom House a couple of hundred yards away, or in the hilly main thoroughfare running down to the riverside from the Tynemouth road. He was already fingering in fancy quite a little heap of heavy gold coins. The hundred pounds reward was as good as his. He had never had actual possession of so much money,

all his own, at any period of his life before. What rare luck was his!

Emerging into the open, he strained his eyes in every direction. No, the place, usually so busy at this time of night, was absolutely deserted. Presently an acquaintance of his hove in sight—a brawny deck-hand on one of the river passenger steamers—and went by with a cheery ‘How do?’ Should he call the stalwart fellow back and enlist his services with a view to the capture of his prospective prize until an officer of the law could be found? No. That would mean the division of the reward. A policeman was the person he needed, the blue-coated brotherhood having no legal claim to gratuities of the sort.

He stood for a moment irresolute on the edge of the broad quay, looking out on to the lights of the shipping, moored and moving, full of dread lest the opportunity that was his might by some mischance pass from him. Little more than a cable’s length away, to the westward, he could discern the dark hull of a ship, with steam up and men going hither and thither over her deck.

Then a dark straight figure came up from the steps near the middle of the quay, and the landlord ran up to him. The newcomer, who

had just passed a lamp which flung its light full on the face of the host of the Samaria Tavern, started back a step.

'Is there a bobby about?' the landlord cried, in hurried, breathless speech.

The man thus addressed paused for a second, and then said quickly :

'Yes, I'm one. What's up?'

The other looked suspiciously into the stranger's face.

'Are you?' he asked. 'Aw saw ye in my place some time ago.'

'Yes,' said the stranger. 'I'm on important plain-clothes duty.'

'Vanberg?' whispered the landlord. He could not say more for the moment, but he pointed wildly backward in the direction of the street from which he had emerged.

'Hush!' said the other. 'We might be overheard. Are you sure you've got him?'

'Yes,' replied the landlord. 'He's drinking a b. and s. in our back snug. Come on! There isn't a second to spare.'

'Here,' said the stranger, 'not a word! I'm a detective from Durham on that very job.'

'Aw won't have to share the reward with you?' came the cautious inquiry.

'Oh, no, not at all. You'll get every penny

of the reward. I can guarantee you that. The promotion alone will amply repay me. But, there must be no error. Are you sure of your man? I have Vanberg's photo in my pocket. Go down by the back way, and I'll follow. I'll show you the photo before we turn into the yard.'

The pair flitted along the deserted street like shadows, the landlord leading the way into a dark four-foot passage giving access to the rear of the tavern. Midway in the passage burned a small gas-jet in a spherical wire cage. They halted there, and the one who followed put his hand into an inner breast-pocket, drew out a cabinet photograph, and held it in his right hand. The landlord leaned forward over it full of fiercest expectation.

The holder of the card drew aside a step, as though stumbling slightly on the worn, uneven cobbles, and his clenched left fist flashed suddenly out and smote the all-unwitting tenant of the Samaria Tavern a deadly blow on the base of the right jaw. The corpulent, white-faced landlord went down like an ox in the shambles under the hammer of the slaughterman, with a low groan, his head striking the base of the wall with a gruesome thud. The stricken man lay where he had fallen, his thick lips quivering

with the ghost of a commingled sigh and moan.

His assailant, Kestrel Dare, stood over him for a second, stooping his head. Satisfied, he walked slowly into the yard, saw that the little back parlour was now empty, and hurried back to the landing-steps in the quay. A boat with a couple of sailors was in waiting, and he sprang into it and was rowed swiftly westward.

A minute or so later a siren sounded harshly through the air, and a steamer, with all her lamps aglow, went slowly on to the sea. The vessel slackened speed as she was passing the quay and drifted slowly down the channel. A boat came out of the gloom on the starboard, and a rope was thrown to it from the ship. Two men came up over the bulwarks—one morosely and reluctantly, and the other, who followed, with a brisk alert step as he jumped down and trod the deck.

‘Welcome!’ said Kestrel Dare, taking the hand of the second man and drawing him apart. ‘It’s been a close shave. I’ll tell you all when we get below by ourselves. Why have you brought that fellow Bunter with you?’

‘I’ll explain later. Get your ship under way. It wasn’t wise to leave the thief behind.’

Dare lifted his hand to a figure on the bridge,

the bell of the engine-room telegraph rang out, and the ship resumed her seaward course, gathering speed as she went.

'Make sure of Bunter for the present,' said Vanberg. 'Don't bother about his reward. Get him below—in irons, if you like.'

Dare walked to an adjacent hatchway and looked down the hold, into a region of ruddy light, access to which was given by a perpendicular iron ladder.

'Here, McTavish!' he shouted.

A hard, bony-faced man came up, and Dare pointed to the recalcitrant Bunter, who stood sullen by the bulwarks, watching his abandoned boat drifting westward on the flood.

'McTavish,' he said. 'Get this fellow into the stokehole, and keep your eye upon him until we are out at sea. He should be useful to you, and don't supply him with the slightest reason for howling about his association with the unemployed.'

'Ay, ay, sir,' responded the other, touching his cap. He placed his hand on Bunter's shoulder and pointed the way. 'The man sha'na want honest wark, or, in the words of our immortal Rabbie, be reduced to the lamentable neecessity of vainly begging a brither worm ta gi' him leave ta toil!'

'Aw'll be damned if aw do!' stormed Bunter, starting suddenly forward and endeavouring to break the line of his captors. 'Where's the two hundred pund aw was promised? Aw'll hev a bloody revenge for this! By God aw will!'

But, Vanberg was by his side, with a cold metallic object pressed rudely into his ear.

'Listen to me, Bunter,' he said quietly. 'I don't want to do it; but I certainly shall if you try to force my hand. You'll be food for the North Sea fishes five minutes after I hear that you've even mentioned my name. I'll do it now, if you speak another word above your breath.'

Bunter stood aside and dropped his arms, reduced instantly to shivering subjection. He had had previous experience of Vanberg, and had again and again in the past had it ground into him that that personage never failed in his word—when it suited him to keep it. So, he slipped down into the stokehole, followed close by the vigilant McTavish.

Attracted by the slight outbreak, a thin small figure in a caped overcoat came up.

'Anything wrong, Mr. Dare?' the newcomer asked.

'Nothing at all, Professor—nothing at all! A fireman come on board drunk. Usual thing

on such occasions.' He paused, and then continued: 'Allow me to present my friend to you, Professor. This is Captain Grimshaw.' Vanberg bowed, and the speaker turned to him. 'Our owner, Professor Bowgrave, captain.'

Vanberg, under his new alias of Grimshaw, bowed again, and the Professor and he shook hands, and then the trio went aft.

'Captain,' whispered Dare, lagging slightly behind as the Professor led the way to the companion-way dividing the saloon and smoke-room, 'just as I was coming down to the Samaria to see if all was serene, I caught the fat-headed landlord, who had spotted you, coming out for the police. He got the reward without delay. If I haven't qualified him for a coffin, I've assuredly smashed his jaw.'

He chuckled loudly.

The three men passed down into the smoke-room, and Vanberg, lingering for a second on the stairs, drank in the pathetic rendering of a love song coming up on the air in a woman's soft and low contralto voice. He could hear the swish of silken skirts, and rare perfumes suffused the air. It recalled a flood of recollection, and his eyes brightened as he listened. There was some strangely familiar yet intangible note in the atmosphere.

CHAPTER XV

PROFESSOR BOWGRAVE'S NIECE

THE *Atalanta* had passed the Low Lights on the left when Gilbert Delaval came up out of the heated atmosphere of the engine-room, and walked forward to the bows. He had been on board now for over a week, and had made himself thoroughly familiar with the department entrusted to him. He had a full and thoroughly competent staff, and was thus relieved entirely of routine work and duty, but he deemed it advisable all the same to keep himself in close touch with the vessel's mechanism, which was throughout of the most up-to-date type. The main propelling engines were turbines, and the subsidiary motors for supplying power to the cranes and winches and for generating the current for electric lighting and heating were of similar principle. It was all true that Dare had said. The objects of owner

and builders had been efficiency, stability, and comfort, and in the achievement of these money had been expended with the most lavish hand.

Before him, on either side, a massive stone pier ran far out into the sea like a pair of gigantic encircling arms. There was a lighthouse on the tall cliffs to the north, and, near by, the ruins of a priory stood out picturesquely in the broadening moonlight.

Once clear of the noble harbour, the *Atalanta*, now speeding majestically along over the bounding waves like a thing of life, turned and swept off southward, beyond a scattered fleet of fishing cobbles, passing two or three steam colliers from Tyne Dock, heavily laden with coal for London.

It was a glorious night, with a full harvest moon, and his thoughts went instinctively back to the happy time of holiday in the island of pleasure that had only a few days before come to an all-too-premature conclusion. He had left his peerless Dorothy and her guardian at Douglas, where they were to remain for another month before returning to their home in the quiet rural outskirts of Wakefield. She had, of course, given him her address, with oft-repeated injunctions to write to her from the first port of

call, but he knew that it was not at all likely that he would be able to communicate with her before the conclusion of the voyage that was now opening, it being evident from even Dare's enigmatical allusions and utterances that they would touch no outward port whatever throughout their cruise in, as he conjectured, the Mid-Atlantic.

One great surprise had just been his that evening—the discovery that weird old Professor Bowgrave was the master and moving spirit in the mysterious enterprise on which he had embarked practically blindfolded. But a still more staggering one was in store for him.

He wheeled round at length, and walked slowly aft, full of somewhat mournful meditations. Strains of music sounded faintly from the saloon, and two or three ladies, with their male escorts, had ascended the upper deck, where they took up positions on chairs arranged behind a stretch of canvas rigged diagonally to give protection from the perceptible breeze created by the swift motion of the ship. He went up the ladder, and Dare, noting his advent, came forward, greeted him pleasantly, and introduced him to the person now posing as Captain Grimshaw.

'You will observe, Delaval,' he began, with

a laugh, 'that we have plenty of spare gear on board the *Atalanta*, including a duplicate captain and a duplicate chief-engineer !'

Grimshaw went forward, and at this juncture Professor Bowgrave came up with his wife on his arm, and Delaval was formally introduced to the pair. The lady was magnificently attired. He could divine that in spite of her great cloud of snowy wraps. It was also evident, from the rays of brilliant light that scintillated from a score of points in her abundant, high-piled raven hair and around her white throat, where the latter was slightly bared, that she was wearing the princess's dowry of precious, priceless gems to which the barmaid in the Douglas dancing-hall had made envious allusion.

'We are not a very large party,' said the Professor, 'but I trust that we shall be a happy one. We had quite an unexpected and welcome addition made to our numbers at almost the last moment. Ah, here she comes.' The Professor turned to a graceful girl who came timidly forward, with a cloak thrown over her dress of simple serge.

'So, you have ventured up, my dear,' said Bowgrave, taking both the fair maid's hands in his. 'Let me introduce to you Mr. Delaval.

Mr. Delaval, this is my dear dead sister's only child—Miss Collingwood.'

The entirely unheralded announcement fell like a thunderclap upon Delaval's astounded ears. He bowed mechanically, and then stood as one dazed. But, his mind worked quickly, and he realised the truth—as he deemed it—in a flash. His surroundings were vague and confused, and it was borne in upon him that the men and women by whom he was surrounded were mere delusive mental images. It was only another of the blissful summer-night dreams that for weeks past had haunted his happy pillow.

The girl that filled the focus of his vision, with a halo of divinity around her, bowed with an air of hesitation and restraint, without sign of precognition, and her face came out of the shadow of the wind screen into the moonlight, and he saw his Dorothy as clearly as ever he had seen her in the flesh—a typical English girl, as sweet and wholesome as the fresh and balmy air of heaven, kissing her cheeks to roses, could make her. He would awaken presently, the light would die out, and then, in accordance with the precedent of tantalising Morpheus, the fond illusion would fade into the darkness of a lonely and empty night.

But the dream was not destined to be dispelled. Mrs. Bowgrave was speaking to him now, walking the white deck by his side, with shimmering, rustling, billowy skirts rippling lightly against him in a flood of grace and perfume and majesty. The theme of the young queen of dusky night was quite a commonplace one, and in no way in accord with the liquid music of a marvellous voice which, when its owner willed it, clung to and caressed whomsoever it addressed.

‘You must show me your engines to-morrow, Mr. Delaval, and explain them all to me. I have quite a penchant for matters mechanical.’

‘I shall be delighted,’ he answered, looking away as he spoke. He saw that the Professor and Dorothy were leaning by the port rail and gazing out across the limitless sea, the girl’s fair animated face and buoyant figure standing out radiantly in the moonlight against the night.

‘There is so little noise or vibration about them,’ Mrs. Bowgrave continued. ‘I suppose that will be because the engines, like the ship, are brand new?’

‘Oh, dear no,’ he answered, smiling, and beginning at last to comprehend that he actually was surrounded by solid reality. ‘In the

ordinary course it would be the other way. New engines generally raise the loudest of protests against the slavery in which they discover themselves for the first time, but these are of the latest type, entirely obviating the need for reciprocal motion, hissing pistons, and grinding cranks and rods. But, there, I'm afraid if I go on I shall become absurdly technical.'

'Not at all, Mr. Delaval. I promise you I shall be tremendously interested. I have had a linen overall specially made for the purpose of entering your Avernus. I shall want every detail explained—how many thousand horse-powers you get to the square inch of steam pressure, you know, and all about the boilers, which I understand are of the greatest importance. Are they of the ordinary sort, or of that dreadfully wicked Belleville class which the poor dear M.P.—for Gateshead, wasn't he?—used to denounce so furiously in the Commons? I heard him a year ago when I was up in London with the Professor. I believe he would have had the iniquitous Monsieur B. hanged, drawn, and quartered if he could have succeeded in getting his motion carried to bring the scoundrel in irons to the bar of the House!' She ceased speaking, and laughed aloud.

'Our boilers,' the man answered in a somewhat absent tone, 'are of the water-tube type. I can see you mean to go through the machinery very thoroughly. I shall have everything ready for inspection directly after breakfast.'

His eyes strayed, as he spoke, in the direction of Dorothy, who had gone back to a seat behind the screen, and had turned her face away from them, with deliberate intent and meaning, so it occurred to him.

'I think I shall sit down for awhile,' said Mrs. Bowgrave, at the end of a few minutes' further conversation.

Appreciating his opportunity, Delaval designedly led the lady to a seat that chanced luckily to be vacant in the immediate vicinity of Dorothy's chair. But the girl, though her back was turned, might have divined his purpose, for, to his intense disappointment, she arose, tripped off to the companion-way, and disappeared below. Then the Professor came up and took the seat left unoccupied by Dorothy, and Delaval contrived to withdraw himself.

He went below, and, shutting himself in the solitude of his tiny room, began to endeavour to think out his overwhelming surprise.

What did it all mean? How came it that she had never mentioned to him her relationship to Professor Bowgrave? Why had she never even hinted at her intention of taking part in a sea voyage herself? Because of the pledge of secrecy he had given to Kestrel Dare, he had not mentioned the name of his ship to her. Nor indeed had the name of Professor Bowgrave passed his lips during any of their conversations. She might easily, therefore, have boarded the *Atalanta* entirely unconscious of his proximity.

Yet she evinced no astonishment at meeting him. She took it all so coolly, so much as a matter of course. And how reserved she was! What a complete change there was in her attitude towards him! She had not shaken hands or even spoken. She had indeed scarcely looked at him, for her one brief glance might have been directed at the merest passing stranger. Had she only recently become aware of her close family connection with the Professor? Could it even be that her association with tremendous wealth had lifted her entirely out of his world, and removed her from him for ever? She had practically cut him dead, and on his second approach she had turned her back upon him and disappeared. If only he

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could see her alone for five minutes. Then he would know the truth, and his soul-torturing suspense would be at an end. But, as he reflected, one strong hope came into his heart. He could never believe her faithless, until such testimony was forthcoming from her own lips, the lips on whose accents he had hung so fondly in those delightful days in Manxland, when they had walked and driven and ridden together oblivious to the fact that there were many, many thousands of other people upon the island besides themselves.

CHAPTER XVI

VANBERG IS RECOGNISED

THE convict Vanberg (passing as Captain Grimshaw) and Kestrel Dare were closeted together in the latter's cabin. It was late on the night of the sailing of the *Atalanta*.

'Got a nice crowd on the boat, Dare. Mostly, I suppose, friends of Bowgrave and his wife?'

Dare nodded.

'Ah,' continued the other. 'We ought to enjoy our little picnic in the Mid-Atlantic.'

'Humph!' muttered Dare. 'With me in this matter business comes decidedly before pleasure. I'm not out on this expedition for my health, and I'm not going to forget it, and I hope you won't either.'

Grimshaw laughed.

'Don't take me over seriously,' he said.

'You know quite well enough that I'll do my bit. By the way, I've not seen Mrs. Bowgrave yet. She's our hostess. I ought to have been presented directly I came on board, but we did the thing rather in a kind of hurry, you know. By the way, that Miss Collingwood, the niece of the old man, is a prime girl. If I were a marrying man, with a refurbished record, and something certain and solid behind me, I should become virtuous and respectable, and go in for a little luxury of that sort myself. As it is, I shall keep my eye upon her.' He laughed unpleasantly, and even the utterly unscrupulous Dare felt disagreeably impressed. So the latter turned the subject.

'You're sure about the specie?' he began. 'The bearings and all that sort of thing, I mean? I've had the whole matter worked up elaborately from your data. It was a big job, and you'll be surprised at the difficulty I've encountered in bringing the old man's astronomical moonshine and the treasure ship into one and the same scheme. However, I think you'll say I've accomplished it all right. The charts and plans are complete, and you'd better go thoroughly through them with me to-morrow morning.'

'Yes,' responded Grimshaw, 'that will be

the proper course. Then we can discuss the affair in detail from the beginning.'

'Suppose we go along into the saloon?' suggested Dare. 'There are only a few people still out of their berths, and I'll give you the necessary introductions.'

The proposal was put into effect, but the newcomers found the big and luxuriously furnished place deserted. An inner door gave access through the amidships bulkhead to another apartment, and Grimshaw threw an inquiring glance in its direction.

'The state-rooms of the owner and Mrs. B. are through yonder,' Dare explained. 'I suppose you could do with a drop of decent cham after your experiences?'

Grimshaw nodded, and the speaker touched an electric button by his side. A trim waiter came out of an adjacent pantry, and attended to the requirements of the two men.

Grimshaw took up his saucer-shaped glass and held it admiringly up before him, watching its mantle beading and sparkling in the brilliant light. Then he put it to his lips.

'Yes,' he remarked at last, 'I think it will do.'

Dare's companion had removed his hat, and the white steady rays of an incandescent lamp

immediately overhead lit up his keen dark eyes with fire, and brought out his pale, narrow, shining brow in high relief against the ruby velvet with which the saloon was upholstered.

Presently Grimshaw spoke again.

‘There’s something about this place that has struck me very curiously,’ he said. ‘I seem to have some intimate connection or association with it.’

‘That’s strange,’ commented Dare. ‘You couldn’t possibly have ever been in this saloon before, or, indeed, in one at all like it. It was specially designed, as I have told you, for its purpose, whilst the ship herself, as you know, has only just left the builder’s yard.’

‘Oh, yes,’ continued Grimshaw, ‘I’m quite aware of that. It isn’t perhaps the place. It may be the people. I thought that there was a note in the atmosphere—it might have been a voice—that I could recall. But, there! perhaps I’m talking foolishness. I’ve had reason to feel overstrung for a week past, and I’m not sure even now that danger is entirely past, though I’ve made up my mind on one subject. They’ll not get me again alive if I can help it.’

‘Come, come,’ protested Dare, quietly, ‘that all belongs to the past, I’m sure. What possible danger could there be here on board the

Atalanta, where you're entirely surrounded by friends?'

Grimshaw laughed faintly and uneasily.

'I don't know about friends,' he proceeded. 'You are the only individual on board the boat who is aware of my identity—always excepting Bunter, of course. Bunter would be as well out of the way, don't you think?' His voice sank to the merest whisper as he put the question.

'Perhaps he would; but he'll keep. He may be useful to us later on. I've sent him down some refreshments and promised that he shall have his dues paid in full, explaining at the same time that we were bound to bring him along with us to obviate the possibility of decidedly unpleasant consequences.'

'Well, I suppose we must leave it at that for the present, and you may as well pass that bottle. I've taken quite a fancy to the brand. This is my first real hour of freedom, and I want to enjoy it.'

'Just so,' responded the other. 'But, if you mean to make a night of it, which I certainly don't advise, we may as well go into the smoke-room and sample the cigars at the same time. I fancy you'll be fairly well suited in that respect.'

'I reckon you're right. A surreptitious bit of common thick twist, of the threepence an ounce grocer's shop variety, got hold of at rare intervals to be reckoned by months, has been my only solace since goodness knows when. Lead the way.'

The two men rose, ascended the first flight of the main staircase of the saloon, and then bore off to the right along the passage giving access to the apartment they sought.

As they disappeared, a woman in magnificent evening attire, with her hair, neck, and low corsage blazing with gems, stole out into the saloon from the inner door already mentioned, and stood transfixed at the foot of the spacious staircase. It was Felicity Bowgrave.

'My God!' she gasped, below her breath. 'That man here? Vanberg! I have been dreading his approach for days past since I read of his escape from prison, but I never dreamed for a moment that there could be any reality in my fears. What is he doing on board the *Atalanta*?'

Suddenly she recalled herself from her absorbed conjectures. Her husband had come noiselessly into the saloon, and was standing by her side.

'I thought I heard Mr. Dare's voice,' began

the old man. 'Has he gone up to the smoke-room?'

'I suppose so,' answered his wife. 'Who is the man with him?'

'His friend? Didn't I introduce him to you? Oh, no. I remember now. His name is Grimshaw—Captain Grimshaw—and he is here with us as a naval expert of some sort, on the advice of Mr. Dare. But, you may as well make his acquaintance without delay. I'll bring him down here. I sha'n't be a minute.' The Professor had his foot on the stair, but his partner restrained him.

'All in good time, dear,' she laughed. 'One would think that I was most deeply interested in your sailor men, and I really am not—not in the slightest degree beyond the formal calls of common courtesy. Come, Philip dearest, let us go into our own particular little parlour. This is our new home, and it is time we were by ourselves.'

She lifted her face to his as she spoke in low tender accents, and the devoted Professor walked off with her proudly into the privacy of their own particular domain.

Her escort led the black imperious beauty to a couch, and closed the door behind them.

'What is the matter with you, darling?' he

inquired solicitously. 'You were rosy-red but a moment ago, and now you have gone pale as death itself.'

'Have I really, Philip?' she asked, with an assumption of unconcern, glancing into a mirror in a splendid frame of silver set in the upper portion of the door. 'Perhaps it is the motion of the ship.'

'Scarcely that, dearest,' said the man. 'The sea is as smooth as a millpond to-night, and, you are one of the very best sailors on board. When you begin to hint at *mal-de-mer*, I shall think it time to take myself off to my berth, seriously indisposed indeed. But, no doubt it's the excitement and change acting on your spirits. We've had a heavy day. You had better call in Susette, and meanwhile I will go up on deck for a few seconds. I have a little matter to talk over with the captain.'

He stooped and kissed her gently and departed.

Mrs. Bowgrave, left alone, touched a bell, and her maid appeared—a thin raw-boned woman of maybe twenty-five, with limp flaxen hair, and almost colourless eyes of faintest coldest blue.

'Susette,' began Mrs. Bowgrave, in low, earnest accents, 'I have something most im-

portant to tell you. It is terrible! What is to be done? Vanberg is on board this ship!

'Vanberg, madame? No! Not Vanberg! It can never be! Your constant baseless fears about that man have overcome you. I will get you some wine.'

The girl opened a locker in the wall as she spoke, and took out a spirit frame of solid gold. She lifted a decanter of brandy, and poured a liberal measure of the gleaming liquid into a glass. Her mistress drank it off undiluted, without a tremor.

'You will be better soon,' said Susette, reassuringly. 'How could such a fancy have come into your head? You have been brooding over his escape from prison last week. I have watched you. You have read every line that has been printed by the papers, and it has been the sensation for full seven days. It would be a million to one against him ever seeking refuge on this ship. You have magnified a molehill into a mountain.'

'I would to Heaven it were so!' moaned the Professor's wife, sinking her head on her white rounded arms on the table by her side. 'There is no mistake whatever. I have just seen him with my own eyes, heard him with my own ears—in yonder room!' She pointed vaguely

in the direction of the saloon. 'Do you think I could make any mistake in such a matter? Go up yourself and peep into the smoke-room. They are there—Dare and Vanberg.'

Susette reached forward at once to the door and swung it ajar; but her mistress recalled her ere she had set foot in the passage without.

'Close it again!' she cried in a hoarse voice that was quite new to her. 'I must be mad to make any such suggestion. The fellow would recognise you at once, and then God alone knows what would follow. Give me more brandy. If something be not done—and at once—I shall go mad!'

'Hush, madame, hush!' whispered Susette, soothingly. 'The Professor might come in at any moment. We have the whole night to think the matter over, and even then, if some plan cannot be devised, you may easily continue indisposed and confined to your room for a day or two. There will be nothing suspicious about that. On no account must he know that you are here, if he hasn't any suspicion already. Trust me, madame, we shall find a way out before you and he can possibly meet—even if we have to serve him as he deserves. Sooner than he shall harm a hair of your dear head I will kill him myself—with poison or the knife,

whichever is handiest.' She paused and smiled grimly, with a queer light in her colourless eyes. 'On shipboard there are many ways of ridding one's self of undesirables. Vanberg, that monster of Hades, shall meet his match! You may depend on me with your life, madame. It will all come right in the end.'

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CHAPTER XVII

A LIFE AGAINST A THOUSAND POUNDS

MORNING broke bright, clear, and exhilarating with the ship well on her way for the Channel. A slight rain had fallen as daybreak came in, and there had been a little mist upon the waters, but, at last the sun burst out undimmed and gradually crept up through the glorious blue canopy that overhung the circle of emerald sea that had the *Atalanta* as its centre—a circle marred in its outline on the western horizon by the shadowy irregular Eastern coast.

Dorothy Collingwood was early on deck, and, standing at an elevated point some little distance from the stern, she saw that the vessel was leaving in her wake a great belt of surging silver, over which a flight of gulls hovered with airy grace. The birds seemed to hang almost motionless in the clear, cool morning air, just

a few yards beyond the points where the hidden propellers churned the water into spume. Yet, though they swung to the right and the left in mazy and apparently purposeless circles, their flight was maintained without an effort, and its easy deliberate grace mocked the efforts of the mighty mechanism that was now causing the ship to forge southward at something like twenty knots an hour.

A shadow fell across the sunlit deck, and Dorothy realised that someone had come suddenly up behind her, but she had an instinctive consciousness of the identity of the newcomer. So she remained with face averted, her eyes strained northward, her yellow curls tossing dishevelled from below a saucy scarlet Tam-o'-Shanter, and the short skirts of her trim navy-blue costume fluttering leeward in the breeze.

'Dorothy dearest,' pleaded a familiar voice, speaking into an ear that had grown rosy with the rushing sea air.

Her pretence was vain. She wheeled about, and her first words dispelled the poor man's fears.

'Oh, Gilbert, what does it all mean?'

'That's more than I can tell, Dorothy,' he responded. 'But, surely it's too good to be true? But, why didn't you speak to me last

night? I thought I had been completely forgotten or else was being entirely ignored.'

'But what are you doing here, Gilbert? You never told me that you were sailing in the *Atalanta*?'

'Well, that's easily explained. It was put to me as a secret mission—though, of course, I have no secrets from you, darling. But, you—how is it I never heard you speak of your uncle, the Professor?'

'I'll be truthful. Until the other day, I only knew uncle by name. As he told you last night, my mother was his only sister. Mother, the Professor, and the uncle who died in the States were the only three in the family, auntie belonging to father's side. Of course, I knew the Professor had inherited a fortune from his only brother; but I never imagined that he was so rich as he really is. Indeed, I did not meet Mr. Bowgrave until last week, and this trip of ours was quite hastily made up on the spur of the moment. Uncle was awfully kind to me, and I really couldn't refuse to come, he urged it so. I'm almost sorry I consented now!'

She laughed as she concluded, and looked towards the hooded entrance to the saloon, from which someone was emerging.

'Oh,' she said, with a little suppressed cry.

'Uncle's yonder. I don't know whether we should be seen speaking. We were only introduced last night, and he may think it strange.'

'Then, you haven't told him anything about—about our——'

'Of course, I haven't. I daren't. I'm only supposed to be fresh from school. What would he think of me if he knew that in a single week at Douglas, and though we had never met before, we had arranged everything, and were going to be married next spring?'

Delaval drew aside, somewhat downcast, as the Professor came up.

'Splendid morning, my lad,' began the old man, pleasantly. 'You'd better go down and see your aunt,' he went on, turning to Dorothy. 'She complains of not feeling quite so well this morning.'

Dorothy ran off with a muttered exclamation of concern, and the Professor addressed himself again to Delaval:

'You've had some considerable experience of submarine work, Mr. Delaval, I am told?'

Gilbert nodded.

'Well, I shall have to take you and a few more into our confidence in a week or so; but at present I haven't the time. I have some tremendous calculations to work out—calcula-

tions that will need the greatest care, so vital and far-reaching are the issues. In the meantime look around the ship and enjoy your leisure as best you can. And now you will please excuse me, for here is Mr. Dare.'

Dare came up and spoke a casual word or two to the Professor, and the pair, engrossed in deep conversation, forthwith departed. Then Grimshaw and others of the saloon party appeared, and the upper deck took on an appearance of gaiety and animation. Delaval exchanged a few words with Grimshaw, and turned down into the engine-room. If Mrs. Bowgrave were indisposed, her visit thither would be postponed. He lingered below for half an hour and then strolled forward, casting a watchful eye ever and anon to the saloon deck.

At last his patience was rewarded. He could see Dorothy's light alert figure turned in his direction.

'I have been looking for you everywhere,' she began eagerly. 'No, you needn't worry, dear Auntie Bowgrave is not in any serious way. Fancy having an auntie about your own age! It's quite a new experience to me. She has a slight headache, and probably won't appear on deck or in the saloon until to-morrow at the earliest. She has given me a novel to pass the

time away, and she has also supplied me with a capital excuse for monopolizing your precious time. She has asked me to seek you out and express to you her deep regret that she won't be able to pay her promised visit to the engine-room. The Professor and Mr. Dare are now with the captain in his cabin, studying certain plans and charts very closely. They were sending for Captain Grimshaw as I left.'

'Supposing you join me in the place of Mrs. Bowgrave and inspect the engines yourself?' suggested Delaval.

'You would promise to be a very, very good boy if I did, and not supply your staff with the slightest occasion for remark?' she inquired playfully.

'I think I could promise that,' he said, leading the way to the engine-room.

As the pair passed along the waist of the vessel, after descending from the upper deck, they almost ran into Susette, who was plainly straying out of her quarters, for she was standing half-concealed by the hood of a ventilator, in animated conversation with one of the stewards; but the woman slipped out of sight without being noticed by the lovers and ran back into the state-room occupied by her expectant mistress.

‘Madame,’ she began eagerly, ‘it is all arranged. I have just seen Tom—my sweetheart, you know. We have been engaged four years, and it was you who got him appointed here on my recommendation. Well, I have told Tom what it is sufficient for him to know—that there is a man on board who is not merely flying from the law, but who is also an enemy of yours and mine.’

‘And what do you propose?’ asked Mrs. Bowgrave, wincing at mention of the close connection between mistress and maid. ‘We must be careful. Even the life of an escaped convict is, to a certain extent, sacred in the eye of the law.’

‘That will be all right, madame. I do not propose that we should go to any extreme course. We are to lie off the Norfolk coast this evening, and five men are going ashore. This Captain Grimshaw, as he styles himself, is one of them. What their business is I don’t know. But I suppose it is about something that has been overlooked in connection with the voyage. Tom is to go with the party, and he will take the best means to get Vanberg arrested after they land. This will depend largely on circumstances; but there will be but the slightest trouble. His escape from prison

is still, of course, the talk of the country, his portrait is in every newspaper, and the reward for his recapture is one hundred pounds. The merest hint will bring the police hot-foot upon him.'

'Ah, but your man Tom will have to be very careful. Vanberg is as subtle as a serpent. I know him, and so do you. There will have to be no mistake, and the name of the *Atalanta* must not be mixed up with the business. The Professor, I have no doubt, has engaged Vanberg for some special purpose, and would be deeply annoyed at my interference if it came to light, though doubtless he is altogether unaware of his true identity. In short, the slightest miscarriage might be fatal to our interests.'

'Yes, I see it, madame,' said Susette. 'But I have another proposal. Why not put confidence in Mr. Dare? He would go far to serve you. I am sure of that,' concluded the woman, fixing Mrs. Bowgrave with a steady look.

The Professor's wife quailed under the maid's curious scrutiny.

'Susette,' she said, after a prolonged pause, 'I do not desire to consult Mr. Dare in this matter. I will leave it to you entirely. Tom and you shall have a thousand pounds to start

housekeeping with if he does exactly as I wish, and carries the matter through without a mistake.'

'Thank you a thousand times, madame,' cried the girl. 'I will tell Tom what you have said. He will earn the money to-night. I feel certain of that.'

'I hope he will, but, if he doesn't, something else will have to be done. I would die sooner than again meet Paul Vanberg face to face!'

Susette left the room on some errand a moment later. 'Poor madame,' she was saying to herself. 'She has been good indeed to me. There are three men now for her to play one against the other. A thousand pounds is a great sum of money; but I do not like to stake Tom's life alongside it, and, if Tom fails, the money will not be ours either.'

CHAPTER XVIII

A WILD RUSH FOR LIBERTY

NIGHT had closed in, and the *Atalanta*, with her lights up, lay for the time motionless in deep water off the shore, the high cliffs of which could be dimly discerned under the starlight in the west. A petrol-launch had put off from the vessel and reached a little black-timbered, weed-overgrown pier. Here three of the five occupants of the launch disembarked. Dare, carrying in his left hand what appeared to be a small staff or truncheon—in reality an electric torch or flashlight not then in use—led the way, followed in close line by Grimshaw and the man known as 'Tom.' The track of the trio lay upwards, over a shingly cart-road that had been cut roughly through the tall, soft, clayey cliffs which accentuate the coast-line in that part of East Anglia, the landing-place of the visitors being in the vicinity of Cromer, to the south.

The explorers went on for some minutes in silence, until they saw the lights of a wayside hostelry in the distance on their right.

'A village pub—the Sycamore,' explained Dare, in a whisper to Grimshaw. Then he turned to Tom: 'You can wait in there for us, my man, until we return from the railway-station. It's now half-past nine. Leave this place at ten exactly, the closing hour here. If we are not at yonder corner'—indicating the abrupt twist in the road they had just passed—'make straight for the shore. And, remember, we start from the pier at ten-fifteen whatever happens.'

The man addressed touched his cap, and left his companions with an air of eagerness that even the darkness could not entirely conceal.

'Do you think we are right in letting that fellow out of our sight?' muttered Grimshaw. 'My experience leads me to the conclusion that nobody of his class can be trusted when the scent of blood-money is in the air.'

'Come, Grimshaw, old fellow, your suspicions are quite unfounded. The man has been specially recommended to me for this service. He's a protégé, indeed, of the Professor, and I know that Mrs. Bowgrave thinks a lot of him. He got his present post through her.

He's a smart man on shipboard, and I fancy he's had considerable service in commissariat work in the Navy. Besides, he doesn't know you from Adam. It's questionable, in fact, whether he's even heard of your case. Few of these men ever read the papers.'

'Well, I suppose we must risk it. Let us get forward. I've come ashore with the greatest reluctance, and you may bet your undermost fiver on it that I shall never again willingly land on the shores of England. How would you like to go back to a stone cell about eight foot square for a dozen years, to be employed in making doormats and postmen's bags, and be fed on scalded oatmeal and other hideous offal? Faugh! The very thought sickens me!'

The two men went slowly forward through the darkness, each with a cigar between his lips, full now of idle, airy chat, as like a pair of ordinary visitors to Cromer in the fashionable season as could that night have anywhere been found.

Tom, the chief saloon waiter of the *Atalanta*, turned into the rather old-fashioned public-house, and, sitting down on a bench in the kitchen at the rear, called for a drink, fumbling the while with a little envelope in the inner

breast-pocket of his reefer jacket. A girl in a red blouse responded to his call. If he were to act successfully, he realized that he must act at once. To be certain in what he did, there was but a brief half-hour he could call his own, and five minutes of even that period would be gone directly.

He was in the act of taking a preliminary drink at his glass of hot rum when a second person entered the kitchen and took up a place opposite to him on the other side of the big cavernous fireplace, in the depths of which a low fire smouldered. The newcomer—a thick-set red-faced man, in the attire of a coast-guardsmen—threw a casual 'Good-evening' in Tom's direction, and the latter responded by inviting the stranger to a drink.

The two men toasted one another in the usual fashion and then remained silent for a few minutes. Presently the old grandfather's clock in the ingle-nook opposite the open door of the room chimed the three-quarters. The sudden stroke of the clock brought Tom up to concert pitch. It was now or never. Could his new companion have divined his thoughts? That was quite impossible, of course. Yet the stranger was now literally glaring at him.

'You'll know me again when ye see me,' said Tom, clumsily.

'Dare say I shall,' coolly responded the other. 'Perhaps I've seen ye afore?'

The speaker put the query in a distinctly unpleasant way, though there was nothing of actual hostility in it.

'I don't think you have,' answered Tom, flushing and trembling in spite of all effort. 'But, *I'm* not in question now.'

He rose, crossed the sanded stone floor of the kitchen, peered into the deserted passage without, and cautiously closed the door.

The other man got up quickly and stood prepared, with slightly upraised hands. 'Here,' he cried, 'what's yer game? Don't come too close.'

Tom fell slightly away.

'Sit down,' he said, hurriedly and almost in a whisper, dropping back himself to his original place on the wooden bench. 'I'm up to no mischief. Not me! Do ye want to earn a hundred pounds?'

'A hundred pounds?' echoed the other. 'I should rather think so! Where's it hidden?'

'Listen! There's a man of the name of Vanberg, a convict doing fourteen years, escaped from Durham Gaol. He's here now—in this very village! You've only to put the

salt on his tail. Be quick, and get half a dozen o' yer mates together, and the money's yours. It's as easy as breaking eggs with a regulation rolling-pin. He's clean-shaven, close-cropped, dressed in blue serge and a black navy cap. I've a letter here, with all particulars. He'll return by this road in a few minutes. Of course, you'll touch nobody excepting him. The man with him is only a casual acquaintance. I'll point him out.'

He edged towards the door as he finished speaking.

The man thus addressed came across the room and clasped the hand which Tom unconsciously extended, thrusting, by apparent accident, the latter's sleeve upward on his brown and hairy arm, and revealing two hearts tattooed in blue above the wrist. Then he flung away the hand he had grasped.

'Who's Vanberg?' he inquired, in a strain of coarse satire. 'An escaped convict, is he? Now, do I look at all like the sort o' man as 'ud go wild-goose chasing? I'm on for a sure thing. What about Bill Higgins, deserter from the Navy, who first bashed the lieutenant of the *Quicksure* over the beak with a belaying-pin? Don't ye know an old shipmate when ye sees one, Bill?'

The man from the *Atalanta* sprang to his feet like a wild cat, made a furious break for the door, and was out into the night in a second, flying madly down the indistinct road, with the coastguardsman, for that was his occupation, in close pursuit. The stout, stolid-faced girl in the red blouse, hearing the wild scurry of footsteps over the sanded floor of the passage, ran eagerly in, but only to discover that her two customers had made a sudden and mysterious exit, leaving the better portions of their drinks behind.

‘Lor,’ she said to herself. ‘Whatever be those two mad fools after?’

Then she went quickly back into the bar-parlour to painfully explain the incident in all its detail, so far as she knew it, to a deaf and doddering old man in his shirt-sleeves, the landlord and only other occupant of the Sycamore, who stood with gaping, toothless mouth in an inner doorway.

Pursued and pursuer, as they sped off without a word into the blackness of the narrow road leading to the shore, were within a dozen yards of each other, and for half a minute, during which they covered slightly over two hundred yards, the chase was an even one. But, the heavier man behind knew that he could

not long maintain the pace and that his hope lay in the uncertain gloom and in the other's want of knowledge of the uneven land over which they raced. His chance came at the abrupt turning in the lane. Here the fugitive swerved, hesitated, swung swiftly around, and the two men were first clasped in a fierce hug and then flung violently to the earth, where they lay for a second or two breathless.

The coastguardsman was the first to awaken, after the rude collision, to the quick, imperative needs of the situation. He had fallen on top of the other man, and now lifted himself laboriously to his knees by the side of his prostrate and seemingly unconscious foe. He knew that he had a pair of handcuffs available, and so he groped blindly in the region of his hip-pocket.

But the other was also thoroughly on the alert in spite of his temporary quiescence. Coming suddenly up on his hips, 'Tom' smote the representative of the law a rather ineffective blow on the right temple, slithered to one side, and was up and off seaward before his antagonist could regain his feet. But, the temporary advantage thus gained was not a great one. Blinded by the darkness of the narrow defile in which he now found himself—a defile which shut out every ray of light except that afforded

by a thin strip of moonless sky overhead—he stumbled again and again as he ran over great fallen unseen masses of soil, and he could tell by the quick patter of feet that his enemy was close in the rear, almost within hand's reach. Indeed, it was possibly imagination, but the laboured, panting breath of the man behind seemed to beat hotly upon his neck.

There was a gutter in the inshore cliff to the right, cut doubtless by the rains, and he flurried into it, impelled by the primitive instinct which turns the hunted rabbit or rat into the nearest hole. It was his last chance, and it served him well.

His antagonist was carried by the impetus of his headlong, downhill flight some distance past the fissure in the cliff, and ere he could recover himself, the fugitive had gained the brow of the grass-grown elevation and was lying prone upon the dry autumn sward with a heavy stone in his quivering right hand. The other, undaunted, followed at a trot on all fours up the precipitous incline, hands and feet sinking into the loose sand, to be met at the summit by a strange, irresistible shock which gave him the momentary impression that he had cannoned into a rock. Then he knew no more. He lay inanimate on his back,

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crouched up in the fissure, with the fallen soil over the lower half of his body, his mouth ajar, and the hollows of his unseeing eyes filling slowly with moisture. The wild rush for liberty was at an end.

The victor in the furious fight in the dark, under the quiet, twinkling stars, did not, however, stay his course. He shot swiftly over the springy turf, which yielded pleasantly to the foot and was as level as a well-kept main road. He was now on the summit of the great cliff, running off in the direction of Mundesley. Sixty or seventy feet below him lay the beach, on which the sea lapped gently about a couple of hundred yards away.

Dimly, too, he could discern the black outline of the pier against the water, and by its side there rocked the petrol launch that meant safety to him, with a ring of faint light close up to it. A sort of mist seemed to be floating around him, above the grass, as he went forward in the uncertain light, and, as his unwitting feet plunged into the curling vapour, he lurched forward with a laugh that ended in a scream of despair, for he found himself flying in mid-air.

* * * * *

Dare and Grimshaw came hurrying back

along the deserted road past the Sycamore as the aged landlord of the house, attended by his plump handmaiden, was closing and bolting the front door. Dare looked at his watch by the aid of the electric flashlight. It was five minutes past ten. Their attendant had left the public-house beyond a doubt, and would either be waiting at the corner further on, or else had preceded them to the pier.

They carried between them a heavy package slung in a stout leathern case to which strong handles were attached.

'It's a weary weight when you've gone a distance,' commented Dare, 'and it tightens on me terribly. I'm not used to being a beast of burden. I hope that fellow's at his place here.' The two men paused, and Dare emitted a low whistle, but there came no response. 'Curse him!' the speaker added. 'Where the devil has he got to?' Then he continued, in sudden alarm: 'Hold on, Grimshaw, I'm slipping! Take care!'

Grimshaw took sole possession of the bag.

'Flash your torch, Dare,' he said, as the other pulled himself together. 'If these confounded detonators and the other stuff were to get a shock we'd never be seen again for sand as long as the world lasts!'

'I believe you,' was the response. 'Why the deuce they couldn't have been sent to us at North Shields along with the dynamite I can't for the life of me make out. And it's a wonder we've got them as it is. I was afraid at one time that that idiot of a booking-clerk was going to cut up rough and tell us to call around during proper business hours in the morning.'

At last the end of the defile was reached and the two men debouched on the shore. Grimshaw stopped unexpectedly and pointed to the right.

'Isn't that someone groaning?' he asked.

They set down their bag and went on along the shore line at the base of the great beetling cliffs of sand, Dare sweeping their path with intermittent flashes of the torch.

'Good God!' exclaimed Grimshaw. 'Look here! It's our man!' He stooped as he spoke, and Dare turned the strong light full into the face of a recumbent body. Grimshaw lifted the fallen man's head, and dropped it instantly, to the accompaniment of a faint hollow groan from its owner. 'He must have tumbled over the cliff in the darkness going back to the shore, though what he was doing on the top is more than I know. He's as good as dead. His

neck's broken.' He stooped again. 'Feel here, Dare,' he added. 'There's no mistake about it.'

Dare shuddered. The scene recalled another of a somewhat similar sort, but of a still more awful type, to his mind.

'No,' he responded. 'I'm not touching it. Your word is enough. What's to be done? Are we taking him back to the ship?'

'What's the good?' asked the other. 'The man will never speak again. He's come down a sheer sixty feet. We should only have to bury him at sea, and the sailors wouldn't like it, to say nothing of the ladies on board. Let's leave him where he is. Yes—I thought so—his heart has ceased to beat. We can do nothing more.'

'But,' asked Dare, 'what are we to do about it? There will have to be explanations, and we mayn't be believed.'

'Explanations!' repeated Grimshaw. 'It's quite evident you know nothing of the sea. What is more natural than that he should have deserted? Hallo! What's this? Here's an unaddressed letter in his pocket. Hold your torch this way.'

There followed a long pause.

'Whew!' whistled Grimshaw. Then, pretend-

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ing to drop the letter, he added: 'Oh, it's nothing! Quick, let's put off without delay. There's just a possibility of treachery! Look to your revolver. Those brutes down in the launch may not be altogether genuine.'

CHAPTER XIX

THE DREAD THAT PASSED AND REAPPEARED

THE beautiful Mrs. Bowgrave sat alone in her splendid boudoir on board the *Atalanta*, crouched in intensest expectation, her rich gown of scarlet satin crumpled in utter disregard of its flowing folds and priceless laces. Her bare, rounded arms were flung in abandon across the head of the couch she occupied, her wonderful wealth of raven hair was all astray, and her strained face had taken on the deathly hue of old ivory, save that a little flag of blood fluttered in either cheek in startling contrast to her pallor. The normal softness of her dark unfathomable eyes had vanished, to be replaced by the hard stony glitter of distension. Her full lips were slightly parted, showing her even, glistening teeth, and she sat motionless, facing the door, not even seeming to breathe, like some magnificent automaton fashioned by a cunning

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artist—a mere lifeless confection of wax and flowers and silks, costly laces and gold and gleaming gems.

She had sat thus for a full hour, during the latter half of which period of stark suspense her maid had stolen up on deck a dozen times to reconnoitre and bring her the momentous tidings for which she waited. But, the supreme issue that held her enthralled could not now be long delayed. In only a few more minutes she must know the truth. Success had hitherto waited upon her like a lackey, fawning at her feet, heedless of her utter scorn and ravished by a passing smile that she might have bestown on a beggar or a dog. Would he fail her now? That was surely impossible. And, yet, why had Fate intervened and flung this sinister figure of the Past—the Past she had deemed dead and done with for ever—directly across her path?

What was that? She started to her feet. A noise on deck had aroused her from her reverie. Chains rattled, a winch snorted furiously for a few seconds, the main engines began to revolve, and the ship, which had lain for an hour listless in the heaving waves, got again under way. Then, the sound of light flying footsteps came near. The door opened

upon her, and the maid came in, her figure completely enveloped in a black cloak, only the barest glimpse of her cold eyes being visible through the narrow slit of a close-drawn hood. The woman halted, threw aside her hood, and leant forward towards her mistress.

'Ah, madame,' she whispered, thrusting a thin yet muscular arm out of her wrap and lifting it dramatically, 'it is well! I knew it would be well! The boat has just returned. It carried out five men, but only four of them have come back. One of them has—has been left behind!'

Mrs. Bowgrave uttered a tense cry that might have been either a suppressed yell or an inarticulate expression of fiercest joy, and fell back swooning on her couch.

Susette stooped down, lifted her mistress into an easy posture, and handed her a wine-glass brimming with brandy, which she gulped greedily down.

'I shall never forget this, Susette—never!' she murmured, recovering herself. 'You are more than maid to me. You are my dearest friend. And, Tom—your Tom—I must see him alone and thank him for what he has done.'

'That need not be. Tom will be amply repaid—with the thousand pounds.'

‘And yourself,’ smiled the mistress. ‘What a load has been lifted from my heart! Now I can breathe again. I have been stifling here all day in this place of torture—this antechamber of hell! But I am a new woman now. All my terrible dread has vanished. Make me presentable at once. I will go into the saloon, and play and sing for our friends, and, after that, on deck, to drink in the cool, sweet air of my new-found freedom!’

She arose and crossed to the cheval glass and surveyed herself. Then, dropping into a chair in front of the mirror, she resigned herself to Susette, bubbling over with nervous gaiety and trembling like a leaf as the firm strong fingers of the maid caught up her abundant tresses and deftly combed and patted them into place.

‘Ah!’ cried the woman at length, in a whisper of admiration. ‘Madame is herself again! The sight of you will gladden the dear master’s eyes. Yes, and I will change your dress—for the amber and black that you have not worn yet? And, I forgot—thinking of the other horrid affair—Mr. Dare made the kindest of inquiries before he left. He hoped that you were better—that you would be recovered sufficiently to join your guests in the

saloon to-night. But, I could not give him an answer then. What am I to tell him now?

'My answer will be my appearance, Susette.' She could feel the warm blood mantling in her cheeks as she spoke. 'Where is the Professor?'

'In that room where all the curious rolls of paper are kept, along with the old books and strange instruments that were brought from Greymere. He has spent the whole day there alone, except when he has come in here to visit you, madame. I saw him half-an-hour ago, when I was on deck the last time before the launch came up. He asked me to say that he will visit you at a few minutes past eleven. The work he is engaged on will be over then.'

Mrs. Bowgrave glanced at her watch, flashing in an outer circle of diamonds on the strap of her corsage. It was twenty minutes to eleven. Yes, there was time. 'Who is in the saloon?' she asked.

'Nobody, madame. It has become a glorious night. The moon is up now. They are all on deck.'

'Please go and tell Mr. Dare that I will see him at once.'

'In the saloon, madame?'

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'No—here. Remain at the head of the stairs, and come to me at once—if—if——'

'Yes, madame, I understand—if the Professor is returning.'

Susette stole out, and the instant that the boudoir door had closed between the pair a significant smile appeared on her harsh face. 'Happy madame,' she was thinking to herself. 'There are only two of them now. Some day there will be but one. And, after one, what?'

No more than a minute went by. Then the door opened softly and Kestrel Dare and Mrs. Bowgrave stood face to face. He had changed the soiled attire worn on the journey from which he had but recently returned, and was in evening dress, fresh and bright in every detail to the outstanding needle-points of his immaculate moustache. He stood for a second surveying the young queen of the evening, with all her normal tints of olive and rarest red showing in her radiant face—a face knowing nothing of sorrow or even troubled thought. Could it really be that this regal creature was his—that she had given herself to him without reservation?

He took her tenderly in his arms, careful of her dainty billowy belongings, and kissed her full red pulsing lips a dozen times.

'I need not ask you, darling,' he murmured — 'you are your own sweet self once more. Why have I been denied the light of your presence from almost the moment we came on board?'

'Yes, I am better now. But you must not stay. Kiss me again and go. I will steal out to-night and come to you when all is quiet. The Professor never awakens until morning now once his head is on the pillow. His insomnia is a thing of the past. His mental work during the day is so incessant and strenuous that he must have the soundest sleep at night. Therefore, he has recourse to drugs. Hush! I hear Susette's foot.' The speaker slipped outside, to return immediately. 'The Professor is asking for you, dearest,' she whispered hastily. 'Go to him at once—in the chart-room.'

The lovers kissed again and parted without a word. Mrs. Bowgrave returned to her seat, took up a novel, and turned the pages idly. It did not interest her. What was empty romance when she had the full, glowing actuality of life and passion surging around her? Still, if it were nothing else, the book was something that would serve to pass the time until the Professor appeared. Then she could go with

them into the saloon, and mingle, entirely unafraid at last, with their guests. Meanwhile, something else was hers—the rare bliss of anticipation—anticipation the lure of which is so immeasurably beyond the reality of achievement.

She tried to fix her attention on the story in the volume which she held before her eyes under the steady light, but her mind was wandering elsewhere. She read on and on mechanically, but the printed words flitted past without making the slightest intelligible impression, though she turned page after page in regular sequence. What the narrative was about she had not the faintest notion, but nevertheless she continued her reading. If it did nothing else, at least the purposeless perusal soothed her mind, and that was something after the crisis of alternating hope and fear she had just undergone.

Presently, moved by some unaccountable impulse, she started up, dropped the book to the floor, and looked once again into the mirror with its glittering frame of richly chased silver. Then the foolish notion occurred to her that, above the monotonous din and rumble of the ship's motion, she had heard a woman's scream. The outcry, if in reality one, had lasted but the

fraction of a second. Curiosity impelled her to open the door of her boudoir and run lightly into the private passage leading to the saloon. The apartment was deserted, but there was a sound of quick footsteps on the main staircase, though she could not from the position she occupied see the person or persons who were descending.

She let the door fall back into its place and fled back into her own apartment ; but, ere she had returned to her seat, Susette burst in upon her with dropped jaw and unspeakable terror stamped upon her colourless countenance, to collapse in a tumbled heap upon the couch.

'Susette! Susette!' cried the other, seizing the maid by the shoulders and shaking her roughly. 'Have you gone crazed? Speak! speak! Why don't you speak?'

The woman vouchsafed no answer, but fell back to her place on the couch, and sat as one transfixed, her bony finger pointing in a palsy to the door.

The mistress wheeled around, beset with unspeakable dread. The cruel mocking, menacing face and figure of Paul Vanberg stood framed in the open doorway! He did not speak for a moment, but shook a slip of pink notepaper in her ashen face.

'This is indeed an unexpected pleasure,

Felicity love,' Vanberg sneered. 'Have you no welcome for me—for your own dearest Paul? Why don't you throw yourself into my arms as in the dear old days?' He advanced into the room as he spoke, as though to take her in his embrace.

'Keep back!' she cried, her power of speech returning. 'Keep back, or I shall kill myself—and you!' She had snatched up a little revolver, and now held it straight in his face.

'Put down that toy!' he laughed, fixing her with his cruel glittering eye. 'Do you think I am afraid of death—even at your hand—the hand of my true and faithful wife?'

'For Heaven's sake do not torture or tempt me further! What is your will?' She lowered her pistol, looked helplessly around, and then flung the weapon on to the couch by the side of her prostrate maid.

'My will, do you ask, dear, sweet, loving, devoted wife? I need only speak, of course, and you will obey. Do you think that I can ever again trust you out of my sight or believe a word you say? Look at this note, traitress! So, you would have betrayed me to the law—the law in whose meshes I became entangled in my mad endeavours to provide limitless gold for your simple and modest needs—the law

from which I should have escaped scot free but for your baseness at the last crucial moment !

‘Go! go! go!’ she shrieked. ‘I will do anything—everything! But do not betray me!’

‘Betray you!’ he echoed stonily. ‘I like the word. It comes so fittingly from those false lips of yours!’

‘My husband!’ she entreated. ‘He may be here at any moment, and——’

‘Your husband! Then what am I?’

‘If it is money you need, I can, given a little time, supply you with thousands. I will see you later. I will explain all.’

‘Even this?’ he said remorselessly, holding up the letter he had taken from the pocket of the dying man.

She grovelled before him, with uplifted hands, in abject despair and humiliation.

‘Oh, do not stay here!’ she prayed. ‘Go! Go! Go! I beg of you—on my knees!’

‘Revenge is now mine,’ he said implacably. ‘I have you in the hollow of my hand. But, I will bide my time and choose my place. Your husband is coming down shortly—to introduce a new-found friend to the angel of his bosom. I have just left him. He was full of profuse apologies at having unaccountably omitted the courtesy last night. Bah, viperess!’

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I will leave you to your dotard! You may betray him—I warrant you have done so already—but don't attempt to betray me again. It will be fatal if you do. Were I to fall dead this moment, the whole story of your shame and infamy would come out without my active aid and be published to the world. I have it all arranged. Be warned in time. Remember! The next instant he was gone.

CHAPTER XX

THE FIRST GLIMPSE OF COMET CHAOS

CONSIDERABLY over a week had gone by, and the ship in which our scene is laid was now in the Mid-Atlantic, to the south, so far out of the track of trade that for several days past not another vessel had been sighted. The *Atalanta* was entirely isolated from the world. This fact, however, disturbed not a single member of the gay company on board the great pleasure yacht, as she seemed to be. In the saloon and on the upper deck high revelry held undisputed sway, dances, concerts, and entertainments of all sorts filling nearly all the waking hours of both day and night. Only one person held aloof from the wild gaiety. The Professor—shut like a hermit in the chart-room—smiled grimly in his den again and again as occasional rounds of deafening applause, or shrieks of unrestrained laughter, broke upon his ears.

The beautiful Mrs. Bowgrave led the dance with reckless, unflagging spirits, devoting herself now almost defiantly to Dare, and meeting Vanberg (or Grimshaw) openly, without the slightest restraint or hesitation on her part, for the two, without further surreptitious interviews, had come to a clear understanding.

Dorothy Collingwood was also supremely happy in her innocent girlish way, all unconscious of what was to come, and Gilbert Delaval was by her side during nearly every moment of his large leisure. But, these individual attachments attracted neither surprise nor comment. The party was made up entirely of young folk, who paired off with alacrity, and, having abundant interests of their own, had neither time nor inclination for the rôle of the looker-on who is proverbially understood to see very much more of the game than the players themselves.

Evening had set in, and the stars and moon were out, flooding the deserted heaving main with solemn grandeur. Dinner, served in the saloon, was over, and the guests had betaken themselves to the deck until the tables had been cleared. Dare, Grimshaw, and Delaval were standing together in the waist of the ship, altogether apart from the little scattered crowd of their fellow passengers on the upper deck,

when a sailor approached to inform them that the Professor requested their attendance in the chart-room. The trio followed the messenger, went quietly down the steps, and entered the cabin.

The Professor sat at the head of the long table, outspread with charts, faced at the other end by Captain Humphreys, the nominal master of the ship. The three took the places at the council board indicated by the thin bony forefinger of Professor Bowgrave, whose fleshless face bore the ashy grayness of the grave, and whose shock of silver hair, streaming to his shoulders, shone like spun metal under the great electric lamp swung directly above him.

'This is the eleventh of September, gentlemen,' began the weird president of the little council of five, in low, sombre, yet insistent tones. 'This is the eleventh, and there is no further time to waste. Two of you'—he pointed to Dare and Grimshaw—'have a knowledge of the rough outlines of my great enterprise and undertaking. A third'—he nodded to Delaval—'is an expert mechanical engineer with a practical knowledge of the inner intricacies of naval architecture, and he, therefore, must be well aware that the *Atalanta* is by no means merely what she seems to the unskilled eye.

You, Captain Humphreys, have alone been left in utter ignorance of my purpose, and, when I have unfolded my plans, you will doubtless forgive me the innocent deception that I have subjected you to for your own good—for indeed your very salvation—as well as ours.’

The man thus addressed started to his feet with a commingled look of astonishment and apprehension on his honest, ruddy, bearded face.

‘I do not comprehend your meaning, sir,’ he began nervously, as one unused to deliberative speech. ‘I am the captain of the *Atalanta*, am I not? She is under my command. I have brought her out here, and I shall, I hope, take her back in accordance with my engagement with you. This is an autumn pleasure cruise in the Atlantic, is it not?’

‘Yes, captain, you are right there. This is a pleasure cruise, but it is something more, and it is of that I would speak. I have not the slightest desire to interfere with your authority—so long as you give due regard to my wishes and instructions. You are the captain of the *Atalanta*, but I am your master and employer. I have a great scheme to be carried out, and, if I do not receive your unqualified obedience in its development, I shall at once supersede you in your command.’

'By God, we'll see about that!' roared the now enraged captain, bringing his hard mahogany fist upon the table with a bang that made it shiver. 'We'll see about that! You forget that I hold my certificate under the Board of Trade, and that I have the cleanest of clean records. I now warn you that, if you have brought me out in this ship for any unlawful purpose, I shall take the helm in my own hands and sail straight back to England. You will find that I have the crew at my back, and the British Government behind the crew!'

'Let me explain,' interposed Dare, seeking to throw oil on troubled waters. 'Captain Humphreys, you misunderstand the owner, who, in his enthusiasm, has perhaps put his position rather crudely.' He dropped his voice to the faintest whisper—a whisper that reached only the captain's ear: 'Be calm. It's a harmless craze. Let him talk.' Then, he added aloud, to the company at large: 'The Professor has called us together in solemn council. Let us give him every attention.'

As he spoke, he passed a quiet significant glance at his colleagues around the table, and Delaval, who had also risen to his feet, sat down again in mild, amused amazement.

'Supposing we have a bottle in?' suggested

Grimshaw. 'It's dry talking without a little lubrication, and it'll go a long way towards restoring the harmony that has unhappily been temporarily broken.'

The proceedings were accordingly suspended for a while, glasses were charged, and the council of five pledged one another in bumpers.

'We shall get along better now,' said Grimshaw, with a smile. 'And pass the cigars this way, Dare. Drink conduces to peace and friendship amongst all properly constituted men, and smoking to clear thinking.'

After an appreciable delay, the Professor began again, speaking in a thin, hollow voice.

'My friends,' he said, impressively, lifting his worn transparent hands above his silvered head, 'I am going to talk to you to-night about the advent of Judgment Day—not the Judgment Day of dark superstition, of irrational dogmatic theology, but of Judgment Day as its coming is to be seen in the exact, clear, colourless daylight of science. This troubled earth, on which we creep like veritable insects, has been ringing down through the limitless space of the universe for myriads of centuries; but, it is at last approaching the end of its journey—a journey that has lasted for an inconceivable period of time—a period in which ten thousand years is

infinitely less in comparison than a second in the life of a man who attains to the age, as so few of us do, of three score years and ten. But, let me not mislead you. When I speak of the end, I do not mean the material end. The world will still roll on, but only as a huge insensate ball of inorganic matter, with mankind swept from off its face, and all the other growths of animal and vegetable life entirely blotted out.' The speaker paused, and looked around inquiringly. But nobody vouchsafed a word.

'When the destruction of the earth is consummated,' he continued, 'wholesale death and desolation will be precipitated by a comet. What are comets? They can best be described as great white, wandering ghosts from outer infinitude—the lost spirits of space eternal! Their name, too, is legion. What has the immortal Kepler told us? Comets, he says, are as numerous in the heavens as fishes in the ocean—*ut pisces in oceano*. If we merely count those which traverse our limited solar system, or revolve forever about the sun, they number at least seventy-four thousand billions, a number that can only be expressed in Arabic numerals by the employment of seventeen figures—a number of which the human intellect can have

no possible conception! They come from all points of space, and wheel around the sun like moths about the flame of a candle. It is quite possible that the earth might be caught in the train of a great comet, and whisked off as a satellite. What would be humanity's fate then? Our year with its four seasons of spring, summer, autumn, and winter, might conceivably become sixty-five years longer than it now is. Our spring, summer, and autumn—the temperate seasons—would last for less than a thirteenth of that great year, and the heat in winter would be twelve hundred times less than it is now! In other words, the earth would be ribbed everywhere in perpetual ice, and animal life of every kind would cease to exist.

‘But that is not how the teeming civilisation of this twentieth century is to be extinguished as one might blow out a tallow dip and then pinch the reeking wick between his fingers. I am an old man, though I cannot remember Biela's comet of 1832; but my father often told me of it in after years, knowing my predilection for things astronomical. If you have read any scientific works on the subject, you will know that it was predicted that Biela's comet would cut into the earth's orbit before midnight on October 29, in the year mentioned, and shatter

our globe to pieces. For a time civilisation was terrorised. Men could not work by day and were afraid to sleep by night. Yet nothing happened. The prediction as to the position of the comet was quite correct. The earth's orbit was certainly crossed, but the earth at the time was forty-nine millions of miles away, and the catastrophe was averted. On the thirteenth of the present month the comet which I claim the honour of having discovered—I have named it Comet Chaos—will be here. It will not, however, crash in upon us, whirling away our attendant moon and smashing this earth into a thousand fragments. But our escape will be of the narrowest—if we are to escape at all. I have spent the whole of my later life and much of my boundless wealth in the most exhausting of studies, the most abstruse of speculations and calculations. It wants now two hours to midnight. The crisis will come in exactly forty-eight hours.'

The speaker turned to Dare. 'Are my figures correct?' he asked.

'Perfectly correct, Professor,' gravely responded the person appealed to.

'Then, let us continue,' proceeded Bowgrave. 'The comet of which I speak is now comparatively close to us—only a brief seven million

miles or so away. Yet the horror is already throwing its baleful shadow of utter ruin and desolation upon our unconscious world. It is stealing upon unwitting civilisation like a thief in the night, and when it comes there will be no escape for anybody or anything in all the world-wide continents of land and mighty oceans of water—no escape for aught but this gallant ship of ours and the handful of souls she has on board. And how are we to work out our salvation in the deluge of fire and blood? I will tell you later. I have said enough for the present. Meanwhile, come up on deck with me into the night, and, till I speak again, let not one word of what I have predicted go abroad among my guests or the ship's company.'

The little weird old man arose as he ended his speech, and moved his fleshless face to the right and the left. Then he lifted his hands aloft, as though in silent invocation to some unseen presence, and, turning his back to the table, led the way into the open air. With curious feelings of dismay at their hearts despite their better judgment, the other members of the council of five followed silently after the small frail silver-haired figure in black. He led them to a position near the

stern, and pointed across the sea to an altitude of some thirty degrees.

‘Look!’ he cried. ‘Look! Yonder is Comet Chaos!’

The silent spectators lifted their eyes and turned to the quarter indicated. A great strange ominous star blazed in the east, with a dazzling train of silver dropping behind it over the extraordinary space of nearly a dozen degrees!

‘If there be unbelievers here,’ the old man continued, ‘perhaps they will now be converted and give credence to my prophecy? Woe unto the world! Woe unto the fathers of the people! Woe unto kings and princes! Woe unto every creeping thing! And I alone shall triumph! It shall be all mine!’ He swept his skinny extended arms over the four quarters of the sky as he spoke and his weak voice broke into a childish treble. ‘All mine! A kingdom and dominion such as Cæsars never dreamed of! I shall inherit it all, and take the world itself in the hollow of my feeble, shaking hand!’

He laughed aloud in tones of demoniacal ecstasy, and, turning upon his heel, vanished into the black shadow of the port gangway under the upper deck, leaving at least two of his auditors speechless and aghast.

CHAPTER XXI

PROMPTITUDE WITH THE PISTOL

IT was noon on the day following the evening on which Professor Bowgrave had given his little council their first glimpse of Comet Chaos, the swift - approaching herald of terrestrial doom. But no sign of consternation, or even excitement, was visible among the gay and light - hearted passengers of the great yacht *Atalanta*. They were scattered in pairs and little groups over the spacious white upper deck of the vessel, with jest, flirtation, and serious love-making everywhere, most of the ladies reclining on extended deck-chairs with white or brightly-coloured parasols over their heads, which served the twofold purpose of protecting their fair complexions from the tropic sun, and of hiding the blushes and looks of confusion that occasionally followed the

sallies and compliments of the more reckless of their cavaliers.

The yacht herself lay quiescent in the waters, rocking gently from side to side in the trough of the summer sea. Her propellers were motionless, which was certainly singular, seeing that her main driving turbine engines were still in fullest activity, judging by the unceasing, deep monotonous whirr that boomed and hummed throughout the ship.

The Professor, in accordance with his usual practice, crouched low over the table of the chart-room, his eyes and ears resolutely closed and shut to all but the papers and documents over which he pored unceasingly and untiringly.

His young wife walked the upper deck with Kestrel Dare as her escort. She wore a light linen costume that seemed to flutter at every point in the midday zephyr with fluffy and feathery laces and trimmings, and she sailed proudly backward and forward like a great white bird, the plumage of which, shimmering in the sun, dazzled the eyes of all beholders and threw up the splendid perfection of its owner's rare dusky beauty, magnificent figure, and sinuous grace of carriage.

The pair halted in the course of their

promenade, and looked over the rails, as though admiring the splendid prospect of calm summer sea, deluged with sunlight.

'I suppose we shall be turning back soon, Kestrel?' she said. 'I have been so happy—so supremely happy. Yet my happiness is not complete. It is you, and you alone, I want!'

'Dearest!' he whispered.

'You, and you alone, Kestrel!' the woman went on, passionately. 'I hate this false forced life! You do not know my feelings. You are a man and cannot comprehend them. I have all that money can buy; but I am like the wretch doomed to walk through the world with a corpse tied upon his back—a corpse which none but its bearer could see or realize in all its horror and obscenity. I was foolish—yes, mad—and I sold myself for money and the luxury that follows in its train. You do not know what it is to loathe one you are supposed to love, and to hide that loathing in tender words, kisses—embraces! Faugh! I cannot live the life much longer. Sometimes—often—I awaken in the dead of night and see my grisly incubus by my side, with his yellow claws upon my shoulder, and then it is borne in to me what I am, and my thoughts turn to murder, and I can scarce refrain from taking the sleeper by

his withered throat and throttling out his life. And I could do it so easily!

She set her white teeth, clenched her firm shapely hands, and lifted her long lithe arms.

'My poor darling! Your purgatory will soon be over. We might have fled together before this voyage commenced, but it was solely on your account that I entered into it. I am not a rich man as rich men are counted nowadays, but I am on the eve of great wealth, and then you shall be freed from your present hateful associations. It is only a matter of a few more days—much less than a month at the outside—and then you shall turn your back for ever upon your—your incubus!

'The fates be thanked, Kestrel! Sometimes I think that he is an actual madman with all his fearsome prophetic jargon about the approaching end of the world. I often wonder how it is that you can suffer him, and humour him, so unweariedly; but I know that the sacrifice is for me.'

'I will be candid, darling. My patience serves a double purpose. But, see, yonder is Delaval. I have to meet him now on important business. He is one of my agents, and I have urgent need of his services. Yet I am growing doubtful of the man.'

'Perhaps I can help you there, Kestrel. He is madly in love with the insipid Miss Dorothy, and, should he prove obstinate, I could put a bar to their billing and cooing and keep them entirely apart. Let me know if you have any trouble with him, and I promise you he shall soon be brought to reason and submission.'

She waved her hand to him in pretended indifference, and Dare strode off to Delaval.

The two men greeted one another in the usual informal way, and then Delaval began, abruptly, gruffly:

'There are some things I want explaining, Mr. Dare.'

'Indeed'—Dare smiled curiously—'say on, and I will do my best to answer and enlighten you.'

'Well, I'll be plain. I've been kept too long in the dark, and if you require my services any longer I shall want to know the nature and meaning of the mysterious business you have on hand—in short, exactly what the game is. I know that we are not here altogether for health and recreation. What is the purpose of this cruise? I've just come on deck, after being admitted for the first time by your confidential man, McTavish, to the two main central compartments in the belly of the ship. I am astounded

at what I have seen. There are six tremendous electric accumulators in the first compartment, three on either side, each with a big dynamo alongside it, and these batteries are now being charged by the main engines, the tail shafts of which have been uncoupled. I find also that the three propeller shafts have been carried forward into this compartment, and that each is fitted with two one hundred horse-power electric motors.'

'That shouldn't puzzle you much, Delaval. I should have thought the presence of such auxiliary gear would have been as plain as the nose on a man's face to an expert mechanical engineer. The arrangement simply means that, if need be, we can suspend the use of steam, draw out the boiler fires, and run the ship for a more or less limited period entirely by electrical energy. Surely there's no objection to that?'

'I don't say there is—directly. But, what purpose is to be served by such duplication of the driving forces of a vessel like this? That, however, may remain aside for the present. In the second compartment I find there is a vast assortment of most curious and unusual stores, tackle, and plant. You have two complete diving outfits, with half a dozen diving suits and helmets, together with much other requisite

apparatus. There is also a heavy vehicle out of which, after a hurried examination, I can make little or nothing. I might hazard the guess that it is a species of submarine automobile, but that would be absurd.'

'Not so very absurd, perhaps,' interjected the other—'not so very absurd when I have given you my explanation.'

'I hope you will explain—and explain everything. What are we waiting here for? I cannot help entertaining the darkest of suspicions. I have counted eighteen cases of dynamite in the second compartment, and I find that the ship is pierced amidships on either side with a full-sized torpedo tube. As ammunition for these tubes, there are two dozen torpedoes of the most powerful type. Against what—against whom—are these tremendous engines of destruction to be used? The Professor, I know, is a staring lunatic so far as astronomy is concerned. But, surely you also are not out of your mind and mad enough to imagine that it is possible to profitably engage in piracy on the high seas in the opening of the twentieth century?'

'Piracy!' Dare laughed aloud, in most mirthful pretence. The two men had gained the privacy of an empty state room. 'No,

Delaval, you're not sailing under the Jolly Roger. I can guarantee you that, at any rate. Your peep into our Blue Beard's chamber seems to have somewhat upset you ; but there is really no need for wild alarm. Let us go and have a drink.'

'You needn't talk of wild alarm,' said Delaval, grimly, 'and I'm not wanting any drink at present. I fancy I know how to take care of myself, and you may take it straight from me, whether it pleases you or grieves you, that I'm going to be no party to any offence against the law of nations so far as I know that law.'

'Humph !' muttered the other. 'You're a mighty particular man ; but you needn't get your wool off. Our enterprise, as I told you at the start, has its risks ; but you have been well paid already, and if the mission is carried successfully through, you shall, as I promised at the outset, have, in addition, a big bonus.'

'But what are we about ? Are we carrying contraband of war for a foreign Power ? Or have we come out here under false colours, commissioned to secretly destroy some special ship that is expected to cross the Atlantic in these deserted latitudes ?'

'You've almost hit it this time,' said Dare.

'Yes, we are going to destroy a ship—torpedo it or blow it up with dynamite, whichever we find the better plan, and you're going to help us in ——'

The speaker broke off in alarm and confusion. Delaval had whipped out a revolver from his pocket, and was holding it close against his companion's head.

'Utter a cry, or raise a finger, and I'll blow the top of your head off!' whispered Delaval, sternly. 'Do you think you've got hold of some simple idiot, some helpless harmless tool to aid you to carry out your infamous scheme? I've had my share of roughing it; but, by God, I'm a Briton, and I hope an honest man. All the money in the world wouldn't tempt me to robbery or murder, or anything approaching such despicable crimes. You've shown your hand too early in the morning this time.'

For a few seconds the two men stood up together in the little room, motionless as statues, Delaval grim and determined, Dare cool and impassive, with a mocking light in his glittering dark-gray eye.

'I'll admit your advantage,' said Dare at length, lightly, even pleasantly. 'In fact, it wouldn't do for me to try to dispute it with a pistol clapped to my lug, as a Scotchman

would say. But, please be careful. The least inadvertent tremor of your hand might result in your committing a lamentable and entirely unnecessary murder.

Delaval did not speak, and Dare went on: 'You needn't fear. I happen to be unarmed. You really *would* oblige if you took that cocked revolver from my temple. It's all a ludicrous mistake. You haven't fallen into a nest of buccaneers. I assure you of that. You are all too premature and will apologise when I have completed the sentence you—shall I say rudely?—interrupted.'

A feeling of confusion began to creep over the sudden aggressor.

'I want your help certainly, Delaval,' Dare continued—'to destroy a ship, but your co-operation is required as a breaker, not as a wrecker. A Spanish treasure-ship rests at the bottom of the ocean well within a couple of hundred knots of where we now are, and there lies our destination.'

In a flash of thought Delaval saw the light.

'You have come out to search for sunken gold?' he queried incredulously.

'Yes,' was the answer, 'that is exactly the whole mystery of our expedition. I should have put it more plainly to you; but it seems

that I have a habit of blundering and you of mistaking the excellent intentions of your friends and acquaintances. It was something like this on our first encounter at Douglas, you remember ?'

Delaval drew away and lowered his weapon.

'It seems I'm an impetuous fool!' he remarked, shamefacedly.

'I won't be so rude as to endorse that, Delaval; but you assuredly are remarkably prompt with the pistol. However, I'm not one to bear ill-will. My speech was really, now that I come to think of it, dangerously ambiguous; but you have my word of honour that our undertaking is a thoroughly legitimate one. There are millions in it, too—in hard English and Spanish coinage. I have promised you a bonus. It is your share in the salvage of that treasure.'

Delaval fell back without further hesitation, uncocked his revolver, and thrust it back into his hip pocket.

'Forgive me!' he said frankly. 'I'm an infernal ass, and it's only to be expected that you should feel terribly sore.'

The two men exchanged hand-grips.

'There's no harm done,' said Dare, 'and there's not the slightest necessity for any

apology. I should have done precisely the same had I been in your case. I'm only thankful you didn't carry out that threat of yours to summarily remove the top of my cranium. As it happens, I have a lot of thinking to do, and could scarcely have spared my brains just at present.'

The two men laughed and went up on deck.

'We shan't be at the scene of operations until about mid-day to-morrow,' added Dare; 'but, as soon as the storage batteries are fully charged, we shall couple the tail-shafts up again and get under way—say, by about six to-night.'

CHAPTER XXII

'THE FIERY HARBINGER OF DEATH'

THE gay party in the saloon of the *Atalanta* dined that evening at a rather earlier hour than usual, and word had been passed round that there was to be a special entertainment after the meal—an entertainment in which the Professor would play for once a prominent part. Contrary to his usual custom, the old man left the chart-house before sunset and dressed himself with the uttermost care and precision. Mrs. Bowgrave shimmered in diamonds and wore a gown that might have been fashioned out of a fragment of purple cloud, dipped in a supernal dye of mist and moonbeams. She was the very high-priestess of fashion on the occasion, but all the ladies were charmingly arrayed, and the general effect was indescribably brilliant. The Professor had

chosen his guests well. The splendid board was encompassed by witching eyes, fair faces wreathed in smiles, and velvety shoulders of tenderest rose colour, emphasized by masculinity's sober evening garb of plainest black and white.

Dorothy Collingwood, attired in white, with a simple necklace of pearls around her neck, looked almost nervously around, but Delaval, who was by her side, spoke a low reassuring word.

'Darling,' he whispered into her ear, 'you are beyond all compare, in spite of the overwhelming splendour by which we are surrounded. Your charms are all your own. As Shakespeare says, I think—though my quotations are sometimes awfully rocky—to paint the lily, to gild refined gold, to add a perfume to the rose, is wanton and ridiculous excess.' And the girl went red at the compliment.

The only nakedly sinister figure at the feast sat at the head of the table. It was that of the Professor, with his pale fleshless face and voluminous mane of silver. Yet even he entered into the spirit of the feast, and his normally cold light-blue eyes beamed with joy as he looked round upon his radiant guests. A faint flush had crept into his hollow cheeks,

and again and again his thin high tones of laughter rippled down the board.

Dare, watching his opportunity, leaned backward in his chair and spoke to Grimshaw, who sat a little distance away.

'I've been observing the Professor,' he murmured. 'He is drinking freely. I only hope I shall be able to keep him in hand till this affair is over. I'll take the first opportunity of giving him a delicate hint. But he's fearfully touchy at times, and might flare up like a tiger-cat. The devil alone knows what would happen if he were to break suddenly out into one of his maniacal rhapsodies.'

But the proceedings flowed merrily, pleasantly on, and nothing untoward occurred to mar the harmony of the festive board. The tables were cleared without the guests leaving the saloon, and then a musical programme was inaugurated, and soon the air was vibrating with the wildest, gayest, most frivolous songs and melodies of the day. Bowgrave joined heartily in, and echoed and re-echoed the loud extravagant choruses with the noisiest of the revellers, clapping his white wasted hands again and again in ready recognition of all sorts and conditions of musical endeavour. The wine

had flowed freely. Many of the men were flushed in the face, and the loud laughter and unrestrained babble of certain of the softer sex plainly testified to their hilarious mood.

One reckless girl arose and loudly proclaimed her desire and intention to give the merry-makers a sample of the cake-walk, as it was really danced in certain parts of the States. Her partner, more on his balance than the lady, strove to dissuade her, but she was insistent, and he was accordingly elbowed aside in a rough but friendly fashion by the giddy crowd. A circle was quickly cleared for the intending dancer, who caught up her rich voluminous silken skirts, and, as though suddenly flung into the vortex of a whirlwind, dashed and flashed like one obsessed through a series of mad, fantastic, eccentric movements of a weirdly evil and suggestive type—a dance of a sort in which lost spirits might be expected to disport themselves in their most demoniacal moods, if as insubstantial shadows they continue tainted with aught of the grossness of mortal appetite and passion. The men cried ‘Bravo!’ again and again, clapping their hands lustily, but the women, or at least several of them, turned aside in shame and utter con-

fusion, with faces burning to purple at the wanton, outrageous degradation of their sex.

She was a frail and slender girl, with big haunting violet eyes of a normally pathetic temperament, but there was a distinctly satanic expression in them now as she tore everywhere, to and fro, up and down, backward and forward, across the impromptu stage, bent, doubled, cramped, at times almost inverted, in her extraordinary exhibition of gruesome saltatory gymnastics. Her long yellow hair had come unbound and floated around her like a fringe of flame.

Gilbert Delaval shuddered in spite of himself as he watched. Dorothy was by his side, but she had retained her seat, and her view was shut off by the crowd of eager upstanding spectators. ‘Possessed of the devil,’ he thought. ‘Now I know what the phrase means. It is revolting, obscene, fiendish!’

He thought of Burns’s haunted kirk, and of that midnight dance of the unredeemed which went on within its ruins of roofless walls and unglazed windows, to the fierce music of the howling tempest. The poet’s witches had had indeed a fitting audience and *mise en scène*, different indeed from the splendour and luxury and light on which he now gazed. Unconsciously he quoted the lines—

‘Coffins stood round like open presses
That shaw’d the deid in their last dresses,
And, by some devilish cantrip sleight,
Each in its cauld hand held a light.’

But here the black supernatural spell held life
and loveliness entranced.

The girl danced on, her breath coming now
in quick, sharp gasps and spasms. Some power
superior to herself kept her mad motion at the
floodtide, reckless of failing lung and limb, of
reeling brain and blinded eye.

The Professor turned with an uncanny
chuckle to the person next him, and whispered
gleefully :

‘It is the Dance of Death ! I have seen it
before—in the whirlpool below Niagara Falls.
Look ! She faints and falls ! Quick ! Carry
her out into the open air !’

The crowd swept in around the stricken
woman, who lay on the floor of the saloon
like a dead bird, her legs and arms bunched
grotesquely upon her frail body. Her face
had turned a ghastly blue, and white foam
fringed her closed and rigid mouth. The
appalled spectators drew aside immediately,
and two or three of the men lifted the
little inanimate figure and bore it up the
staircase to the deck, to lay it face up-

ward under the stars in the fresh cool air of heaven.

For a moment it appeared as though the entire party would have followed in a flock at the heels of the bearers of the slight human burden, but the foremost of the pressing crowd paused at the foot of the steps, held back by the uplifted hands of the Professor, who sprang up transfigured, filling the great apartment with a majestic and magnetic presence. From a pigmy he seemed in the eyes of the startled unlookers to have swollen to the proportions of a giant.

'Go back!' he cried—'back to your seats, my friends. I have something to say to you now. I shall not keep you long. I have just told this gentleman'—he touched a bystander on the shoulder—'that we have witnessed a Dance of Death—perhaps I might more appropriately call it a dance on the brink of the sheer precipice of universal desolation that awaits this great unwitting world of ours!'

He paused, for Kestrel Dare had come quickly forward and strove to speak to him.

'Stand away, Dare,' he said in peremptory tones. 'Stand away until I am done. Let no man interrupt me in the deliverance of my great prophetic message touching the cataclysm

of insensate ruin! I, and I alone, am master here!

He leant forward defiantly, and Dare unwillingly obeyed, falling back sullenly upon an ottoman at the rear of the eager little assemblage.

‘My friends,’ continued the Professor, resuming his speech, ‘I am talking to you on a theme tremendous, not of our own petty personal concerns or the welfare of our country, but of the entire existence of civilization as we know it. Has it ever occurred to you how brief and new is this moral world of ours? The earth herself has hurtled through space for countless æons—vast periods of time in which a million years are but as a paltry human week—yet, how raw and unformed is our civilization! It is a mere thing of yesterday. If we go back less than a score of centuries, we go back to prehistoric times—times when the Briton, who is the acme of modern culture, ran wild in the woods, naked or clothed in undressed skins, and feeding on raw flesh and uncultivated herbs. Even such mighty monuments of antiquity as the pyramids are probably not more than five or six thousand years old. Yet they mark an era with which the present is absolutely unlinked. Why is this? The best of us are but mole-eyed

philosophers, seeing no further than our noses and groping vainly in the dark. Yet dim flashes of eternal truth come to us at times. Is it not more than merely probable that some great physical agency precipitates, at irregular intervals of a few thousand years, world-wide disaster that wipes out kingdoms and continents, leaving but a handful of miserable survivors to inherit and repopulate the earth—survivors compelled by destitution and danger to fight as savages for hundreds of years for a bare existence before they can commence to build up anew from vague memory and tradition the arts and sciences that give mankind its unquestioned empire over brute creation?

‘And now let us pause and ask ourselves what is the agency adequate enough and most likely to produce a disaster calculated to envelop the entire earth in its baleful embrace? When our world was in its infancy, and infinitely more fluid and thinner in the crust than it is to-day, a mighty earthquake might perhaps have rent it in twain. But that time is past. Ruin, when it comes, must come from the awful outer void of the universe itself. Its active force will be one of those lost wandering stars, from out the womb of the unknown and unknowable,

which visit us occasionally and happily flash past in a general way without causing material injury to our planet. These stars are classified in scientific terminology as comets. They journey around the sun at irregular intervals, and the completion of their orbits, which in the case of the earth itself takes but a brief twelve months, occupies anything from twenty or thirty years to eighty or ninety thousand centuries! This is almost unthinkable; yet it is the solid fact. The deluge is something more than a mere piece of Biblical mythology. It was produced by the comet which revisited us in 1680, and which, according to the profound Whiston, after having drowned our globe in the days of Noah, is destined to bring about its destruction by fire. We have an inner consciousness of this. Deep down in the mind of common humanity the horror of comets lingers, and there is a terribly tangible reason for that horror. Without a doubt primitive man, out of his own bitter experience, handed down to his successors the knowledge that these strange visitants to our sphere bring in their train potential doom unutterable for the peoples of this earth.'

The speaker paused and glanced critically over his audience. Its attention was partially

flagging. One or two of the occupants of the saloon had even turned their backs upon him, and were gazing idly at the costly paintings on the walls, wondering when the interminable oration would end.

‘Awake! Arouse yourselves!’ he shrieked, bringing every soul to instant attention by his wild, unearthly vehemence. ‘I have wearied you with my speech, but it is closing. All things come at last to an end, as will the world—to-morrow! To-morrow is Judgment Day—the Judgment Day of science! Come with me on deck, and I will show you the fiery harbinger of death, set as a sign in the sky.’

He sprang from his place as he spoke, and raced up the staircase, followed by a panic-stricken, demoralised mob fleeing blindly from the wrath to come, and knowing not in what direction their chance of safety lay.

He reached the upper deck and stood under the dark-green vault of heaven surrounded by his affrighted guests. Then, after the briefest pause, he pointed to the east.

A gigantic star that seemed to blaze directly in the ashen faces of the little multitude was rising upon the horizon, with a great crescent of silver flame flaring away at its base. In the eyes of the astounded watchers, it took the

awful shape of a great white vengeful hand brandishing before them a pitiless sword up-raised to smite earth, sea, and sky into nothingness.

‘Look, my friends,’ he cried, ‘I have not misled you. Yonder is Comet Chaos, the fiery harbinger of death, winging its mighty way towards this sentenced world of ours at the lightning speed of one hundred and sixty thousand miles an hour! Judgment Day is at hand! Judgment Day is at hand! It comes in the shape of a conflagration compared with which the devastation of Sodom and Gomorrah, the Cities of the Plain, was not worthy even of passing record! But be not dismayed. I am with you, and I will save you. That is why you are here, why I have brought out this wonderful ship of mine, the *Atalanta*, which I mean to sink down into the depths of the ocean to-morrow night whilst the earth is making its terrible seven hours’ passage through the all-consuming fiery train of yonder comet!’

A woman shrieked aloud and fell in a merciful swoon, and two or three others turned and endeavoured to regain the saloon. But the bulk of the crowd rushed purposelessly hither and thither over the deck. One dis-

tracted girl sprang on to the outer rail, and sought to fling herself into the sea, but she was dragged back again to the deck and then hurried away below by a friend.

'The Last Day! The Last Day!' someone was wailing aloud.

'Yes, the very last—for this poor girl here!' said Gilbert Delaval, rising from his place by the side of the little dancer he had assisted to carry to the deck but a brief half-hour before. 'The doctor has pronounced her dead. It is a case of heart disease, and the end has been precipitated by fierce excitement. But what is all the bother about? What is this the Professor is howling about Judgment Day? I have been on deck all the time he was speaking, and have heard nothing.'

He turned about inquiringly, but no one answered him, and the next instant Dorothy Collingwood came up and fell into his arms.

'Oh, Gilbert, Gilbert!' the terrified girl sobbed. 'Have you heard those terrible tidings? Oh, tell me, tell me, can there possibly be any truth in the Professor's awful predictions?'

He drew the shuddering girl close to his heart, kissed her tenderly, and led her away from the frantic, gesticulating crowd.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE CONSPIRACY REVEALED

It was going on for midnight when Gilbert Delaval, having seen Dorothy safely bestowed below, away from the almost maniacal mob which had transformed the saloon into a bedlam, knocked at the door of Kestrel Dare's room and entered without further ceremony.

'What is all this lunacy?' he asked, almost fiercely. 'I suppose you know that the Professor has broken out again—in public this time, before the whole body of passengers—with his wild hysterical ravings about the advent of Judgment Day, which it appears is due to-morrow!'

Dare chuckled cynically and nodded his head, but did not speak.

'This sort of thing mustn't be allowed to continue,' went on Delaval. 'If I were the captain of this ship, owner though he be, I

shouldn't for a moment hesitate about putting the old man under forcible restraint. That course seems to me to be demanded in the interests of common safety. Do you know that half the passengers, and at least three parts of the women, are at this moment reduced to utter despair by the hold the Professor's harangue has taken upon their fevered imagination? Two or three of the women have attempted to jump overboard, one man has cut his throat and is actually dying, and many others are prostrate and speechless. The captain has had to put half-a-dozen of his best men on duty in and about the saloon, and I am not sure that even the sailors can be reckoned on. You know how full they are of silly superstitious fears. Suppose a mutiny occurs, what might not happen with all these women at the mercy of drink-maddened desperadoes? What do you propose? The outlook is of the gravest possible nature.'

'I don't know what to propose,' said Dare, with an assumption of indifference. 'And, as you must be aware, I am not the Professor's keeper. I did my best to hold him back and failed. If the strait-jacket's your cure, get it applied by all means; but don't go to work in that direction before you've spoken to me.'

The passengers, to my mind, are suffering from a mixture of drink and monomania, but it will all come right in the morning, when they have sobered up and had their heads well soused in cold sea water. The cowardly, yelping fools will see the situation very differently in the broad daylight. Things have fallen out rather curiously, haven't they? I knew that the old man had a display of astronomical fireworks up his sleeve for the thirteenth—to-morrow—but I never dreamt that Nature herself would bolster up his craze by furnishing him with a bona fide comet. Rather a singular coincidence. It's a splendid star, isn't it? I suppose the world will eventually wind up that way—perhaps in another million years!

He laughed aloud in lazy scorn.

'I'm glad you take it so lightly,' said Delaval, sullenly. 'To me there's little of jest about it.'

'I agree with you,' said the other. 'But how was it to be helped? After all is said and done, Bowgrave is the owner of the *Atalanta*, and we must grin and bear as best we can his playful little idiosyncrasies. But let's to business. Before noon to-morrow we shall be at our destination, and so I may as well now make to you the clean breast that I was about to make the other day when you cut up so

rough. First of all—and it's absolutely marvellous you haven't even guessed it!—the *Atalanta's* a submarine ship, and I may safely say that she's by far the greatest and most perfect submarine that has ever put out of port.'

Delaval started back with a loud exclamation on his lips.

'Well I'll be—jiggered!' he cried. 'I ought to have seen it at a glance.' He paused, and then went on: 'But surely you don't mean to tell me that it is your intention to submerge this ship, with all these excitable men and women on board, for the purpose of exploring the floor of the ocean in quest of sunken treasure? Don't tell me you're mad enough for that?'

Dare nodded affirmatively, with a queer mocking smile on his lips.

'Why, man,' asked Delaval, 'have you the faintest idea what you are undertaking? I am supposed to be an expert in submarines, but I should tremble to undertake the job even with nobody on board but the best picked crew of sailors and engineers that could be got together in the whole of Britain. Why, I may as well tell you at once that the project is not merely an outrageous one, but utterly and absurdly impossible into the bargain.'

'Do you think so, Delaval?' came the light, easy query.

'Do I *think* so? Why, I am absolutely convinced on the subject. Submarine navigation, let me tell you, is in its infancy. All the submarines that have ever sailed the sea are only such in little more than name. Hitherto they have been but the tiniest craft, employed for experimental war purposes, and it is only necessary for them to go a few yards below the surface of the water, merely to keep out of sight of the ships they are attacking. But here you're actually proposing to sink a great ship, with about one hundred souls on board, to the bed of the Atlantic! Why, man, you'd have to go a depth of anything from eighteen hundred to over four thousand fathoms—between two and five miles or more! And the pressure where your sunken ship lies would crumple up the stout steel hull of the *Atalanta* as I would crush a paper bag or a child's toy balloon! I thought the diving idea a Jules Verne sort of dream; but this is beyond all conception ridiculous. We'd assuredly never see daylight again. It would be cold-blooded suicide—wholesale *felo de se*!'

'When you have done demonstrating the complete impracticability of my idea,' said Dare,

calmly, 'I will lay my plans before you and endeavour to make them clear to you. As it happens, the ship we go in search of—the *Valladolid*—does not lie on the bed of the great main lower floor of the ocean. You will remember her loss was brought about by fire, and that her crew remained with her to the last possible moment, and then, being unable to get at the gold, put off in boats and watched her founder after the store of gunpowder she carried had exploded. The captain had hoped to save the specie by running her ashore on the edge of the Dent du Loup, a rock that rises above the water like a great curved tooth. This fang is in reality the summit of a submerged mountain, towering full three miles above the floor of the Atlantic. The Spanish Government might have had the gold they can so badly spare long ago had their submarine geography been up to date, which it most decidedly isn't. They believe the *Valladolid* to be resting in eternal security in Neptune's dark impenetrable depths miles below the surface. Yet she is not more than a paltry hundred fathoms down, and, therefore, quite accessible. The rock comes up from a great plateau on the top of the mountain—a plateau having an area of at

least eight or ten square miles — and the treasure ship awaits us there. Its gold is already almost as good as ours!

‘You’ve certainly gone a round-about way to get hold of it,’ commented Delaval. ‘Why should this picnic party have been essential to your venture?’

‘Isn’t it plain to you yet?’ asked the other, with a rising note in his voice. ‘This ship’s cost over a quarter of a million, and has been specially built for the job. Where could I have raised the money for her construction if I had not found the Professor and worked my little scheme in with his nice little agreeable end-of-the-world eccentricity? You see, I’m being quite candid with you.’

‘And you call yourself an honourable man?’ queried Delaval, amazed at the audacity of the revelation. ‘And, if I say that I will have nothing to do with your infamous plot, and that I shall feel it my duty to at once see Captain Humphreys and tell him all, what then?’ He paused, fully on the alert, with his hand upon the butt of his revolver.

‘I leave you quite free in the matter,’ responded Dare, in the most even of tones. ‘Excuse me, there is someone outside in the corridor.’ He slipped out of the little cabin,

closed the iron door behind him, and shot the bolt on the outer side into its socket.

'It is my turn this time, Delaval,' he cried out to his sudden prisoner. 'You will be quite safe here until we need you. You will find much to interest and amuse you in the locker—plans of the ship, of the engines, and of the submarine mechanism.'

Delaval did not reply, but commenced a furious onslaught upon the door with the heavy leg of a swing table that he had promptly torn from its position.

But he quickly realised that his attack upon the solid door was worse than useless. It was built to withstand very much more than any force he could bring to bear against it, and his fierce assault was only productive of physical exhaustion and confusion of thought. So he ceased his battery.

Dare had not left his position outside. He spoke presently.

'If you're prepared to listen to reason, Delaval,' he began, 'I'll let you out again—on receiving your word of honour that you will respect the confidence I have placed in you and give me your best assistance in my venture.'

'My word of honour! How can I pledge my honour to help you to carry through a

dishonourable conspiracy — a conspiracy in which not only our own lives but the lives of a number of helpless women will be at stake? Think what a horrible, long-enduring death miscarriage on our part would mean for them! Don't imagine that I fear for myself. Let us go on to the mainland and put our passengers ashore. Then, with the Professor's sanction, we can return with a volunteer crew, knowing exactly what we are after. I would be with you all the time and all the way.'

'Quite impossible, Delaval, I tell you,' was the answer. 'It is now or never. Are you with us? No? Well, you can think it over. You'll have plenty of time—exactly twelve hours. I'll look you up at breakfast time.'

The speaker went on along the narrow passage and locked the main door at the further end giving access to it. He turned out into the open. Though nearly midnight, it was still almost as light as day. The entire atmosphere was permeated with a kind of phosphorescent luminosity, and the giant Comet Chaos, mounting steadily upward in the heavens, hung now almost directly over the stern of the *Atalanta*, like a white pursuing ghost that had marked down the ship and her human freight for destruction and death.

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He ascended to the bridge-house, and nodded to the captain, who was standing close to the man at the wheel, with a chart outspread on the table at one side of the little octagonal structure.

'Good-evening, Dare,' said the captain—it was Grimshaw—with an air of deep concern. 'You'll be surprised to see me here, but we've had a sad accident. Poor Captain Humphreys slipped on the ladder yonder two hours ago and pitched to the main deck on the back of his head. The doctor's with him in his cabin, and he's quite insensible. It's a case of concussion of the brain. So I've taken over the command for the time being.'

'Indeed I' cried the newcomer, exchanging a significant glance with the other. 'That's shocking news. But it's something to be thankful for that you're available.'

Captain Grimshaw crossed to the wheel, took it over, and dispatched the sailor on some errand.

'There was nothing else for it,' he muttered, as the man closed the door behind him. 'The old idiot would have queered our pitch entirely if he'd got but an inkling of our intentions. I just gave him a gentle love tap over the back of the jimmy with a belaying-pin when he wasn't looking. That's the plain truth.'

'I hope you haven't killed the old chap,' said the other.

'Not at all. You can't kill those sort. They always either die of old age or drink themselves into the cemetery. He's a thick-skulled Tyne-sider from Felling. I've given him his medicine exactly on the right spot. There'll be no lasting bad effects, but for the next month he'll be very little more trouble than a sick baby. And how are ye working that other stubborn brute, Delaval?'

Dare laughed, but the effort was a rather uneasy one.

'I've got him a prisoner in my room,' he said, 'securely locked up. He refuses to work, but he'll come to his porridge before his porridge comes to him. You can bet on that. And what about poor little Miss Dacre?'

'I read the Burial Service over her half an hour ago,' responded Grimshaw, 'committing her body to the deep in the presence of half a dozen of her friends, keeping it quite dark from the crew. It was no use waiting for daylight, for, if I'm any judge, to-morrow will bring its own work and responsibilities with a vengeance. But here's the mate. Let's go down below and wash our necks. Reading aloud in the open air has given me a mouth and a throat as dry as—the ventricle of an aged Sheeny money-lender!'

CHAPTER XXIV

TRAPPING PASSENGERS AND CREW

BROAD daylight had returned again, and the fierce tropical sun glared down out of a sky of brass. The *Atalanta* was steaming steadily forward over the deep blue water, lifting lazily in long low rollers, and the white upper deck radiated with the intense heat. Only the faintest breeze was blowing, and that was travelling with the ship, so that the air seemed stagnant.

Dare and Captain Grimshaw stood forward and gazed out over the port bow.

'Yonder,' said the latter, 'is the Dent du Loup.' He indicated a dark purple column near the horizon. 'We are some ten miles from it. When I make my observations at noonday I shall be able to tell to within a mile where the *Valladolid* lies. Everything will be ready for action directly. This is a superb boat of

ours. I feel confident that I shall be able to manœuvre her under water as easily as on the surface.'

'Yes, and I can help you, captain. Though it's not in any way my profession, I have a remarkable aptitude for mechanics, and I have thoroughly studied the main features of the ship. Isn't it nearly time that we began to clear the decks?'

'Not for an hour or so,' said the other. 'We must get her thoroughly fastened down first, and the passengers out of the way. We'll get them all into the saloon shortly and run out the steel door that shuts off the staircase at an exact level with the main deck. Then out must go all the fires in the stokehole, and every ounce of ash, hot or cold, must be shot overboard. There must be nothing left anywhere to foul the atmosphere seeing that once we are hermetically sealed every cubic foot of air will be unspeakably precious.'

'And the masts and rigging?' queried Dare.

'That's all provided for. I've picked men ready for the job, and I know they can be relied on. The top hamper is to go overboard in its entirety—masts, rigging, upper deck, the houses, and all obstructions. They'll be shorn

off as clean as a whistle. It would be inviting disaster to leave a single stick standing.'

'I'm quite aware of that, captain. What's the temper of the crew? Do they suspect anything?'

'They are as innocent as children of what we are about. I'll run her along another seven miles, and then out go the fires, and to work we'll get. Don't forget your revolvers. Have them both loaded, and put a canister of cartridges in both of your outer jacket pockets. A little compulsion may have to be applied at the last moment.'

Presently the Professor strolled up to where the pair were standing. He was dressed in a gray tweed lounge suit, with white waistcoat and cap, and seemed thoroughly at his ease. He put a few questions touching the business in hand, and then, lighting a cigar, strolled off aft with an easy indifferent air, and mingled with the general body of his guests, who had come out into the sunshine, and were beginning to look upon their experiences of the preceding night as something merely of the nature of an ugly dream. All the storm and wild hysteria of the past was obliterated from his face and voice, to be replaced by smiles and light pleasant words.

The ship hove to, and lay clearly within sight of the great curved fang of inky rock to the south-west. Then the ash tackle rattled inside the stokehole ventilators, and six firemen, bared to the waist, and covered from head to foot with soot and gray dust, came up on deck and commenced the work of clearing out the glowing debris that was being withdrawn from the furnaces and shot into the sea with a dispatch that soon almost completely enveloped the workers in a cloud of steam. A big can of liquid had been carried to them as an incentive, and they took their turns at the welcome refreshment, wiping their parched mouths on sweat-cloths and eagerly swallowing the grateful ale.

Grimshaw looked aft over his shoulder. He could see the Professor amidst his guests, passing lightly from one little group to another. Some of the passengers seemed a trifle cool towards their host, for their terror and suspicion had not been entirely dissipated, but the majority responded readily to his advances. For the time they were oblivious even to the dreadful visitation of death on the night before.

‘How’s the old man going to get every one of them below?’ asked the captain.

‘That’s an easy job. He’s telling them that this is his birthday—the thirteenth of Septem-

ber—and that a modest little champagne lunch is being laid for the interesting occasion.'

'Pretty good device,' laughed Grimshaw. 'But, but—— Hadn't you better take care? I've two men 'tween decks waiting the signal to shoot home the horizontal watertight door cutting off egress from the saloon. He mustn't be left below when we've done it. Why, they'll go just mad for a time when they find how they've been trapped. They'd lynch him in their despair and passion for a certainty.'

'All that is provided for,' said Dare. 'Mrs. Bowgrave is supposed to be indisposed in her own apartments—off the saloon, you know. As soon as the crowd have drunk the Professor's health, I'll whip him into his private passage, and quietly bolt the door, which is as tough as the front of a safe.'

Dare went off along the sunlit deck, and followed the gay throng down into the saloon. The air of the spacious apartment was filled with the chatter and hum of merry conversation, and the loud popping of corks told its own festive tale.

Glasses were charged, and one of the crowd, at the previous suggestion of Dare, stood up upon an ottoman and proposed long life and health and all manner of possible happiness to

the Professor and his charming partner. The toast was received with loudest applause. Glasses were emptied at a gulp, a lady fell into place at the pianoforte, and the old familiar chorus—'For he's a jolly good fellow'—was roared enthusiastically out, followed by the usual deafening hurrahs.

At this juncture, as a matter of course, everybody looked round for the hero of the moment. But there came a little hitch in the proceedings. He was not visible for a few seconds. His diminutive form was temporarily lost in the confusion of the crowd. By what appeared to be a concerted movement, though it was nothing of the sort, the guests drew off from either side of the long snowy central table.

The Professor had vanished unnoticed in the pleasant excitement, as also had Dare.

A broad shaft of intense light was flooding the wide, open staircase, and one of the men nearest to it ran lightly up two or three steps, as if intent on making investigation on deck. But he started back with a cry of awe and utter astonishment. A great black shutter had flashed across the stairs almost grazing his head in its flight, and shadowy gloom instantly took the place of the hot yellow streaming sunshine.

Then the two headlights in the ceiling were

blotted out as though by magic, and the festive crowd were plunged into Egyptian darkness. For a second or two there was perfect silence. Then a mad chorus of yells and groans and curses broke upon the black air, to the accompaniment of the bell-like crash of glasses innumerable falling from upraised nerveless hands.

The next instant the electric lamps burst out in all their brilliance, and for a time the clamour of the crowd ceased altogether, and its terror was also somewhat abated.

Bowgrave and Dare, crouching behind the outer side of the iron door, listened to the tumult and outcry.

'It grieves me deeply,' said the former at length, 'to take so extreme and high-handed a step, but they will thank me for it on their bended knees—when they realise to the full the awful fate from which I have rescued them in spite of themselves.'

'Yes,' acquiesced Dare, 'but hadn't we better be getting on deck? Much remains yet to be done, and my presence is essential.'

'One moment,' protested the Professor, 'one moment and I am done. I will leave you then and join my wife in her boudoir. I am a man of thought, not of action—a philosopher, not

a practical administrator. I must leave the carrying out of the details implicitly in your hands.'

Dare bowed.

'Your confidence is not misplaced,' he said.

'No,' was the answer. 'You are my right hand and my mainstay. Let nothing be left undone. Is it not terrible even to reflect upon what is about to come to pass to this fair smiling earth of ours? To-day it is all green fields and beauty, summer seas and sweet blue skies. To-morrow, ay, this very night—in another ten brief hours—the earth will be plunging in the centre of the train of Comet Chaos, and the hellish hail of fire that will then be breaking everywhere over its surface—by sea and land, on the open mountain top and in the low sequestered valley—will utterly devastate nature and our puny mortal civilization. Perhaps the worst scenes will be in the great cities, the streets and open places of which will everywhere be strewn to a depth of several feet with the ashes of red-hot, calcined meteorites, whilst human structures of all kinds—places of worship and public buildings, factories and great emporiums of commerce, the lordly mansions of the rich and the crowded slum tenements of the poor—will blaze up to the skies in one

gigantic holocaust, with mighty rolling clouds of blackest vapour overhead as the limitless funereal pall of universal death! But *we* shall live through it, and *I*, a weak old man, shall, by means of my intellect, become the master of the world!

The pair walked forward, Dare taking the precaution to close a second door in the passage, so that the noise of the imprisoned passengers might be yet more effectually shut out. The Professor turned into the boudoir, where Mrs. Bowgrave, Dorothy Collingwood, and the maid Susette were huddled together in indefinable dread at the strange outcry that had reached their ears a few moments before.

Dare ran lightly up the steps and darted out on to the open deck without a pause. His celerity was his salvation. As he slipped out from under the hood of the companion-way a crowbar flashed past his face. Had the quick aim been true, the formidable implement would have smashed in his skull as easily as an egg is broken with the knife of the maker of an omelette. But Dare's hour was not yet. He sprang aside with a revolver in his ready hand and faced his unknown foe.

It was the redoubtable Bunter, the broad-built Tyneside keelman whom Vanberg had

crimped at North Shields to secure his own safety.

Dare did not speak, but advanced inch by inch upon his adversary until the muzzle of his weapon was nearly touching the latter's mouth. He had the fellow completely at his mercy, and Bunter concluded, with sinking heart, that all was up and that his agony was merely being pitilessly prolonged. But the revolver did not ring out its deadly message. Bunter had dropped the crowbar to the deck.

'Go forward,' said Dare, at length. 'And don't let me see your innocent face within range again to-day, or I'll spoil its beauty with a bullet right between your piggish, cowardly eyes.'

Bunter slunk gladly off, with an all-gone feeling at the knees, and the victor in the brief, unexpected encounter ran up the steps to the bridge-house. As he did so, he was startled by the ping of a bullet, which passed close overhead, and raced for cover to the house.

Grimshaw was there alone, with the sash of the front window dropped and a heavy Navy revolver in his hand, trained on the entrance to the forecastle.

Dare threw a quick glance forward. The deck was entirely deserted.

‘What’s up?’ he asked.

‘Mutiny!’ ejaculated the other. ‘McTavish has just been up here to tell me. Things are looking a trifle unpleasant. Humphreys has got his senses back, and he’s been kind enough to tell his attendant that I made a deliberate attempt to murder him. What’s still worse is that the entire story of that craze of the Professor’s is common property among the crew. I’ve got a dozen men ready to do what I want—and the number’s sufficient—but I fancy they’ve no liking for this target practice, and so it isn’t likely that they’ll show up till the shooting’s over. Those rats in the foc’sle swear they’ll die sooner than let the ship go down; but I think I can handle them. The one pity is that they’ve got a gun.’

Evidence corroborative of this latter statement was promptly forthcoming. As Grimshaw was speaking a second bullet whistled aft from some place of concealment in the bows, tore a slight red furrow in the captain’s cheek, and ploughed its way through the stout teak wall of the bridge-house.

‘Damnation!’ roared Grimshaw, clapping his hand to his jaw. ‘That settles it. It’s no blessed use waiting here to be potted.’

The two men dropped quickly to their knees

and stole out of the house on all fours. The next minute they were in safety for the time being.

‘What do you propose?’ asked Dare.

‘I scarcely know,’ responded the other. ‘A revolver’s of little use among that crew. They’ll not come out into the open, and, though they’re all skulking somewhere in the bows, you cannot make out even a nose. Ah! I’ve got it! There’s a big punt gun in your room, if it hasn’t been stolen. We’ll load it up with half a pound of small shot, and, if we can’t clear them below then, I’m a Dutchman. By Heaven, I’ll scrape and sting their swinish sides for them! And, just think of it, the whole of the God-forsaken officers are with the mutineers!’

The men forward were not slow to mark the fact that the bridge had been deserted, and after a time, one or two of the bolder spirits among them even ventured out of their places of concealment. Their slow advance aft was not checked, and other of their companions crept out and joined them. Five minutes went by, and the spirits of the mutineers—if they could be so called—rose perceptibly. Their champion with the gun—an old Lee-Metford—stood with the weapon across his arm. Had

the enemy capitulated without striking a blow? A dozen of the sailors had now come bodily out, and the heads and arms of several others could be seen cautiously lifting above the little impromptu barricades about the bow where the main body lurked.

Then, without the slightest warning, a spreading hail of lead swept the deck, followed by a thunderous boom, and half-a-dozen forms were writhing and sprawling on the white planks. The survivors stood staggered and irresolute for a second or two and then broke for the forecastle, tumbling one over the other in their mad haste and panic. All but one of the wounded men crawled slowly and painfully after their comrades, and he remained prone on his back, with wide open staring eyes unblinking in the burning sun.

Grimshaw ran up to the bridge-house, shouted a hasty message down the speaking-tube to the engine-room, and directly afterwards, an impregnable watertight door slid forward over the descent to the forecastle flush with the main deck. The ship lay at the mercy of the two conspirators.

Grimshaw's allies in the stoke-hole and engine-room came up the ladders and peered out of the hatchways. They had no particular

stomach for bloodshed—least of all if there was any possibility of their being the victims—but, short of that, they were prepared to do anything that was asked of them. The golden lure of a thousand pounds apiece had been dangled before them, and it represented wealth beyond the wildest of their dreams.

The captain glanced down at them.

‘Hurry up, my lads!’ he cried. ‘The fighting’s over and the coast is clear. Throw yon carrion overboard!’

The men gathered in a silent circle around the prone figure upon the deck, with its wide-open eyes still staring steadily at the blazing sun.

‘Poor old Billy!’ sighed one of the group. ‘Dead as a haddock! Yet there isn’t a wound on ’im as I can see.’

Reluctantly they lifted their grim burden to the bulwarks, where it lay limp for a minute. Then one sailor, more daring than the rest, uncovered his head, threw aside his cap, took the dead man’s raw, red, naked, dangling heels in his hands, lifted them over his head, and the corpse turned a ludicrous somersault and plashed into the water. It disappeared in a little whirlpool, came to the surface again, and then sank slowly out of sight.

‘Now for business,’ said Grimshaw, genially,

coming down from the bridge, followed by Dare. 'Where's the carpenter? Oh, you're there, Tubbs. Both the masts must go. Get out your axes and cut them off close to the main deck.'

The work was soon done, for the masts were of pine and of slender girth, being merely needed for the display of flags, signals, and lamps. One after the other they came down with a crash upon the massive bulwarks, lifted their ragged, rough-hewn bases, and slid into the sea, dangling half in and half out of the water until the shrouds that still held them attached to the vessel had been severed. The davits were all swung out and the lifeboats lowered and cast adrift. Only the petrol-launch of all the small craft was retained, and she was lashed securely down under the starboard bulwark near the stern.

'It seems a thousand pities to wreck the *Atalanta* thus,' said Grimshaw, as he and his companion watched the operations. 'But all this heavy top lumber would be the greatest peril once we get below. It might get entangled with rocks, or wreckage, or gigantic submarine plants, and, were we once in that sort of a mess, it would be all up. There'd be no earthly hope of release.'

Dare shuddered in spite of himself.

'It won't bear thinking of,' he remarked.

'It won't,' agreed Grimshaw. 'We should have to remain in the depths, helpless, for an indefinite period—dying slowly and by most minute degrees, not of starvation, or even of thirst, but of want of air, scarcely able to realise that the implacable grip of death was at our throats choking the life out of us! Yet despair would set in at once, for all hope of escape would have to be abandoned from the outset.'

'We have a large store of air in the cylinders, under a pressure of a thousand atmospheres. It would take some using up, if our ventilating apparatus keeps right.'

'All told,' said Grimshaw, 'we might last without serious discomfort for a week. But what would come after? We should go pale as ghosts, scarcely able to creep about, and the weakest would die and become a pestilence to the living. Some of us would go mad with the black horror of it. Others would fly to drink and become transformed into raging devils. I fancy that is how I should end myself.'

He paused, as if intending to dig still deeper into the pit of inexhaustible terrors.

‘For God’s sake, close it off, Grimshaw!’ begged Dare. ‘What time is this for conjuring up the grisly nightmares of an airless, sunless grave? Besides, you forget, there would always be a quick remedy and release. I should explode our great store of dynamite long before we had reached that gruesome, unspeakable stage at which you hint so brutally.’

‘Bah!’ laughed Grimshaw, his mood suddenly changing. ‘We are prating like a couple of fearsome old wives. What can happen to us with the admirable instrument that we have in our hands? Nothing whatever!’

The nuts of the great bolts screwed in the deck girders to keep the various houses and coamings in position were being rapidly unscrewed, whilst the bridge and upper deck, a structure entirely of wood with the exception of its steel standards, had been detached from the hull, remaining in their places merely by gravity, like loose tables on a floor, and the hatchings were hermetically closed one after the other by great sliding horizontal doors.

‘We shall drop steadily under in a very few minutes now,’ said Grimshaw, ‘and all this loose debris and lumber about the deck will be lifted up by the rush of the water and swept away, leaving us clear and trim from stem to stern.’

'I understand it exactly,' remarked Dare. 'I have studied the plans as closely as yourself. Indeed, I had a large hand in their preparation, as I have already told you.'

Grimshaw nodded.

'Let us get the conning-tower shot into position. I haven't seen it extended. It's six feet outside diameter, and rises——'

'To a height of eight feet above the deck,' added Dare.

The conning-tower came slowly up in obedience to its silent electric motor, and stood at length fully revealed. In outer aspect it was something like the miniature turret of a war-ship, though it was considerably higher than a turret in comparison with its diameter, whilst the port holes that would have pierced the thick armour of the latter for the guns were in this case filled fore and aft, to the port and the starboard, with circular windows of heavy plate-glass. In the top of the turret deepish horizontal slits were similarly glazed.

Grimshaw gazed for a while at the structure and then turned aft. The great smokestack above the boilers was collapsing in telescopic sections, to be at once securely protected by yet another watertight door, which ran into its place with a dull thump.

Grimshaw placed a whistle to his lips and blew it loudly—once, twice, thrice.

‘All hands below!’ he cried.

The men obeyed him slowly, walking with the curious jerky gait of fear and apprehension, and casting wistful sidelong backward glances over their shoulders at the sun as they went on into the gloom. Dare followed, and Grimshaw was the last to quit the now utterly deserted deck, closing the little door behind him.

The ship lay as a log on the bosom of the heaving water, like some veritable derelict of the desert ocean. For some minutes there was no perceptible change in the listless, abandoned fashion in which she rode the lazy rollers. Then she began to sink—down, down, down—until little more than her bulwarks were visible, and the water gushed and gurgled inward through the scuppers and set her deck awash. A little later on the dark-gray conning-tower and the upper deck began to be gradually submerged, and the thin flood raced merrily to and fro over from side to side as the vessel rocked and quivered in her heavy labour.

Then, suddenly, the hull went down with a rush, the water closed over it with a great swirl, and the loose superstructures on the deck were swept away confusedly by the fierce

upcharge of the sea. The sun shone now only on the empty main. The *Atalanta* had utterly disappeared, and it was though the noble vessel and her precious cargo of human souls had never been.

CHAPTER XXV

THE FACE IN THE DOORWAY

THE *Atalanta* went steadily onward on an even keel at some five or six knots an hour through the mist, and to the two men glueing their faces to the glasses in the conning-tower it appeared as though they were sailing high over the earth in mid air, in the heart of a mighty cloud. Vague distorted, dancing blobs, writhing lines, and undulating forms of a darker hue than the motionless, invisible water itself went by continually, to and fro, and once the porthole at which Dare stood was blocked into darkness. Some great fish—a shark probably—had come into contact with the tower, and was gently rubbing its rough side against the steel plates, perchance to relieve itself of parasites.

Then the shadow passed, and Dare could look out again and enjoy his weird submarine experience. Below him the water was black

and impenetrable to the vision, on a level with his eye it was a darkish green, whilst overhead the tone faded to dull yellow. The rays of the sun were shut completely out, but a dim diffused illumination remained that sufficed for the purposes of the submarine navigators—a kind of twilight, with a strange lurid tone. The interior of the tower was in almost utter darkness.

‘This is splendid!’ said Grimshaw, with unwonted enthusiasm, turning from his place at a miniature wheel. ‘Our balance is perfect, and she answers to the helm and the side planes with the most delicate precision.’ He paused, switched on the electric light, and looked at the figures in the face of the indicator on the wall before him. ‘Sixty,’ he said. ‘We are sixty fathoms below the surface unless the buoy is dragging unduly, which is not likely.’ Then he glanced at a dial in the table by which he stood. ‘There are thirty fathoms of water under our keel,’ he continued. ‘We are as safe in the *Atalanta* as is the sleeping baby in the cradle by its mother’s knee.’

The speaker turned off the brilliant lamp, and darkness enveloped them again, save for the minute point of shaded light that made the blue needle of the compass barely visible.

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‘How long do you think we shall be before we come up with the *Valladolid*, Grimshaw?’ asked Dare, after a considerable period of silence.

‘It is impossible to say. Half an hour perhaps—if we are lucky. But, we should certainly reach her long before daylight begins to fail. There are five hours before us. Then, as soon as the sun gets well down into the west, if we have not found our quarry, we shall have to cease work, for it will have become as black as night. When darkness sets in we might as well go up to the surface, cast anchor, take in a fresh supply of air, and wait till morning before again descending.’

‘That would assuredly be the proper course. But what about the Professor? That cursed comet of which he claims the paternity will make things almost as light as day at the surface, and he will know that we are tricking him. But there—I forgot! He can be drugged. But we must be careful. I don’t want him to discover our deception, for we may need him again. There is always the unfortunate possibility of unseen difficulties ahead. I’m going to leave you for a few minutes. If anything unexpected turns up, ring for me and I’ll return at once.’

Dare went down the narrow spiral iron staircase leading from the floor of the tower, and made his way to the big, well-lighted compartment in which the great dynamos driving the ship murmured the low deep burden of their monotonous, unceasing song. McTavish was in charge, walking about with an oil-trainer in his hand and the eight or ten other men followed him about nervously like chicken under the convoy of a hen.

‘How are things going, sir?’ asked McTavish, coming eagerly up to him.

‘Excellently,’ was the answer. ‘They couldn’t indeed be better. We expect to be back to the surface in a few hours with the job finished, and then you and your mates will be made men for life. Take this key. There’s a couple of bottles of whisky in yonder locker. Be sparing with it. But’—he laughed—‘I dare say if you drink the lot it won’t hurt half a score of hard-baked lads like yourselves.’

The cluster of sailors roared aloud at the remark, and Dare left them without further remark.

He reached Mrs. Bowgrave’s boudoir and tapped gently at the door. After a brief interval it opened, and its owner stood revealed in the cool steady light which flooded the interior.

'You, Kestrel,' she whispered, throwing her arms upon his shoulders and drawing him within. 'Oh, how I have watched and waited for you! It has seemed an eternity. Where are we now? Surely not at the awful bottom of the ocean, where nameless, shapeless monsters creep and crawl amid wrecks and rotting weeds and the bones of the dead?'

Dare glanced quickly around ere he answered. She was alone in the room. So he noiselessly closed the door, folded her firmly in his arms, and kissed her passionately.

'Put aside these foolish fancies, darling,' he said soothingly. 'There is no danger whatever. We are merely a little distance below the surface, and could float upward again instantly like a cork were there the slightest necessity. But where is the Professor and your maid?'

'He is sound asleep in the next room, and, though he said nothing to me about it, I believe he has taken a great draught of chloral. I looked in upon him a few minutes ago. I was so terribly afraid of being alone that I would have been glad of even his pitiful companionship. But I strove in vain to arouse him. He lies as one dead. And Susette? She is huddled in speechless despair in her berth. I tried the door and it was locked. I knocked

and there was no response. How unspeakably thankful I am that you are here! I have no fear now.'

Dare kissed her again, and they sat down side by side on the couch, entwined in each other's arms.

'And where is Miss Collingwood?' he queried, suddenly remembering Dorothy's existence.

'I really cannot tell. In fact, to be candid, I had forgotten about her altogether.' She curled her red ripe upper lip with scorn and disdain. 'I and that insipid Miss Dorothy are entirely out of sympathy with one another. But let us talk of ourselves. How delighted I am to have you here, Kestrel! I am beside myself with joy. The solitude of the past hour has been unspeakably dreadful. I turned out the light a few minutes ago, thinking to sleep, and the porthole became a great green glaring eye. Then the eye closed suddenly, and all was darkness. I switched on the electric light, and saw that a hideous gray face fluttered against the glass, flat, distorted, and featureless, with long twirling fingers fringed around it—some misshapen abortion of the sea striving to burst in upon me!'

'Oh, Folly, my foolish Folly, what an

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imagination you have! It would be but some strange harmless fish attracted by the glare of the electric light.'

'But why are we here? Surely, as you have so often told me, the Professor's dream of a world destroyed by fire is utter foolishness?'

'It is, darling—entirely, absolutely. I will tell you what is my purpose. The lure of gold has drawn me hither, not for its own sordid sake, but for yours, Folly darling. Within a very short distance of where we now are lies a sunken treasure ship containing the fabulous sum of between three and four millions in coin. I am dividing that with my partner in the enterprise, Captain Grimshaw, but even at that I shall come out an enormously rich man. Then you can quit this hateful life, and go abroad together to a new and unclouded world of rarest happiness, free and unfettered as the wind.'

She lifted her face to his as they sat in close embrace, and he showered a storm of kisses everywhere on her head and face.

Presently she started up.

'I think of nothing but ourselves,' she said. 'What of our guests? How are they faring?'

'They are all right,' he answered. 'There

are plenty of them to keep one another company. They are in the saloon at present, and we deem it prudent to keep them there under lock and key. It would be highly dangerous to give them more extended liberty till our work is over. However, they are taking no harm. They have access to their berths, and their supply of food and other refreshment is without limit. I must be returning to Grimshaw. He may need me. Kiss me once again, dearest Folly, and I will go.'

He rose slightly as he spoke, and seemed on the point of departure, but she drew her soft white arms more closely around him, and he sank back to her side. She held his face tightly to hers.

In their abstraction neither of the pair noticed that the door had opened slightly, and that a face had obtruded itself.

'Kestrel,' said the woman earnestly, in low accents of suppressed passion. 'I should die if I were to lose you. I don't know what makes me think it, but deep down in my heart I have an instinctive feeling that my husband will yet come between you and me, and part us for ever! I should kill him if he did, without hesitation, without remorse!'

The face at the door, that had at first peered

in incredulously and then changed its aspect to one of horror and disgust, vanished. Its owner was Dorothy Collingwood, coming unconsciously and innocently to the boudoir to visit Mrs. Bowgrave.

The poor girl turned about appalled, and raced along the corridor till she had freed herself from the atmosphere of the guilty lovers. The woman she had made a constant companion of for many days past was a perjured and faithless wife, ready to stoop even to murder to rid herself of her bond! What was she to do? How must she act? She turned blindly around a winding in the passage and then halted and rested herself against the wall, breathing heavily.

'Oh, Gilbert, my Gilbert!' she wailed unthinkingly aloud. 'What has become of you?'

'Dorothy, Dorothy dearest, is it possible? Is it you—your own sweet self? Are you really there?'

The familiar voice proceeded from the door of a room on the right.

'Yes, it is I, Gilbert. Come out to me. I have sought you all day, and I want you—oh, so badly!'

'Hush!' he whispered in tones of warning. 'I will tell you all directly. I have been

entrapped and am a prisoner here. Beware of Dare and Captain Grimshaw! I cannot come to you. The door is locked upon me. Dare has the key. Can you possibly get hold of it? Listen, and I will tell you how to go about it.'

CHAPTER XXVI

SUSETTE REGISTERS A VOW

THE afternoon was wearing on, and Mrs. Bowgrave sat alone in her boudoir on board the *Atalanta*, lost in thought and pallid in the extreme, all her tender reds and olives gone. Her wonderful wealth of raven hair had become unbound and fell about her fair firm white shoulders like a garment. The ship's chronometer on the wall of the apartment marked the approach of the hour of three. Kestrel had been gone a long time now. Would he ever return?

She started up and crossed the little room, filled herself a measure of brandy and drank it off. Then she poured out another, and toyed for a few seconds with the glass, holding it up before her and noting that the liquid gleamed like melted gold. It called to mind the treasure in the sunken ship of which her lover had

spoken. How would the awful adventure eventuate?

There was a quick light step in the passage without, and Susette came flying in, as if from some imminent peril. The maid threw a furtive glance behind her and fell in a heap at the feet of her mistress.

'Oh, madame!' she sobbed. 'I have seen him! I have seen him!'

'Seen whom?' asked the other.

'Tom—my betrothed! He came to me a little while ago, put a hand of ice upon my shoulder, and told me that he was dead!'

'What are you talking about, girl? Tom is not on board. He deserted the ship before we left England.'

'No, madame, that is not so. Tom would never have left me of his own free will. He is dead—dead, I tell you. Vanberg killed him. Look! I have just been in the villain's room. Hidden in a book I found this note—the note you gave me for Tom to deliver at Cromer. It is all quite plain. Vanberg discovered that Tom had it in his possession and murdered him! I am convinced it is so. I have thought so for days past. And now I know.'

'Hush, Susette, hush! Be calm. You are

not yourself. Your sorrow and this awful situation are driving you distracted.'

The maid shook her head, and lifted her white face and colourless eyes.

'I know it,' she said, in a quieter strain. 'Tom has just left me.'

'Susette, Susette, restrain yourself. How could Tom come to you here?'

'I saw him but a few minutes ago as clearly as I see you, madame. There was a great gash in his face, and his clothes were soiled and bloody. He had made a hard fight for life, but he died all the same. Why ever did I let him go? He is dead—dead—dead!'

Her speech ended in a low wail of anguish.

'You have been dreaming, Susette—merely dreaming. Tom is safe and sound ashore. We shall be back in England soon, and you shall join him again.'

'Yes, I shall join him again—to-morrow, or it may even be to-day. How? Let me whisper it in your ear. I shall kill Vanberg and afterwards myself. Then I will go to my poor dead lover and tell him that he is avenged!'

She laughed long and wildly as she concluded, and, stretching out her long muscular arm, stuck savagely downward with some imaginary lethal weapon.

Directly afterwards the woman suppressed all outward evidence of her passion with an effort, and smoothed out her apron mechanically.

'Do you require anything, madame?' she asked. 'May I stay here with you? I dare not go back to my room. *It* may still be there awaiting me!'

'Yes, Susette, you may remain. But you must not talk that way. You have no absolutely certain proof that Vanberg is a murderer. There will come another day. We must not take the law into our own hands. The consequences might be terrible for both of us. Were you to attack him and fail, there is no knowing what might not come out.'

'Have no fear, madame. Nothing will come out. I shall not fail. My aim will be too sure. He shall be stricken to the heart before he even knows that evil hovers over his accursed head.'

As the woman was speaking the slow, incessant throb of the propellers ceased altogether, and profound silence reigned for the first moment since the voyage began. But the ship was not entirely at rest. To the occupants of the little apartment it was as though its floor were falling away beneath their feet; but the strange sensation of sinking passed in a few seconds. Then a strange jar followed, which caused the

ship to quiver throughout her entire frame and fabric, and the floor uprose as though it were about to overturn, but suddenly it became stationary at an angle from the horizontal of some ten or fifteen degrees.

'What has happened?' gasped Mrs. Bowgrave, starting in terror to her feet. 'We have gone to the bottom! The machinery must have given way. Great heavens, what is to become of us? Already I feel that I am entombed in a living grave!'

Susette did not reply, and Felicity fell back again into her seat. For several minutes the pair continued to stare at each other in speechless awe.

Eager steps came hurrying along the corridor after a while.

'Susette,' said her mistress, 'it is Mr. Dare. Go into the other room while he is here.'

The maid did as she was bidden, threw a glance at the inanimate form of the sleeping Professor, and crouched down behind the inner chamber door, with her ear pressed close against it and her sense of hearing strained to the uttermost.

Dare came quickly in, with a fierce look of expectant joy upon his determined face.

'Ah, Folly darling!' he cried in a low hoarse

voice, taking her in his arms. 'Our triumph is at hand! We have reached the great treasure ship, and are lying alongside of it, so closely indeed that the two vessels are almost touching. Come with me into the conning tower and see it. It is a wonderful sight!'

'Is Captain Vanberg there? I do not like the man.'

'That matters nothing. He is merely my partner for the time being. We shall have to be civil with him. But, for the present, you need not meet him. He is down in the dynamo room.'

He took her arm as he spoke and sought to lead her away; but she held back, unwilling to go on.

'One moment, Kestrel; I have wanted to speak to you several times about that visit of yours to Cromer. What became of the man Tom?'

'Have I not told you, dearest? Why, everybody on board the ship knows. He deserted, of course.'

'Kestrel, I want the truth. There need be no concealment. I want the truth. Do you know he was engaged to marry Susette, that he was devoted to her, and that I am convinced he would never have left the *Atalanta* of his

own free will? You don't know how the thing has troubled and puzzled me.'

'Well, Folly, I'll be candid. I myself had not the slightest reason in the world for concealment, except that I was disinclined to shock you unnecessarily. Tom, as you call him, is dead. Captain Grimshaw, returning from the railway-station, found him lying on the beach with his neck broken. He had, I fancy, lost his way and tumbled in the darkness over the top of the great cliff. That is everything I know of the matter. In fact, I had forgotten all about it. It was Grimshaw who suggested the desertion story. He said he thought the truth mightn't be believed. As for myself, I hadn't the faintest intention of worrying you with the deplorable affair. Come, dearest, let us go.'

He thrust his arm around her waist so that she could the better keep her footing on the tilted floor of the passage, and Susette came out of the room behind them. Her uncanny colourless eyes were blazing with wrath, and her gray face was rigid with the horror that had supervened on the confirmation of her dream.

She sank to her knees on the thick carpet, and lifted her long sinewy arms above her head. Her dry lips moved rapidly for several

seconds, yet not a sound escaped them. She was temporarily deprived of speech, but she registered her vow all the same.

Then she arose, went into a little adjacent pantry, and came out with a gleaming carving-knife worn and pointed like a dagger, and set herself methodically to the task of giving it a ragged yet almost razor edge by means of a whetstone. The work calmed her gradually, she became absorbed in it, and her nerves grew steadier. Later, as she drew the ball of her left thumb experimentally over the keen blade, she found herself smiling.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE SUNKEN GOLD'S GRIM GUARDIANS

MRS. BOWGRAVE, standing by Dare's side in the dark interior of the conning tower, with the man's arm clasped tightly around her waist, looked out through the glazed port-hole to which he had led her. For awhile she could distinguish nothing but a low liquid tone of green. It was as though she were endeavouring vainly to pierce with her sight a painted window. Then her eyes grew accustomed to the all-pervading colour, and her vision cleared.

Immediately before her, twenty or thirty yards away, though it was impossible to judge the distance, lay the hull of a great steamer, with black funnels, one behind the other, and three masts, two of which were reduced to mere stumps. The bridge and upper deck hung in skeleton ruin, little more

than the uprights and girders remaining in position. The sides of the ship were encrusted with shells, and great fringes of weeds floated upwards in rich fantastic tracery from her bulwarks and the remnants of her rigging. There was a huge gash not far from her bows, the plates being torn from her sides and shattered outwards in ragged fragments over an irregular area of many feet; but, otherwise, the wreck appeared to be substantially intact.

‘She was fired,’ explained Dare, ‘and yonder yawning chasm was the result of the explosion of a quantity of powder and other military stores she carried. She would sink like a stone after that.’

‘And the gold?’ asked the speaker’s companion, breathlessly.

‘It lies in a strong room amidships. Its door is locked and sealed, and it is surrounded on all sides by the heaviest class of cargo to add to its security. It was that special precaution on the part of the Spanish Government that precluded the possibility of the specie being saved. Time would not permit of the work, for the fire had gained a thorough hold close to the powder room when it was discovered. The crew had to take to the boats, and helplessly watch her go down. Curiously

enough—and this explains our present mission—Captain Grimshaw was on board the *Valladolid* at the time. He had been specially commissioned to assist in her navigation because of his intimate knowledge of this particular ocean route.'

'And how are you going to get to the gold, Kestrel?'

'We shall destroy the hull at the point where the strong room is situated by means of dynamite. The rest will be easy. We have two divers with us, and, if necessary, both Grimshaw and I are ourselves prepared to don the dresses. There is a water-lock in the side of our ship from which we shall work. All is arranged. With the single exception that the water pressure is exceptionally heavy, owing to the considerable depth, the conditions are more favourable than if we were working in the ordinary way from the top.'

'Look!' cried the woman, with a sudden thrill of fear. 'What monster is yon?' She pointed to a black patch that worked its undulating way over the bulwarks of the wreck, and then flashed down to the bed of the sea like an arrow. 'It is alive, and looks like some mighty fish.'

‘That is exactly what it is, Folly. It is a shark, and a full-grown specimen without a doubt.’

‘How dare the divers venture out amongst such fearsome brutes? See! There goes another, and yet another! Why, the sea is alive with them! Surely with those shadowy lines of grim, gaunt, wolfish guardians the gold of the *Valladolid* is for ever locked against you!’

The spectacle was not a reassuring one to a man who might himself have shortly to venture bodily out into the waters, but nevertheless Dare laughed lightly.

‘There is no need whatever for alarm,’ he said. ‘We shall explode a torpedo or two near the vessel before we set to work. It will give short shrift to any sharks that may happen to be hanging about and deter all the rest from venturing into the vicinity of the wreck for hours afterwards.’

A foot grated on the iron staircase, and Grimshaw came up out of the depths and bowed in the thick gloom. The woman could not see his face, but she felt instinctively that the newcomer was glaring at her, with bitterest malice and mockery in his sinister eyes.

‘I have been showing Mrs. Bowgrave the

treasure ship,' said Dare. 'She is quite interested in it.'

'I suppose she will be. She's about the first woman who ever gazed on such a sight,' remarked Grimshaw. He put his hateful hand upon her shoulder. 'Look now, madame, at those sharks. There is quite a number of them. Here is one approaching with a body as big as that of an elephant. There it is, close to the glass. You can see the gleam of its white belly and the glitter of its teeth. Any one of us would make a toothsome light lunch for that gentleman. He would snap you in two as easily as I could take a bite of bread!'

The woman shuddered and touched Dare on the arm with a little downward thrust, and her companion, divining the meaning of the action, led her away.

In the corridor they came upon Dorothy Collingwood, picking ineffectually with a hair-pin at the door of her room.

'I have foolishly locked up my room,' she said artlessly, 'and the key, of course, has gone a-missing. I don't know what I shall do.'

'There needn't be any trouble,' replied Dare readily. 'I will lend you a ring of keys if you can wait a minute. One of them is sure to fit

the lock. I will get them for you after I have seen Mrs. Bowgrave to her apartment.'

Dorothy followed the pair to the boudoir, making a great effort to keep her face composed and to conceal the reflection upon it of the hope that suddenly welled up in her heart. Gilbert's freedom was almost as good as achieved!

'Don't leave me!' whispered Mrs. Bowgrave imploringly into the man's ear. 'I won't be left alone even for a moment! I am horribly afraid of something or other. Death seems to hover in the air around me!'

He patted her shoulder soothingly.

'My poor Folly!' he murmured. 'I won't be gone an instant.'

He turned into a room near by and came out again directly with a bunch of about a dozen keys jingling on his forefinger.

'Here you are, Miss Dorothy,' he said. 'These are all spare ones. Take off the one you want and let me have the rest back again.'

The girl thanked him in easy careless tones and closed the door upon the couple in the boudoir. Then, instantly, she stole noiselessly up the corridor, turned to the right, and was at the door of the prisoner she hoped to release.

'Gilbert, Gilbert!' she whispered fondly. 'I have secured the keys. Are you well?'

'Thank goodness!' he exclaimed. 'Yes, darling, I am quite well, but terribly weary of this close confinement. What is going on? I suppose we are at the bottom of the sea?'

'I suppose so; but there is no time to talk. Dare may come upon me at any moment.'

She fingered the keys nervously as she was speaking, and they slipped from her hands and fell with a slight crash to the floor. Hastily she picked them up and set herself to the opening of the lock. But none of the keys made any impression on it. She came to the very last. Her heart beat heavily and she trembled like a leaf in the breeze of June. Had her device been all in vain?

No! The last key was the right one. The levers of the padlock fastening down the strap of the bolt slipped easily back, the hasp swung open, and in an instant Dorothy was clasped in her lover's arms and was sobbing softly on his shoulder.

They retraced their steps to the main corridor, and had almost reached it, when the mocking visage of Kestrel Dare obtruded itself around the corner.

Delaval sprang apart from Dorothy and reached for his revolver; but his antagonist was too quick for him. He slammed the door

in the faces of the couple and shot home the heavy bolt.

'You can keep each other company now,' he sneered. 'The occupation cannot fail to prove a most agreeable one for devoted sweethearts such as you! And you need have no fear of your privacy being intruded upon.'

CHAPTER XXVIII

INTO DEPTHS UNFATHOMABLE

DARE and Grimshaw were back together in the conning tower, eager to get forward with their enterprise. It was still broad daylight, and at least a couple of hours' work was possible. Their decision was soon taken. After the briefest conversation, Grimshaw shouted a message down the speaking-tube to the dynamo room, and a minute later the *Atalanta* had lifted a few fathoms above the bed of the sea and was moving slowly back eastward away from the treasure ship. When about a couple of hundred yards had been traversed, and the shadow of the *Valladolid* had entirely disappeared from their green monotonous outlook, Grimshaw steered his ship sharply to port and put her broadside to where he calculated his quarry lay.

Then Dare ran down into the hold, leaving

the captain alone in the conning tower, and a torpedo was sent spinning noiselessly off westward. For several seconds nothing happened. Had the deadly projectile missed its mark and gone careering onward till it touched the surface a mile or more away? Then, suddenly, the water shivered and leaped upward, and for a full minute the *Atalanta* spun about helpless in the great swirling undercurrent created by the explosion, of which, however, scarcely the sound had reached the ears of those on board the vessel.

When the motion had somewhat abated, Dare came up into the conning tower to join his friend. He was bleeding slightly on the face.

‘That was a close call,’ Grimshaw began. ‘We were far too near. It’s a miracle we haven’t come to serious mischief. I thought for a moment that our boat was going to turn turtle, and had that happened we should have been done for. We could never have righted. Torpedoes cannot be successfully employed on this job. Their effective range is too short—under the present conditions I mean, of course.’

Dare rubbed his left elbow vigorously as he listened. ‘I’ve had an ugly fall,’ he said. ‘The wave struck the ship just as I was crossing the floor of the dynamo room, and I was pitched

right off my feet on to my face, and very nearly into a running dynamo. We shall have to resort to the divers.'

Grimshaw steered steadily back to the *Valladolid*.

'Certainly we must employ the divers,' he answered, 'as we would in any case after the blasting had been done. We've frightened the fish at any rate, but we've done little else. Look! The torpedo has struck her on the bulwarks close to the port bow. You don't see any signs of sharks anywhere?'

'No,' responded the other. 'The torpedo has certainly smashed a big hole in her side. Had it gone just a little lower she would have been cut right in two.'

They were back in their old position on the floor of the sea, side by side with the *Valladolid*, which seemed to have slightly shifted its position. The torpedo had struck the treasure ship just at the main deck, immediately above the yawning chasm created by the powder explosion that had caused her to founder, and Dare was right when he remarked that the torpedo had very nearly cut the hull into two portions.

'There's no time to waste,' said Grimshaw.

'Let us get the divers to work instantly.'

He turned and left the tower, followed by his companion.

The water-lock was set amidships in the *Atalanta's* side, only a few feet above her keel. It consisted of a chamber some four feet wide by six high, with big glazed portholes on either side beyond it for the use of those engaged in working the diving apparatus.

The two divers, fully equipped, and each carrying on the back a bulky zinc-covered case of dynamite, with a clockwork detonator at the belt, entered the chamber together, and stood motionless whilst their attendants screwed the couplings of their air tubes into the junctions in the steel wall of the chamber.

At last they signified their readiness by horizontal sweeps of their arms. Their attendants withdrew, the watertight door at the rear was closed and screwed up behind them, and the chamber filled almost instantaneously with water. The outer door, flush with the hull of the ship, slid aside, a little ladder slipped down from the opening to the weed-grown floor, and the two men went out, each cautiously trailing after him a strong thin line of hemp and an air-tube of armoured rubber.

Dare, stationed at one of the portholes, saw the strange, burly, bloated figures, with

monstrous heads of copper and great goggles of glass, go waddling onward through the weeds towards the wreck. With the exception that the vision was slightly blurred and at times curiously distorted, he could take in every detail and watch the thing at leisure. It was as though he were sitting comfortably at the play, in the cushioned ease of the dress-circle, with a pair of opera-glasses in his hand, absorbing the slow movement of a pretentious submarine scene in an up-to-date realistic drama.

At times the squat, ungainly, frog-like figures, crawling and stumbling painfully over the slimy bottom, were almost overtopped by the luxuriant growths. But they were in no haste. The keen hatchets they carried were cutting a clear path wherever necessary, though the work was carried through in a ludicrously slow and clumsy fashion. The water through which the grotesque bipeds moved gave little direct sign of its presence. With the exception that the vegetation stood up buoyant, it was as though Dare gazed by the aid of heavily-smoked glasses on to a scene amid the rocks of the seashore at low water.

The unseen element, however, fettered the movements of the divers terribly. They could

scarcely move at times through the strange green atmosphere, owing to the enormous water pressure, and, indeed, as Dare watched, the man to the left slipped and sprawled for a few seconds with outstretched legs and arms on the floor. But he regained his feet with a mighty effort, and the two went on together, side by side, with the waste air from the exhaust valves of their apparatus shooting upwards in a perpetual succession of racing silver globules.

In five minutes or so by the watch, though it appeared almost as many hours to Dare, the two dim figures had reached the hull of the *Valladolid* and become merged in its shadow and lost entirely to sight. But, though swallowed up in the intense gloom, they did not waste a second. They unstrapped their burdens, placed the cases of dynamite on the rock and slid them gently forward right up to the keel. To accomplish this they had to go down on all fours at first and afterwards grovel flat upon their stomachs.

It was perilous work ; but at last the two great charges were pushed home, set up on their sides and jammed tightly in between the stones and the bottom of the foul and slippery hull. The delicate task of affixing the de-

tonators followed, and, after a long interval of supremest suspense, Dare saw them come creeping back unencumbered. Soon they were midway on the passage. In but a minute or two more they would be aboard their ship, and the *Atalanta* would be up and away to await the terrific upheaval of the sea at the safe distance of a couple of miles or so.

Suddenly it occurred to Dare that there was a tremulous shadow in the water overhead, a shadow that he had not previously noticed, though that was not in any way surprising, for the whole of his attention had been riveted on the movements of the divers. What the shadow was he could not tell. But the matter troubled him so slightly that he scarcely gave it passing attention. Probably it was a cloud thrown by the hull of the *Atalanta* or by some lumber projecting over her bulwarks. Then it occurred to him that the shadow was moving to and fro in the upper water immediately above the porthole against which his eyes were set. But he was too blindly engrossed in the human figures coming onward to the chamber by which he stood to indulge in further profitless conjecture.

The first diver had now gained the foot of the little ladder, and went slowly up its rungs into the water-lock. The other halted at the

foot of the ladder, drew back a step, and passed his left arm across the face of his helmet. For a second he stood thus, immovable, with the great goggle eyes of glass turned directly up towards Dare, and not more than a dozen feet away. Then there was a lightning passage of some great unseen body through the water, and the man had disappeared! He had gone suddenly upward to the right, with a motion far too swift to be followed by Dare's confused vision, but his line and air-tube could be seen pulled out taut in a diagonal direction, to flirt back in a tangle, loose and unattached, almost immediately.

As he watched in awesome wonderment, Grimshaw came suddenly round to him, crying: 'My God! Did you see that? A shark has got him! Quick! Close the outer door of the water-lock, and get the other fellow inside!'

The response to the order was instantaneous. The outer door ran into its place with a thud, the water in the chamber whistled away into the ballast tank, and the prone figure of the survivor was drawn in and undressed.

Two of the sailors set to work applying restoratives, but Grimshaw did not waste a moment. He ran back to the conning tower, started the pumps to lighten the ship, and,

immediately she had drawn clear of the bed of the sea, he set her nose to the north and ran her forward at full speed.

Ten minutes later he had brought the *Atalanta* close to the surface, with the conning tower itself lifted into the air and sunshine. Here he let his vessel lie motionless, unscrewed a porthole, drank in the reviving current of fresh air, and, with a pair of glasses to his eyes, continued to gaze expectantly southward to the spot where the *Valladolid* rested unseen in a hundred fathoms of water.

After a while Dare rejoined the captain.

'Terrible affair, isn't it?' he said.

'Yes,' responded Grimshaw. 'But it's only one of the risks of the calling. In fact, I really shouldn't have minded it so very much but for the effect it'll have on the rest of the men. However, I'm in this business for all it's worth. If we can't get volunteers, by Peter! I'll have pressed men. Indeed, I'll don the dress and go out myself sooner than let it be said that all the teeming treasure slipped through craven, nerveless fingers. And, if——'

The speaker broke off abruptly.

'Look, Dare,' he cried—'look yonder! It's like a gigantic water-spout. There's a cloud of broken sea gone up at least a hundred yards

into the sky! That, of a surety, has settled the hash of the *Valladolid*! And, by Moses and all the other prophets, it'll have shattered out that infernal nest of sharks, too! We'll get back at once.'

Grimshaw closed the porthole, and, still keeping to the surface of the water, ran back over the heaving waves created by the outburst to within a quarter of a mile of the great convulsion. Then he lowered his ship gradually towards the bottom and crept onward to the treasure that he now knew was so soon to be his, safe on board the *Atalanta*.

The sun was declining, but there was still considerable illumination in the depths, though the change from brilliant daylight to the thick gloom made it impossible for them to clearly distinguish anything. But at last their eyesight grew accustomed to the situation, and foot by foot they contrived to creep up to their old resting-place. They could now dimly discern the prow of the wreck, but the rest of it was for the time invisible.

The *Atalanta* subsided on to the floor of the sea with scarcely a perceptible shock. Gradually the disturbed sand and debris settled, the water cleared, and the impatient Grimshaw, who had turned inward to talk

to his companion, faced about again to his porthole.

'Good God!' he groaned. 'Great God in heaven!'

'What's the matter?' queried Dare.

'Matter? matter? It's damnable! it's hellish! Look! look for yourself, Dare! Have I been stricken blind? Or have I gone mad? The treasure ship has vanished!'

Dare glanced outward in wild alarm and astonishment. About sixty feet of the worthless forepart of the *Valladolid* still lay before them, but the rest of the hull was gone entirely, leaving not a scrap behind on the rocks, which were utterly denuded of all their plant life for many yards around by the tremendous shock of the explosion.

Dare gaped incredulously. 'What does it mean?' he asked.

'That I'm the damnedest idiot that ever trod a plank!' roared the other. 'This is the very edge of the plateau. It makes from this point a sheer descent to the main floor of the ocean—three miles away. The dynamite has hurled our treasure ship from off this shelf of rock into depths unfathomable!'

'Never!' cried Dare. 'You do not mean it? You cannot mean it?'

Grimshaw's answer was a wild and prolonged outburst of hideous blasphemy. He paused at length, from utter lack of breath, and leaned exhausted against the wall of the conning tower.

'I think I am going mad,' he whispered. 'Take me out of this, and get me something to cool my tongue and moisten my throat. It flames with fire. Take care of me. Put me in a strait-jacket if you've got one. I feel that I am going to do something awful. I'm tempted to run the *Atalanta* after that golden death's head of ours—down down, down, into the black, bottomless pit of hell itself!'

CHAPTER XXIX

MORE TREASURE, AND A TRIPLE TRAGEDY

KESTREL DARE stole up to Felicity's boudoir and knocked gently. In answer to a murmured invitation he opened the door and stepped inside.

'Ah, Folly dearest,' he began. 'You must be terribly lonely down here by yourself. Is the Professor still asleep?'

'Yes,' she answered, throwing aside a fleecy cloud and revealing her splendid shoulders. 'It would not grieve me if he never awoke again. I am growing beside myself. When is it all to end?' She lifted her weary white face to his, and their lips met. She saw that his countenance was drawn and lined and full of despondency.

'You are looking far from well, Kestrel dear,' she whispered. 'You have exhausted yourself.'

'Yes, I'm decidedly off colour. Things have

not gone as they should have done—damnably, indeed—and I'm almost in despair.'

'Despair?' she echoed. 'Surely there is no danger? We shall get back to the surface of the ocean again safely?'

'Oh, yes,' he responded quietly. 'We are there already. Night will soon be setting in, and then we can take a stroll together on deck, if you are so inclined—and if you think it will be safe.'

'I shall be delighted, dearest,' she answered.

'By the way, Folly, I came to see where I could pick up a bottle of good wine. It is impossible to get to the stores without going through the saloon, and that is not advisable, or even practicable, for the present. Have you anything of the sort here?'

'Merely this half decanter of brandy; but there is a considerable stock of champagne, brandy, and other spirits in the Professor's private store, down to the left. There is only one key to the room. He invariably carries it himself. He is very jealous of it, as though there were some great secret shut up in the place. However, he is asleep, and I think I can detach it from his watch-chain without arousing him.'

She turned into the inner room, and came out again directly, and handed a key to Dare.

'Let me have it back again as soon as possible, Kestrel. Were he to awake he might miss it, and then there would be trouble. Indeed, I have never yet been permitted in the room myself. It is a sort of secret chamber. I'd better come with you. I really should like a peep at the forbidden mysteries.' She smiled in a spiritless way as she spoke.

'Captain Grimshaw is at the door,' he said. 'It is for him I desire to get the wine. He is suffering from a somewhat serious attack of indisposition.'

'Oh,' she ejaculated shortly, drawing back again. 'I did not know that. When he is gone will you return to me?'

Dare nodded, kissed her again, and departed.

The two men went straight into the private store room. Several dozen cases were piled six deep around the apartment, bearing the brands of a famous Continental house. One case was open and almost empty, containing as it did but a solitary bottle of champagne. They secured glasses and drank it off in a minute or two.

Grimshaw smacked his lips. 'Prime stuff,' he remarked. He lifted another case and staggered under its unexpected weight before he had got it in place upon the little table.

'Whew!' he whistled, commencing to prise off the lid with a small crowbar he had found in the corner. 'This is the heaviest box of booze I ever lifted. I should say it weighs a hundredweight or more.'

'Nonsense!' laughed Dare. 'You're dog tired, that's all.'

Then the lid sprang off and Grimshaw cleared away the uppermost layer of neatly cut straw.

'What in the devil's name are these?' he cried, lifting out a little heavy bag of stout canvas. He dropped it to the table as he asked the question, and it gave out a distinctly metallic jink. 'Goodness gracious!' he continued, whipping out a pocket-knife, and slitting open the miniature sack. 'Why, if it isn't coin—English sovereigns!' He poured out the discs upon the table, and they jingled musically with the familiar ring of genuine coin. 'The bag is marked £250. One, two, three,' he ran on hurriedly. 'Why, there's twenty of them here—just five thousand pounds!'

'Marvellous!' exclaimed Dare. 'And there are eighty, or so, of these cases. If they have all similar contents, there will be close upon half a million sterling in this room! It's the Professor's little hoard, of course. What did he

want with it on board the *Atalanta*? Oh, of course, he wanted to be amply provided for against that day of doom he was so fond of prophesying about, oblivious to the fact that even minted gold would be worthless in the face of a wiped-out civilization.'

'Here, lend a hand quick!' cried Grimshaw. 'Let's investigate a few of the other cases at haphazard before the Professor awakes. If the thing is as it seems we are after all not to come penniless out of this trip. Paltry as it may be in comparison with our original expectations, a quarter of a million each is not to be despised—if only we can get away with it, and'—he swore a great oath—'it shan't be my fault if we don't!'

For some minutes neither man spoke. They were both at work opening the cases. In only one of them did they find champagne, and the difference of its weight betrayed it at once.

'What's to be done?' asked Dare eagerly. 'There's at least four hundred thousand here.'

'Suppose we run the *Atalanta* nearer to the mainland and leave her at some suitable island by means of the launch? We can cache the gold, or the bulk of it, until we have made arrangements for its safe transport.'

'That must remain over for careful considera-

tion,' said Dare. 'Meanwhile, let us pass back the Professor's key. I've one exactly like it, and he'll never know the difference till he comes to try, and then it will be a trifle late in the day.'

'Well, we'll suspend operations for the time, and take that case of cham. to my room and thoroughly sample it. The anchor's down, and we cannot possibly take any harm until the return of daylight.'

He took the case of wine in his arms and walked off, followed by Dare, who locked the door and peeped in again upon Mrs. Bowgrave.

'Here's the key, Folly,' he said. 'There's nothing special in the room, but we've managed to get hold of a case of decent wine. It's to be hoped the Professor will never miss it.'

'It's scarcely likely he will,' she said with a smile. 'I suppose it is only one among several dozen?'

'Exactly,' he replied. 'May I bring you a bottle?'

'Yes, dearest,' came the response, 'and we can drink it together.'

'Au revoir, then, darling. I shall return in an hour, or less.'

When Dare got back to Grimshaw's room he found that the latter had already an empty

bottle on the table and was starting in freely upon a second.

'Bring yourself to an anchor, Dare, my boy,' he shouted merrily. 'I'm going in to enjoy myself. I've not had a real good downright night of it for years now, and I mean to make up for lost time. Here's to that half-million!'

He tossed off the glass as he spoke and poured out another.

Dare filled his glass and drank to the toast; but he could not help throwing a rather dubious glance at his companion.

'I shouldn't go the whole hog to-night, captain, if I were you,' he said, rather confusedly. 'An unexpected call may come upon us at any time, and if it finds us over the line, what may not happen? Moderation's my motto to-night at any rate.'

'Moderation be hanged!' roared the other. 'Pass the bottle. No, don't trouble. I'll open another. There are plenty of them.'

He reached down to the case at his side, pulled out a bottle, decapitated it on the edge of the table, and filled up his glass again.

'We've had a devil of an unlucky day certainly, but it's a poor heart that never rejoices, and after all things have certainly brightened during the past half hour.'

'I'm going to forage for some eatables,' said Dare, persuasively. 'Hadn't you better come with me? I know where there's some good pressed beef and pickles, and you can wash them down admirably with bottled beer. I've some capital beer in my own place.'

'Beef be hanged!' shouted Grimshaw. 'Who wants to eat beef or drink beer when there's wine like this literally begging to be necked? Leave me where I am and go and enjoy yourself. I'm not a child. I can take care of myself, and don't you forget it!'

There was a growing note of latent hostility in Grimshaw's speech, and Dare reluctantly departed.

'Lock your door till I return again,' was his final unheeded admonition.

An hour went by, spent by Dare in the dynamo room in a long and confidential chat with McTavish and one of that person's most trusted subordinates; and by Grimshaw in looking upon the wine until he was very nearly in a condition to discern two bottles where, alas! there was but one.

He hiccupped and rose unsteadily to his feet at last.

'Good idea! Good idea!' he soliloquised, in a thick voice. 'I'll go into the saloon and

see the ladies. Some deuced fine girls among 'em! What do you think, Paul, old man?

He winked to himself gravely and knowingly as he passed a little adjacent mirror, and then staggered into the corridor.

He started suddenly. There came to his ear the swish of skirts. Some woman was around. So he hurried off in the direction whence the sound apparently proceeded. He had gained the passage leading to Mrs. Bowgrave's boudoir, and fancied that he saw a female figure in a gray silk cloak brush into an open door on the right close by him, as if to escape his attentions.

'Ha, ha! my pretty little charmer!' he cried, jocosely. 'You're not going to skip off thus!'

He stumbled into the room, and groped around in the utter darkness. His outstretched hand caught on the soft fabric of a woman's dress—that of the girl who sought to elude him beyond all doubt. He seized her, but with a struggle she slipped away, leaving a cloak in his hands. But the fair unknown did not quit the room. She remained motionless, not even attempting to breathe, in the depths of the impenetrable shadow.

He crossed the room and fell against some-

one, who drew aside and struck fiercely at him with an edged and pointed weapon. The blow ripped his coat, but fell harmless over his shoulder. The quick hand was withdrawn again, and a sharp pang, like the passage of a searing iron, crossed the back of his left hand. He leaped forward, thoroughly aroused, and caught a woman's hand.

A keen knife descended and buried itself for a full couple of inches in his shoulder, and the next instant a figure flashed past him into the lighted corridor. He tore madly out after it, and was instantly sobered by the sight of blood running in a little spouting stream down the breast of his coat. His left hand, too, had been savagely gashed, and was reddened everywhere and dripping at the fingers.

The flying female figure was rushing into the boudoir. He darted after it at full speed, raging with uncontrollable passion, and burst open the door that someone was vainly endeavouring to bar against him.

Grimshaw flung himself violently against the door of the boudoir, and it opened with a crash. There was but one occupant of the apartment—Felicity—who shrank back in horror before the fierce menacing figure advancing upon her with face swollen and contorted with

passion, reddened hands, and blood streaming over his breast from the wound in his shoulder.

He leaped upon her, with his strong fingers outspread like the claws of a maddened beast, but she slipped somehow out of his clutches, sprang back to the inner wall, caught up a revolver, and, pointing it directly in Grimshaw's face, pulled the trigger. The weapon rang out with a sharp 'ping,' and for a few seconds afterwards the room was filled with smoke, and the movements of the two desperate persons within it were hidden from sight.

The vapour cleared and revealed the woman crouched like a tigress behind the couch, which she had pushed forward from the wall, whilst the man writhed in the corner near the now closed door, his encrimsoned palms digging into the hollows of his eyes in frantic, unavailing efforts to restore the vision of which he had been so strangely and suddenly bereft. He did not know it yet—he was never to know it for a certainty—but Folly's bullet had taken him in the profile as he turned to elude her aim and completely blinded him.

At last he must have realized something of his irreparable deprivation, for he ceased the vain compression of his shattered orbs, and, spreading out his long arms over the little

apartment, began to grope methodically over every inch of its space in quest of vengeance—the blind, unavailing vengeance that was now all that remained to him. Yet the woman seemingly had him at her mercy, for the pistol was still in her grip, and she raised it again—this time to his heart.

But the awful sightless thing that was coming slowly yet surely on towards her, inch by inch, with outstretched white and red talons writhing everywhere like the tentacles of an octopus, held her fascinated. Her powerless hand dropped upon the head of the couch, and her aspen fingers unclasped themselves from the ivory butt of the revolver, which fell with a crash to the floor.

His keen ears instantly took in the significance of the slight sound, and he was upon her. The couch was hurled heavily backward by the impetus of his bound, pinning the woman to the wall. Then his itching fingers touched the bare firm flesh of Folly's shoulders and closed like springs of steel around her bejewelled throat.

He drew her out of her place of refuge, lifted her above his head as though she were a feather's weight, and held her suspended in the air for two or three seconds. And all the while

—grown purple in the face with the merciless compression of her throat—she tore and clawed like a wild cat at the grotesque, disfigured, inhuman, eyeless mask before her. The man's touch had nerved her again for the conflict, which she knew must now go on to the end.

He staggered forward, and, exerting every atom of his superhuman strength, flung her headlong to the floor and dropped upon her with his rigid fingers still buried in her throat, resolute to throttle out of her any chance remaining spark of life. He had it all his own way. She lay inanimate upon her back, with her arms thrown out limply on either side. The wild unequal war was over, and from first to last it had not occupied thirty seconds.

Then the victor relinquished his grip, and started up half erect over the body of his victim, a flood of fierce unreasoning joy sweeping through his breast. At last he had repaid everything. The account was settled in full, and sealed and signed in her life's blood.

Unthinking of what had gone before, he dug his hard palms once more into the sockets of his eyes, to wipe away the mist and moisture that gathered there, so that he might look upon what he had done and gloat over the

false beauty that he had mangled so hideously. But there was no time for that.

Someone had come in upon them and was now stooping behind him, so closely that a clinging skirt brushed past his wounded face. He lifted his right arm and confronted his new probable antagonist. But his blind instinctive defence was unavailing. Susette was by his side, with her knife in the air, and, when he flung up his left arm, the long worn narrow blade flashed down and buried itself in his unprotected side right to the heart. The stricken man swayed slightly to the right and the left, and fell without a groan upon his face, the knife still hidden in its sheath of quivering flesh.

Susette arose, took in the weird situation at a glance, and stood appalled against the wall, her colourless eyes wandering aimlessly around the disordered, bespattered room. Then her vision was arrested by the fallen revolver. She snatched it up, placed the weapon to her temples, and fired. The third of the ill-fated trio fell to the floor and writhed in a brief death agony.

All was silence for full twenty minutes. Then steps sounded in the inner chamber where the Professor had slept in peace through

all the tragedy. The door opened, and the old man came out and gazed uncomprehendingly at what lay before him. Perhaps he was scarcely awakened from his slumbers and was still dreaming.

He reached forward and stooped over the corpse of his once beautiful wife. 'Felicity, Felicity dearest!' he cried. But there came no response. Close by her lay the body of Susette, whilst in the centre of the room Grimshaw was huddled up on his right side with the yellow handle of a knife projecting from his ribs. He lifted his bony hands and passed them through his shock of long silver hair, to stand thus for a full minute.

'Felicity, Felicity dearest!' he repeated vacantly. Then the awful actuality of his surroundings burst upon him, something snapped in his brain, and, with a great shrill yell of horror unspeakable, he fell senseless upon his face.

CHAPTER XXX

'UNTIL THAT JUDGMENT DAY'

WHEN Kestrel Dare had finished the evening meal hastily provided by himself out of the ship's stores, he bethought himself of Grimshaw, who would probably be now so far advanced in his cups that, if he were not helplessly drunk, he would be at least obstinate, defiant, reckless, and it might even be actively hostile. So he decided to leave the captain to himself and go up on deck. There was much to be done, and it had begun to dawn upon him that it might be very much indeed to his personal advantage to dispense with the co-operation of his fellow conspirator and leave him to his own resources.

The *Atalanta* was riding quietly at anchor under the stars. Comet Chaos was rising again in the east. But she was not nearly so brilliant as on the previous night, for she was

passing onward in the great limitless orbit that would lead her out of human ken again into the unknown outer void of the universe. He looked up at the strange star, with its train of ashen fire standing tremulously out against the deep purple sky of the tropical night, and smiled bitterly.

Then he turned away forward over the bare naked deck, to where the petrol launch lay snug beneath the shelter of the bulwarks. A dark figure was upon the little craft, bending down into the covered compartment where the engines were situated, and narrowly examining them by the aid of a hand lamp.

'Well, McTavish, how are they?' he asked.

'Graund, sir, graund. We'll ha' na bother wi' the engines. They're new, and, thank the Lord, they're no coal-firing. Wi' coal we couldna gang much mair nor twa hundred mile. Wi' speerit, there's no reason why we shouldna gang a thoosan.'

'Humph!' breathed Dare. 'That's capital. Is the winch in working order to sling her over the side?'

'There'll be na trouble about that, sir.'

'Right! And the stores, water, and the rest are safely packed?'

'Ay, sir.'

‘And the fuel?’

‘That’s always there, sir. She’s built wi’ water ballast, ye ken; but we’ll start out wi’ every ane o’ her tanks filled wi’ speerit, which ’ll last us easy a fortnet.’

‘You’re a treasure,’ said Dare. He paused for a moment. ‘I wish you filled Grimshaw’s place, and were my partner in this job instead of he.’

‘For why?’ asked the other, with a shadow of suspicion in his voice.

‘Because I can place no dependence on him, and I know I can on you. Even at this present moment, when every energy is needed, he’s in his berth, snoring, I have no doubt, like a drunken hog. How many persons will this launch carry safely and comfortably?’

‘Twa i’ the cabin, sir, and mysel’ and twa ither hands could pig forrad.’

‘And I’ve some cargo, too,’ went on Dare, hesitatingly—‘going on for three tons. Can that also be managed?’

McTavish shook his head.

‘I doot it, sir. But what’s the purpose o’ the cargo?’

Dare leaned forward until his lips were almost touching the ear of the man he was addressing

‘It’s gold, McTavish,’ he whispered—‘four

hundred thousand pounds in British sovereigns! And there’s a tenth part of it for yourself when the trip to the mainland, or a suitable island, is safely accomplished—forty thousand pounds—in yellow boys exactly like this!’

He thrust his hand into his outside jacket pocket as he spoke, and drew out a big handful of coins which he dropped into the outspread paws of McTavish.

‘Forty thoosan’ pounds!’ echoed the man, in breathless awe. ‘Ye mean it? Weel, I’ll see the cargo carried—if I hae ta rip oot every rib i’ the little ship, though that’s no’ neecessary. There’s fittings as can gang.’

He bestowed the gold just handed to him in an inner pocket and carefully buttoned up his coat.

‘Where’s the money lying?’ he asked eagerly. ‘Hadna we better be getting it up?’

‘No, no, there’s plenty of time. Don’t breathe a word to a soul. We’re going to leave Grimshaw behind. There’s another passenger with me—a lady. Your crew will be the two men selected by us this afternoon; but don’t let a syllable slip about the captain. There’d be murder done if he got even an inkling of it. We had arranged, as you know, to start by daylight—at six—but we must go now at midnight instead.’

‘Ye ken best, sir. But ye’re acquainted wi’ this Captain Grimshaw. He’ll no’ sit doon an’ greet when he misses us. He’ll follow us to the far end o’ the warld for vengeance.’

‘Don’t trouble your head about it, McTavish. He won’t follow us. You may rest confident on that. I’m going down for a while. Keep your eyes skinned, and come to me immediately if the least matter of importance is likely to arise. I shall be either in the chart-room or Mrs. Bowgrave’s parlour.’

‘Ay, ay, sir,’ came the response, and Dare passed on.

McTavish, left alone, thrust a coarse grimy hand into an inner pocket and jingled the heap of gold within—the mere trifling earnest of what was to follow.

‘What a mon!’ he sighed admiringly. ‘He’d beguile Beelezebub hissel!’ What a blazing hell-fire row there’ll be atween ’em if it comes oot! An’, if it doesna, I shall hae ta watch him like a thief if ever I’m ta haundle that forty thoosan’ pounds!’

Dare, after getting between decks, went back to his own room, and refreshed himself with a glass of spirit. Then he listened stealthily at the door of Grimshaw’s place. All was as silent as the grave. That worthy had in all

likelihood drunk himself into a condition of insensibility. Afterwards he went on to the treasure room and gazed around at the numerous cases containing the solid wealth that was shortly to pass practically undivided into his possession.

Why, he asked himself, for the twentieth time during the past half-hour, should he share it with Grimshaw? He had kept faith scrupulously right up to then with that individual, had helped him materially in his escape from prison, and had run other serious personal risks in safeguarding his liberty after it had been obtained. Yet, after all, their plot had fizzled ignominiously out. The elusive sunken gold would never be theirs now. It could never indeed be anybody's. He had filled his part in the compact in the straightest possible way. But now—this very night—the partnership would cease. Folly and he were the legitimate heirs of the new-found treasure, and, come what might, it should continue theirs and theirs alone!

He had assured the somewhat doubtful McTavish, who had reason to know his man, that there need be no fear that they would be pursued in their flight with the gold by the implacable Grimshaw. That was all to be thoroughly safeguarded against. As a matter

of fact, there would be no after consequences—no pursuit of any sort—for there would be no pursuers!

The *Atalanta* would at midnight make yet another journey to the bottom of the sea, but it would be her last. She would never return from it, and her whole crew and company, imprisoned and free, would go down with her—to remain in the depths until that Judgment Day of which the Professor had so often in the recent past, on shipboard and in Manxland, prated long and foolishly.

The idea supplied him with grim amusement, and he laughed mirthlessly at the new notion. The prophecy of the crazed old man was coming true after all. The world was to end on the thirteenth—for the vast majority of doomed souls on board his ill-omened ship!

He turned lightly into Mrs. Bowgrave's boudoir, with a careless knock, not waiting for an invitation, for he was always a welcome visitor, to encounter a spectacle that froze him to the spot on the threshold where he stood, open door in hand.

The bodies of Susette and Grimshaw lay on the floor where they had fallen, but that of the beautiful Mrs. Bowgrave had been lifted to the couch and placed at its head in a semi-upright

position. It was an indescribable travesty of humanity, with its glazed and starting eyes and bruised and empurpled flesh tints.

The Professor, recovered from his fainting-fit, was seated by the dead woman's side. He paid not the slightest attention to Dare's entry, and did not even lift his eyes to look at the latter as he stood transfixed.

'Professor!' gasped the newcomer at length.

It was all that he could contrive to say. He could not utter another syllable. His throat had gone dry as dust, and his tongue clicked convulsively upwards and glued itself to the roof of his mouth.

The cry attracted the old man, and he lifted his mild blue eyes at last and threw a pleasant glance of inquiry at Dare, laughing quietly the while.

'Who are you, my friend?' he asked. 'I do not seem to remember your face, and your name is unknown to me. What can I do for you?'

He did not wait for a reply, but turned to the ghastly figure seated by his side.

'Folly, Folly love, what are all these people doing here? Tell them to go away. Tell them I desire to be alone—with you, dearest. Heigh ho! How dull it is up here by night at

Greymere. I think I'll order the carriage and go down to Douglas and finish that game of chess with the General. I shall beat him easily, darling, for I have every move thought out.'

The old man arose, went aimlessly into the inner chamber, and left Dare alone with the dead.

Dare stood for some minutes in statuesque horror, gazing on the fixed eyes and immovable face of Felicity Bowgrave. Then he strode across the stained floor and glanced into the inner chamber. The Professor had thrown himself upon a couch and was seemingly sound asleep. He drew away, went over to where the dead woman sat, and, impelled by the loyalty of his dishonour, put his arms without a shudder around the cold neck and kissed the unresponsive cheek.

'Farewell, Folly—farewell!' he whispered into the deaf ear. 'What is the meaning of all this awful tragedy? Ah, yes! It is the thirteenth! Comet Chaos again! Can it be possible? Surely not! Surely this frail old monomaniac—now entirely bereft of his wits—is not the irresponsible author of all this blood and ruin?'

He turned to Folly a second time, kissed her

once more—this time fully, fondly, upon the lips—and fled with averted face into the corridor.

He halted and remembered something. There was still a purpose left in life. And the means were his. Gold, gold, gold! It was his in fullest measure still, in spite of all.

He unlocked the door of the treasure room, switched on the light, emptied a bag of gold from the opened case, and, with his back to the door, began mechanically to count it out upon the table formed by the embrasure of the port-hole. The exercise restored the action of his half-paralysed brain, and his thoughts began to flow again in a reasoned current.

Why should he stay an unnecessary minute in this ship of horrors unspeakable, unthinkable? He would summon his three humble confederates instantly, have the treasure carried on deck at once, and start forthwith in the launch. And the *Atalanta*, with all her cargo of dread? What of her? She should be blotted out of existence. She should be as a page torn out of the book of life and cast into the fire to be utterly consumed. Not a record of her should remain! She should become, within an hour, a figment of the past—a mere evil memory, to be forgotten in the abounding mercy of the unknown, untold future!

The method by which he would rid himself of his surroundings, and avert all possible consequences in the time to come, was of the easiest and simplest description. In fancy, he entered the dynamite store, affixed several detonators to the pile, set their mechanism in motion for the half-hour, and the thing was done! He would see it to the end himself, too. It should all take place before his own eyes. Room should not be left for even a shred of doubt.

He turned about to put his great idea into instant action. The little low door stood half-open, and over its iron top there peered a face in the gloom. He fell back in awe. He fancied it was the pale moonlit face that had looked up to him in mute despair from the edge of the deserted quarry—the face that still haunted his dreams nightly and sat by his bedside in dark hours when the solace of sleep was denied him—the face that at times appeared before him and beckoned him to follow even in the broad light of noontide!

Then, to his utter consternation, he saw that the apparition was no harmless ghost, but stark, stern reality. It was the face, cruel and determined, of Gilbert Delaval, who, dropping the file he carried, came with giant strides across

the room to take him by the throat. Dare wheeled about to fly, but there was no way of escape. He clutched at the outspread gold on the table, caught up two handfuls, and faced his remorseless enemy again.

Gilbert took him as a terrier might take a rat, shook him savagely from side to side thrice, and then flung him contemptuously across the room. Dare's head crashed against the iron bulkhead like a stone, and he collapsed in a huddle on the floor, his eyes wide open and his lower jaw dropped upon his breast in what seemed an imbecilic grin. It was a grin that would last. He still gripped his little handfuls of gold. They would go with him unseen down into the deep and spacious grave that awaited him.

The victor in the brief strife stayed not to cast a second glance at the fallen man, but went out as quickly as he had entered, to begin the task thrust on his shoulders by destiny of subduing what foes remained, releasing the prisoners, and generally evolving order out of chaos.

* * * * *

We are in England again. It is an idyllic April morning, made up of alternating smiles and tears innumerable. Gilbert Delaval and his

fair proud young wife, Dorothy, stand in that particular garden of Eden, a mile or two north of Tynemouth, which the man had pictured to the woman in such roseate tints during those happy, never-to-be-forgotten days of glorious summer in delightful Douglas. And, when she had put aside the black horror of the past to enter the sunlit future, the blissful reality far exceeded even her fondest, tenderest fancies.

The bright and handsome couple were on the terrace of the little palace set in the centre of their Eden—an Eden standing away from the quiet highway across the open country and shut completely out from the world by a tall impregnable hedge of hawthorn—gazing up the trim drive.

A hansom had drawn up at the gates, and a burly red-faced man came out. It was Lashley, the Tyneside shipbuilder, brimming over with important intelligence from his office on the Quayside at Newcastle.

‘Good news, Gilbert, my lad,’ he cried merrily. ‘You can wipe your hands of the business now and give me the order for that yacht of yours that we have talked so much about. I’ve found a customer for the *Atalanta*—the Jap Government. What’s more, I’ve been commissioned to transform her into a

fighting ship. And you can bet your boots she’ll be heard of some day soon, out Port Arthur way, performing wonders up against the Muscovites under a new and unpronounceable name. Here’s the draft for the purchase money.’

Delaval took the slip extended to him—a piece of paper worth just one hundred and fifty thousand pounds. ‘I’ll put it into the bank along with the Professor’s millions.’

‘Which will all go into Mistress Delaval’s pocket some day,’ added Lashley.

‘Indeed,’ retorted Dorothy, tossing her sun-kissed head. ‘You may know something about ships, but you know nothing about ladies’ dress. Why, ladies have no pockets whatever nowadays. The tailors give them all to you selfish men. I shall have to let Gilbert carry my purse. He’s certainly well provided for, for I counted fifteen pockets in a suit of his the other morning. Awfully unfair division, isn’t it?’

‘Extremely shocking,’ responded Lashley.

‘By the way, I forgot. How’s the Professor? He isn’t out this morning?’

‘No,’ said Gilbert. ‘He’s as usual, but it’s a trifle too damp for him to-day. It’s a great mercy that he is as he is. He never

mentions the past—it's an utter blank to him—and his outlook is that of a good-natured child. He was happy and profoundly busy yesterday in his pathetic, innocent way, helping Dolly and me in our gardening. But he soon grows tired. The doctor was here this morning. The day of his patient, he fears, is not long. He may live a year or two, or he may leave us at any moment. We shall part from him with genuine regret.'

'He's a dear old man,' commented Lashley. 'And there's one consolation. Let his end come when it may, it will be peace—peace where otherwise there might have been unceasing torture to the last.'

'I'd better give you a cheque for your commission,' suggested Gilbert. 'It will be a tidy sum even at five per cent.'

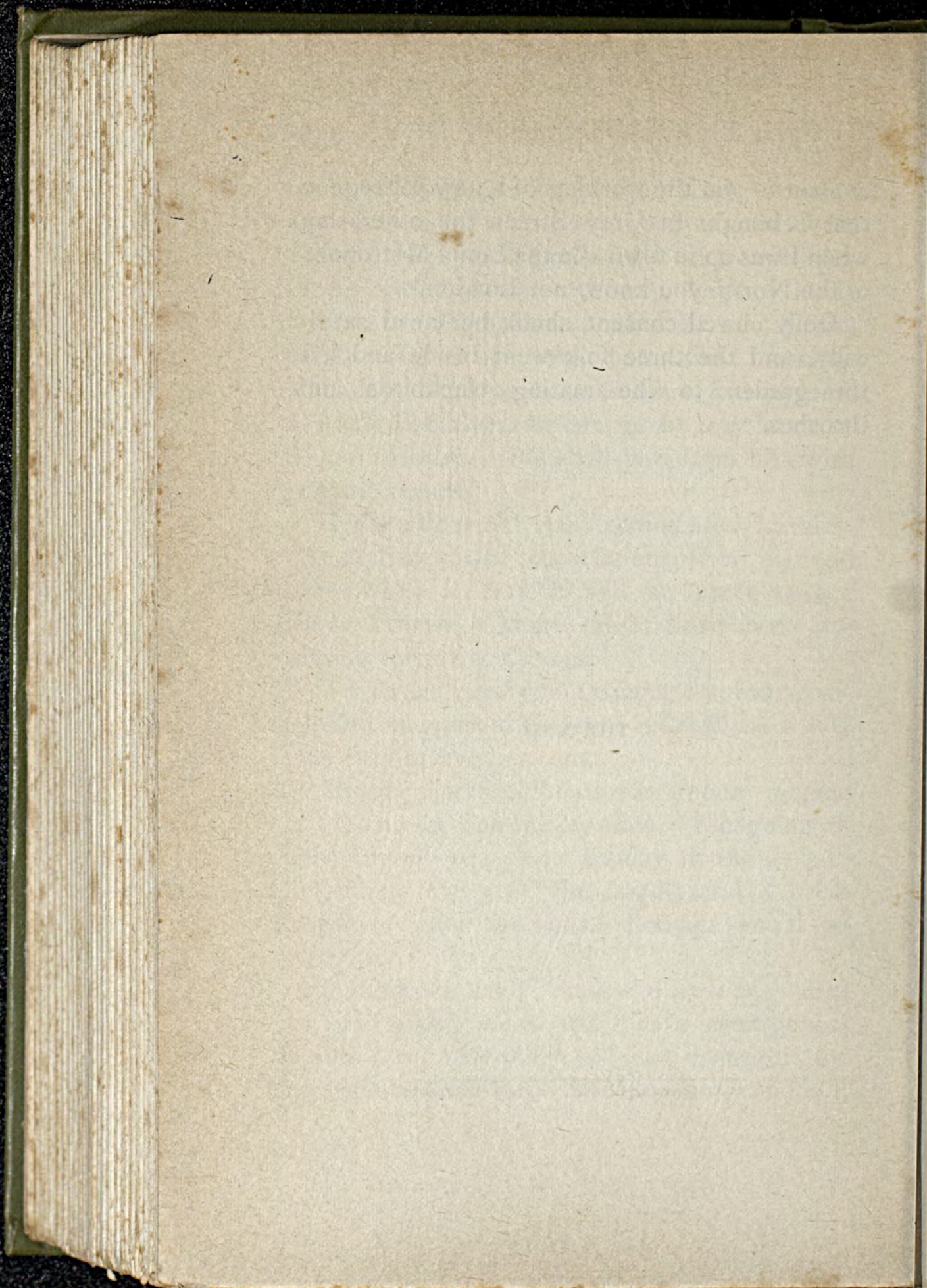
'Right you are. I never refuse money. It'll come in handy, my boy. I'm going to treat myself to a long holiday in the Island. I'm taking the wife, the family, and a great crowd of poor relations. Perhaps you'll be going, too?'

'I think we shall,' came the answer. 'But it's dry talking here, and I'm a most inhospitable host. If Dolly will just excuse us for five minutes, we'll go into my den, and I'll

explain to you the working of a new seltzogene that I bought in Grey Street the other day when I was up in town—in the canny Metropolis of the North, you know, not London.’

Dolly bowed consent, shook her head satirically, and the three folk went inside and left the garden to the mating blackbirds and thrushes.

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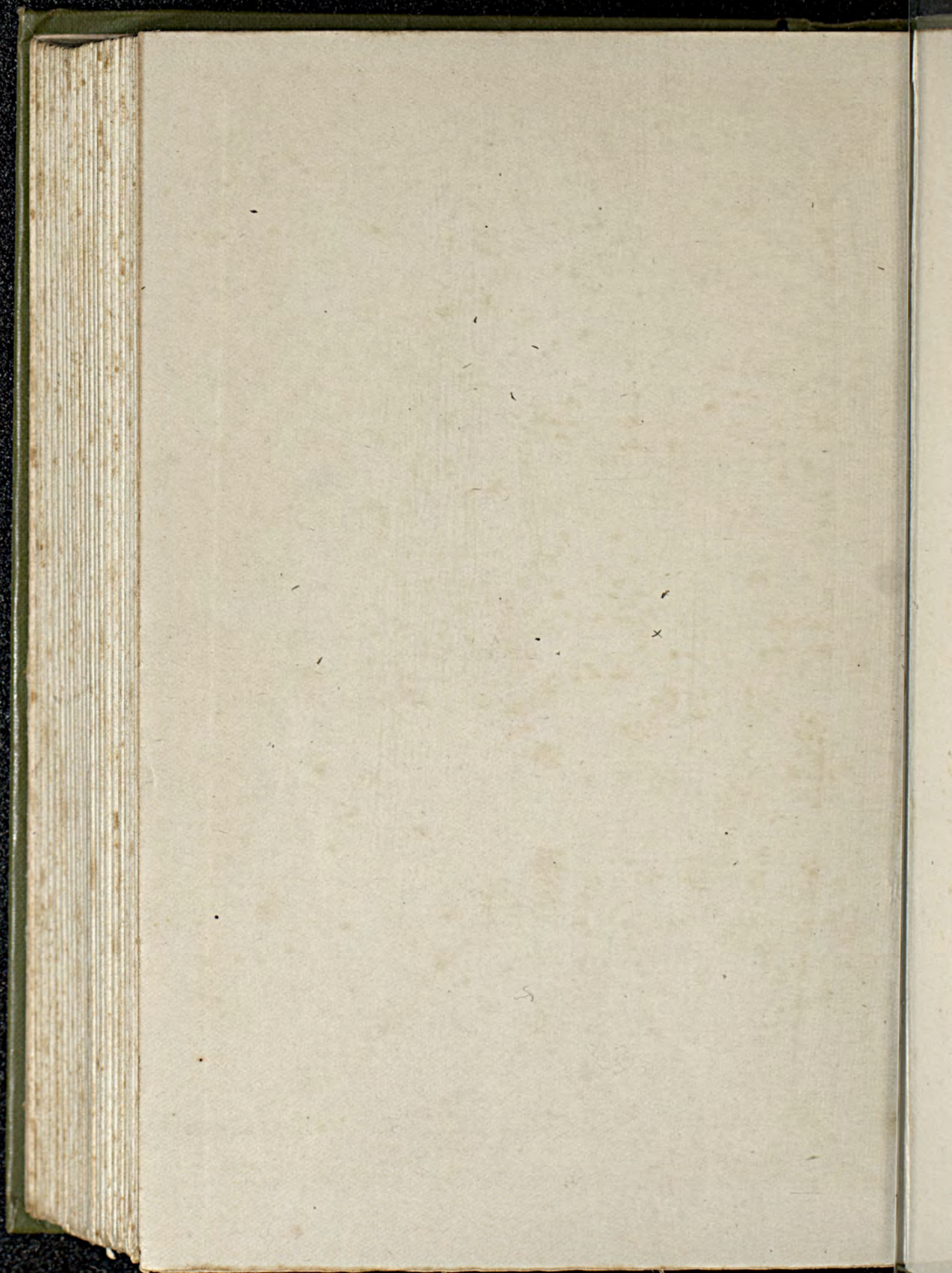
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