

ACT II. THE ISLAND

Two months have elapsed, and the scene is a desert island in the Pacific, on which our adventurers have been wrecked.

The curtain rises on a sea of bamboo, which shuts out all view save the foliage of palm trees and some gaunt rocks. Occasionally Crichton and Treherne come momentarily into sight, hacking and hewing the bamboo, through which they are making a clearing between the ladies and the shore; and by and by, owing to their efforts, we shall have an unrestricted outlook on to a sullen sea that is at present hidden. Then we shall also be able to note a mast standing out of the water--all that is left, saving floating wreckage, of the ill-fated yacht the Bluebell. The beginnings of a hut will also be seen, with Crichton driving its walls into the ground or astride its roof of saplings, for at present he is doing more than one thing at a time. In a red shirt, with the ends of his sailor's breeches thrust into wading-boots, he looks a man for the moment; we suddenly remember some one's saying--perhaps it was ourselves--that a cataclysm would be needed to get him out of his servant's clothes, and apparently it has been forthcoming. It is no longer beneath our dignity to cast an inquiring eye on his appearance. His features are not distinguished, but he has a strong jaw and green eyes, in which a yellow light burns that we have not seen before. His dark hair, hitherto so decorously sleek, has been ruffled this way and that by wind and weather, as if they were part of the cataclysm and wanted to help his chance. His muscles must be soft and flabby still, but though they shriek aloud to him to desist, he rains lusty blows with his axe, like one who has come upon the open for the first time in his life, and likes it. He is as yet far from being an expert woodsman--mark the blood on his hands at places where he has hit them instead of the tree; but note also that he does not waste time in bandaging them--he rubs them in the earth and goes on. His face is still of the discreet pallor that befits a butler, and he carries the smaller logs as if they were a salver; not in a day or a month

will he shake off the badge of servitude, but without knowing it he has begun.

But for the hatchets at work, and an occasional something horrible falling from a tree into the ladies' laps, they hear nothing save the mournful surf breaking on a coral shore.

They sit or recline huddled together against a rock, and they are farther from home, in every sense of the word, than ever before. Thirty-six hours ago, they were given three minutes in which to dress, without a maid, and reach the boats, and they have not made the best of that valuable time. None of them has boots, and had they known this prickly island they would have thought first of boots. They have a sufficiency of garments, but some of them were gifts dropped into the boat--Lady Mary's tarpaulin coat and hat, for instance, and Catherine's blue jersey and red cap, which certify that the two ladies were lately before the mast. Agatha is too gay in Ernest's dressing-gown, and clutches it to her person with both hands as if afraid that it may be claimed by its rightful owner. There are two pairs of bath slippers between the three of them, and their hair cries aloud and in vain for hairpins.

By their side, on an inverted bucket, sits Ernest, clothed neatly in the garments of day and night, but, alas, bare-footed. He is the only cheerful member of this company of four, but his brightness is due less to a manly desire to succour the helpless than to his having been lately in the throes of composition, and to his modest satisfaction with the result. He reads to the ladies, and they listen, each with one scared eye to the things that fall from trees.

ERNEST (who has written on the fly-leaf of the only book saved from the wreck). This is what I have written. 'Wrecked, wrecked, wrecked! on an island in the Tropics, the following: the Hon. Ernest Woolley, the Rev. John Treherne, the Ladies Mary, Catherine, and Agatha Lasenby, with two servants. We are the sole survivors of Lord Loam's steam yacht Bluebell, which encountered a fearful gale in these seas, and soon became a total wreck. The crew behaved gallantly, putting us all into the first boat. What became of them I cannot tell, but we, after dreadful sufferings, and insufficiently clad, in whatever garments we could lay hold of in the dark'--

LADY MARY. Please don't describe our garments.

ERNEST.--'succeeded in reaching this island, with the loss of only one of our party, namely, Lord Loam, who flung away his life in a gallant attempt to save a servant who had fallen overboard.' (The ladies have wept long and sore for their father, but there is something in this last utterance that makes them look up.)

AGATHA. But, Ernest, it was Crichton who jumped overboard trying to save father.

ERNEST (with the candour that is one of his most engaging qualities). Well, you know, it was rather silly of uncle to fling away his life by trying to get into the boat first; and as this document may be printed in the English papers, it struck me, an English peer, you know--

LADY MARY (every inch an English peer's daughter). Ernest, that is very thoughtful of you.

ERNEST (continuing, well pleased).--'By night the cries of wild cats and the hissing of snakes terrify us extremely'--(this does not satisfy him so well, and he makes a correction)--'terrify the ladies extremely. Against these we have no weapons except one cutlass and a hatchet. A bucket washed ashore is at present our only comfortable seat'--

LADY MARY (with some spirit). And Ernest is sitting on it.

ERNEST. H'sh! Oh, do be quiet.--'To add to our horrors, night falls suddenly in these parts, and it is then that savage animals begin to prowl and roar.'

LADY MARY. Have you said that vampire bats suck the blood from our toes as we sleep?

ERNEST. No, that's all. I end up, 'Rescue us or we perish. Rich reward. Signed Ernest Woolley, in command of our little party.' This is written on a leaf taken out of a book of poems that Crichton found in his pocket. Fancy Crichton being a reader of poetry. Now I shall put it into the bottle and fling it into the sea.

(He pushes the precious document into a soda-water bottle, and rams the cork home. At the same moment, and without effort, he gives birth to one of his most characteristic epigrams.)

The tide is going out, we mustn't miss the post.

(They are so unhappy that they fail to grasp it, and a little petulantly he calls for CRICHTON, ever his stand-by in the hour of epigram. CRICHTON breaks through the undergrowth quickly, thinking the ladies are in danger.)

CRICHTON. Anything wrong, sir?

ERNEST (with fine confidence). The tide, Crichton, is a postman who calls at our island twice a day for letters.

CRICHTON (after a pause). Thank you, sir.

(He returns to his labours, however, without giving the smile which is the epigrammatist's right, and ERNEST is a little disappointed in him.)

ERNEST. Poor Crichton! I sometimes think he is losing his sense of humour. Come along, Agatha.

(He helps his favourite up the rocks, and they disappear gingerly from view.)

CATHERINE. How horribly still it is.

LADY MARY (remembering some recent sounds). It is best when it is still.

CATHERINE (drawing closer to her). Mary, I have heard that they are always very still just before they jump.

LADY MARY. Don't. (A distinct chapping is heard, and they are startled.)

LADY MARY (controlling herself). It is only Crichton knocking down trees.

CATHERINE (almost imploringly). Mary, let us go and stand beside him.

LADY MARY (coldly). Let a servant see that I am afraid!

CATHERINE. Don't, then; but remember this, dear, they often drop on one from above.

(She moves away, nearer to the friendly sound of the axe, and LADY MARY is left alone. She is the most courageous of them as well as the haughtiest, but when something she had thought to be a stick glides toward her, she forgets her dignity and screams.)

LADY MARY (calling). Crichton, Crichton!

(It must have been TREHERNE who was tree-felling, for CRICHTON comes to her from the hut, drawing his cutlass.)

CRICHTON (anxious). Did you call, my lady?

LADY MARY (herself again, now that he is there). I! Why should I?

CRICHTON. I made a mistake, your ladyship. (Hesitating.) If you are afraid of being alone, my lady--

LADY MARY. Afraid! Certainly not. (Doggedly.) You may go.

(But she does not complain when he remains within eyesight cutting the bamboo. It is heavy work, and she watches him silently.)

LADY MARY. I wish, Crichton, you could work without getting so hot.

CRICHTON (mopping his face). I wish I could, my lady.

(He continues his labours.)

LADY MARY (taking off her oilskins). It makes me hot to look at you.

CRICHTON. It almost makes me cool to look at your ladyship.

LADY MARY (who perhaps thinks he is presuming). Anything I can do for you in that way, Crichton, I shall do with pleasure.

CRICHTON (quite humbly). Thank you, my lady.

(By this time most of the bamboo has been cut, and the shore and sea are visible, except where they are hidden by the half completed hut. The mast rising solitary from the water adds to the desolation of the scene, and at last tears run down LADY MARY'S face.)

CRICHTON. Don't give way, my lady, things might be worse.

LADY MARY. My poor father.

CRICHTON. If I could have given my life for his.

LADY MARY. You did all a man could do. Indeed I thank you, Crichton. (With some admiration and more wonder.) You are a man.

CRICHTON. Thank you, my lady.

LADY MARY. But it is all so awful. Crichton, is there any hope of a ship coming?

CRICHTON (after hesitation). Of course there is, my lady.

LADY MARY (facing him bravely). Don't treat me as a child. I have got to know the worst, and to face it. Crichton, the truth.

CRICHTON (reluctantly). We were driven out of our course, my lady; I fear far from the track of commerce.

LADY MARY. Thank you; I understand.

(For a moment, however, she breaks down. Then she clenches her hands and stands erect.)

CRICHTON (watching her, and forgetting perhaps for the moment that they are not just a man and woman). You're a good pluckt 'un, my lady.

LADY MARY (falling into the same error). I shall try to be. (Extricating herself.) Crichton, how dare you?

CRICHTON. I beg your ladyship's pardon; but you are.

(She smiles, as if it were a comfort to be told this even by CRICHTON.)

And until a ship comes we are three men who are going to do our best for you ladies.

LADY MARY (with a curl of the lip). Mr. Ernest does no work.

CRICHTON (cheerily). But he will, my lady.

LADY MARY. I doubt it.

CRICHTON (confidently, but perhaps thoughtlessly). No work--no dinner--will make a great change in Mr. Ernest.

LADY MARY. No work--no dinner. When did you invent that rule, Crichton?

CRICHTON (loaded with bamboo). I didn't invent it, my lady. I seem to see it growing all over the island.

LADY MARY (disquieted). Crichton, your manner strikes me as curious.

CRICHTON (pained). I hope not, your ladyship.

LADY MARY (determined to have it out with him). You are not implying anything so unnatural, I presume, as that if I and my sisters don't work there will be no dinner for us?

CRICHTON (brightly). If it is unnatural, my lady, that is the end of it.

LADY MARY. If? Now I understand. The perfect servant at home holds that we are all equal now. I see.

CRICHTON (wounded to the quick). My lady, can you think me so inconsistent?

LADY MARY. That is it.

CRICHTON (earnestly). My lady, I disbelieved in equality at home because it was against nature, and for that same reason I as utterly disbelieve in it on an island.

LADY MARY (relieved by his obvious sincerity). I apologise.

CRICHTON (continuing unfortunately). There must always, my lady, be one to command and others to obey.

LADY MARY (satisfied). One to command, others to obey. Yes. (Then suddenly she realises that there may be a dire meaning in his confident words.) Crichton!

CRICHTON (who has intended no dire meaning). What is it, my lady?

(But she only stares into his face and then hurries from him. Left alone he is puzzled, but being a practical man he busies himself gathering firewood, until TWEENY appears excitedly carrying cocoa-nuts in her skirt. She has made better use than the ladies of her three minutes' grace for dressing.)

TWEENY (who can be happy even on an island if CRICHTON is with her). Look what I found.

CRICHTON. Cocoa-nuts. Bravo!

TWEENY. They grows on trees.

CRICHTON. Where did you think they grew?

TWEENY. I thought as how they grew in rows on top of little sticks.

CRICHTON (wrinkling his brows). Oh Tweeny, Tweeny!

TWEENY (anxiously). Have I offended of your feelings again, sir?

CRICHTON. A little.

TWEENY (in a despairing outburst). I'm full o' vulgar words and ways; and though I may keep them in their holes when you are by, as soon as I'm by myself out they comes in a rush like beetles when the house is dark. I says them gloating-like, in my head--'Blooming' I says, and 'All my eye,' and 'Ginger,' and 'Nothink'; and all the time we was being wrecked I was praying to myself, 'Please the Lord it may be an island as it's natural to be vulgar on.'

(A shudder passes through CRICHTON, and she is abject.)

That's the kind I am, sir. I'm 'opeless. You'd better give me up.

(She is a pathetic, forlorn creature, and his manhood is stirred.)

CRICHTON (wondering a little at himself for saying it). I won't give you up. It is strange that one so common should attract one so fastidious; but so it is. (Thoughtfully.) There is something about you, Tweeny, there is a je ne sais quoi about you.

TWEENY (knowing only that he has found something in her to commend). Is there, is there? Oh, I am glad.

CRICHTON (putting his hand on her shoulder like a protector). We shall fight your vulgarity together. (All this time he has been arranging sticks for his fire.) Now get some dry grass. (She brings him grass, and he puts it under the sticks. He produces an odd lens from his pocket, and tries to focus the sun's rays.)

TWEENY. Why, what's that?

CRICHTON (the ingenious creature). That's the glass from my watch and one from Mr. Treherne's, with a little water between them. I'm hoping to kindle a fire with it.

TWEENY (properly impressed). Oh sir!

(After one failure the grass takes fire, and they are blowing on it when excited cries near by bring them sharply to their feet. AGATHA runs to them, white of face, followed by ERNEST.)

ERNEST. Danger! Crichton, a tiger-cat!

CRICHTON (getting his cutlass). Where?

AGATHA. It is at our heels.

ERNEST. Look out, Crichton.

CRICHTON. H'sh!

(TREHERNE comes to his assistance, while LADY MARY and CATHERINE join AGATHA in the hut.) ERNEST. It will be on us in a moment. (He seizes the hatchet and guards the hut. It is pleasing to see that ERNEST is no coward.)

TREHERNE. Listen!

ERNEST. The grass is moving. It's coming.

(It comes. But it is no tiger-cat; it is LORD LOAM crawling on his hands and knees, a very exhausted and dishevelled peer, wondrously attired in rags. The girls see him, and with glad cries rush into his arms.)

LADY MARY. Father.

LORD LOAM. Mary--Catherine--Agatha. Oh dear, my dears, my dears, oh dear!

LADY MARY. Darling.

AGATHA. Sweetest.

CATHERINE. Love.

TREHERNE. Glad to see you, sir.

ERNEST. Uncle, uncle, dear old uncle.

(For a time such happy cries fill the air, but presently TREHERNE is thoughtless.)

TREHERNE. Ernest thought you were a tiger-cat.

LORD LOAM (stung somehow to the quick). Oh, did you? I knew you at once, Ernest; I knew you by the way you ran.

(ERNEST smiles forgivingly.)

CRICHTON (venturing forward at last). My lord, I am glad.

ERNEST (with upraised finger). But you are also idling, Crichton.
(Making himself comfortable on the ground.) We mustn't waste time. To work, to work.

CRICHTON (after contemplating him without rancour). Yes, sir.

(He gets a pot from the hut and hangs it on a tripod over the fire, which is now burning brightly.)

TREHERNE. Ernest, you be a little more civil. Crichton, let me help.

(He is soon busy helping CRICHTON to add to the strength of the hut.)

LORD LOAM (gazing at the pot as ladies are said to gaze on precious stones). Is that--but I suppose I'm dreaming again. (Timidly.) It isn't by any chance a pot on top of a fire, is it?

LADY MARY. Indeed, it is, dearest. It is our supper.

LORD LOAM. I have been dreaming of a pot on a fire for two days.
(Quivering.) There 's nothing in it, is there?

ERNEST. Sniff, uncle. (LORD LOAM sniffs.)

LORD LOAM (reverently). It smells of onions!

(There is a sudden diversion.)

CATHERINE. Father, you have boots!

LADY MARY. So he has.

LORD LOAM. Of course I have.

ERNEST (with greedy cunning). You are actually wearing boots, uncle.
It's very unsafe, you know, in this climate.

LORD LOAM. Is it?

ERNEST. We have all abandoned them, you observe. The blood, the arteries, you know.

LORD LOAM. I hadn't a notion.

(He holds out his feet, and ERNEST kneels.)

ERNEST. O Lord, yes.

(In another moment those boots will be his.)

LADY MARY (quickly). Father, he is trying to get your boots from you. There is nothing in the world we wouldn't give for boots.

ERNEST (rising haughtily, a proud spirit misunderstood). I only wanted the loan of them.

AGATHA (running her fingers along them lovingly). If you lend them to any one, it will be to us, won't it, father.

LORD LOAM. Certainly, my child.

ERNEST. Oh, very well. (He is leaving these selfish ones.) I don't want your old boots. (He gives his uncle a last chance.) You don't think you could spare me one boot?

LORD LOAM (tartly). I do not.

ERNEST. Quite so. Well, all I can say is I'm sorry for you.

(He departs to recline elsewhere.)

LADY MARY. Father, we thought we should never see you again.

LORD LOAM. I was washed ashore, my dear, clinging to a hencoop. How awful that first night was.

LADY MARY. Poor father.

LORD LOAM. When I woke, I wept. Then I began to feel extremely hungry. There was a large turtle on the beach. I remembered from the Swiss Family Robinson that if you turn a turtle over he is helpless. My dears, I crawled towards him, I flung myself upon him--(here he pauses to rub his leg)--the nasty, spiteful brute.

LADY MARY. You didn't turn him over?

LORD LOAM (vindictively, though he is a kindly man). Mary, the senseless thing wouldn't wait; I found that none of them would wait.

CATHERINE. We should have been as badly off if Crichton hadn't--

LADY MARY (quickly). Don't praise Crichton.

LORD LOAM. And then those beastly monkeys, I always understood that if you flung stones at them they would retaliate by flinging cocoa-nuts at you. Would you believe it, I flung a hundred stones, and not one monkey had sufficient intelligence to grasp my meaning. How I longed for Crichton.

LADY MARY (wincing). For us also, father?

LORD LOAM. For you also. I tried for hours to make a fire. The authors say that when wrecked on an island you can obtain a light by rubbing two pieces of stick together. (With feeling.) The liars!

LADY MARY. And all this time you thought there was no one on the island but yourself?

LORD LOAM. I thought so until this morning. I was searching the pools for little fishes, which I caught in my hat, when suddenly I saw before me--on the sand--

CATHERINE. What?

LORD LOAM. A hairpin.

LADY MARY. A hairpin! It must be one of ours. Give it me, father.

AGATHA. No, it's mine.

LORD LOAM. I didn't keep it.

LADY MARY (speaking for all three). Didn't keep it? Found a hairpin on an island, and didn't keep it?

LORD LOAM (humbly). My dears.

AGATHA (scarcely to be placated). Oh father, we have returned to nature more than you bargained for.

LADY MARY. For shame, Agatha. (She has something on her mind.) Father, there is something I want you to do at once--I mean to assert your position as the chief person on the island.

(They are all surprised.)

LORD LOAM. But who would presume to question it?

CATHERINE. She must mean Ernest.

LADY MARY. Must I?

AGATHA. It's cruel to say anything against Ernest.

LORD LOAM (firmly). If any one presumes to challenge my position, I shall make short work of him.

AGATHA. Here comes Ernest; now see if you can say these horrid things to his face.

LORD LOAM. I shall teach him his place at once.

LADY MARY (anxiously). But how?

LORD LOAM (chuckling). I have just thought of an extremely amusing way of doing it. (As ERNEST approaches.) Ernest.

ERNEST (loftily). Excuse me, uncle, I'm thinking. I'm planning out the building of this hut.

LORD LOAM. I also have been thinking.

ERNEST. That don't matter.

LORD LOAM. Eh?

ERNEST. Please, please, this is important.

LORD LOAM. I have been thinking that I ought to give you my boots.

ERNEST. What!

LADY MARY. Father.

LORD LOAM (genially). Take them, my boy. (With a rapidity we had not thought him capable of, ERNEST becomes the wearer of the boots.) And now I dare say you want to know why I give them to you, Ernest?

ERNEST (moving up and down in them deliciously). Not at all. The great thing is, 'I've got 'em, I've got 'em.'

LORD LOAM (majestically, but with a knowing look at his daughters). My reason is that, as head of our little party, you, Ernest, shall be our hunter, you shall clear the forests of those savage beasts that make them so dangerous. (Pleasantly.) And now you know, my dear nephew, why I have given you my boots.

ERNEST. This is my answer.

(He kicks off the boots.)

LADY MARY (still anxious). Father, assert yourself.

LORD LOAM. I shall now assert myself. (But how to do it? He has a happy thought.) Call Crichton.

LADY MARY. Oh father.

(CRICHTON comes in answer to a summons, and is followed by TREHERNE.)

ERNEST (wondering a little at LADY MARY'S grave face). Crichton, look here.

LORD LOAM (sturdily). Silence! Crichton, I want your advice as to what I ought to do with Mr. Ernest. He has defied me.

ERNEST. Pooh!

CRICHTON (after considering). May I speak openly, my lord?

LADY MARY (keeping her eyes fixed on him). That is what we desire.

CRICHTON (quite humbly). Then I may say, your lordship, that I have been considering Mr. Ernest's case at odd moments ever since we were wrecked.

ERNEST. My case?

LORD LOAM (sternly). Hush.

CRICHTON. Since we landed on the island, my lord, it seems to me that Mr. Ernest's epigrams have been particularly brilliant.

ERNEST (gratified). Thank you, Crichton.

CRICHTON. But I find--I seem to find it growing wild, my lord, in the woods, that sayings which would be justly admired in England are not much use on an island. I would therefore most respectfully propose that henceforth every time Mr. Ernest favours us with an epigram his head should be immersed in a bucket of cold spring water.

(There is a terrible silence.)

LORD LOAM (uneasily). Serve him right.

ERNEST. I should like to see you try to do it, uncle.

CRICHTON (ever ready to come to the succour of his lordship). My feeling, my lord, is that at the next offence I should convey him to a retired spot, where I shall carry out the undertaking in as respectful a manner as is consistent with a thorough immersion.

(Though his manner is most respectful, he is firm; he evidently means what he says.)

LADY MARY (a ramrod). Father, you must not permit this; Ernest is your nephew.

LORD LOAM (with his hand to his brow). After all, he is my nephew, Crichton; and, as I am sure, he now sees that I am a strong man--

ERNEST (foolishly in the circumstances). A strong man. You mean a stout man. You are one of mind to two of matter. (He looks round in the old way for approval. No one has smiled, and to his consternation he sees that CRICHTON is quietly turning up his sleeves. ERNEST makes an appealing gesture to his uncle; then he turns defiantly to CRICHTON.)

CRICHTON. Is it to be before the ladies, Mr. Ernest, or in the privacy of the wood? (He fixes ERNEST with his eye. ERNEST is cowed.) Come.

ERNEST (affecting bravado). Oh, all right.

CRICHTON (succinctly). Bring the bucket.

(ERNEST hesitates. He then lifts the bucket and follows CRICHTON to the nearest spring.)

LORD LOAM (rather white). I'm sorry for him, but I had to be firm.

LADY MARY. Oh father, it wasn't you who was firm. Crichton did it himself.

LORD LOAM. Bless me, so he did.

LADY MARY. Father, be strong.

LORD LOAM (bewildered). You can't mean that my faithful Crichton--

LADY MARY. Yes, I do.

TREHERNE. Lady Mary, I stake my word that Crichton is incapable of acting dishonourably.

LADY MARY. I know that; I know it as well as you. Don't you see that that is what makes him so dangerous?

TREHERNE. By Jove, I--I believe I catch your meaning.

CATHERINE. He is coming back.

LORD LOAM (who has always known himself to be a man of ideas). Let us all go into the hut, just to show him at once that it is our hut.

LADY MARY (as they go). Father, I implore you, assert yourself now and for ever.

LORD LOAM. I will.

LADY MARY. And, please, don't ask him how you are to do it.

(CRICHTON returns with sticks to mend the fire.)

LORD LOAM (loftily, from the door of the hut). Have you carried out my instructions, Crichton?

CRICHTON (deferentially). Yes, my lord.

(ERNEST appears, mopping his hair, which has become very wet since we last saw him. He is not bearing malice, he is too busy drying, but AGATHA is specially his champion.)

AGATHA. It's infamous, infamous.

LORD LOAM: (strongly). My orders, Agatha.

LADY MARY. Now, father, please.

LORD LOAM (striking an attitude). Before I give you any further orders, Crichton--

CRICHTON. Yes, my lord.

LORD LOAM. (delighted) Pooh! It's all right.

LADY MARY. No. Please go on.

LORD LOAM. Well, well. This question of the leadership; what do you think now, Crichton?

CRICHTON. My lord, I feel it is a matter with which I have nothing to do.

LORD LOAM. Excellent. Ha, Mary? That settles it, I think.

LADY MARY. It seems to, but--I'm not sure.

CRICHTON. It will settle itself naturally, my lord, without any interference from us.

(The reference to nature gives general dissatisfaction.)

LADY MARY. Father.

LORD LOAM (a little severely). It settled itself long ago, Crichton, when I was born a peer, and you, for instance, were born a servant.

CRICHTON (acquiescing). Yes, my lord, that was how it all came about quite naturally in England. We had nothing to do with it there, and we shall have as little to do with it here.

TREHERNE (relieved). That's all right.

LADY MARY (determined to clinch the matter). One moment. In short, Crichton, his lordship will continue to be our natural head.

CRICHTON. I dare say, my lady, I dare say.

CATHERINE. But you must know.

CRICHTON. Asking your pardon, my lady, one can't be sure--on an island.

(They look at each other uneasily.)

LORD LOAM (warningly). Crichton, I don't like this.

CRICHTON (harassed). The more I think of it, your lordship, the more uneasy I become myself. When I heard, my lord, that you had left that hairpin behind--(He is pained.)

LORD LOAM (feebly). One hairpin among so many would only have caused dissension.

CRICHTON (very sorry to have to contradict him). Not so, my lord. From that hairpin we could have made a needle; with that needle we could, out of skins, have sewn trousers of which your lordship is in need; indeed, we are all in need of them.

LADY MARY (suddenly self-conscious). All?

CRICHTON. On an island, my lady.

LADY MARY. Father.

CRICHTON (really more distressed by the prospect than she). My lady, if nature does not think them necessary, you may be sure she will not ask you to wear them. (Shaking his head.) But among all this undergrowth--

LADY MARY. Now you see this man in his true colours.

LORD LOAM (violently). Crichton, you will either this moment say, 'Down with nature,'.

CRICHTON (scandalised). My Lord!

LORD LOAM (loftily). Then this is my last word to you; take a month's notice.

(If the hut had a door he would now shut it to indicate that the interview is closed.)

CRICHTON (in great distress). Your lordship, the disgrace--

LORD LOAM (swelling). Not another word: you may go.

LADY MARY (adamant). And don't come to me, Crichton, for a character.

ERNEST (whose immersion has cleared his brain). Aren't you all forgetting that this is an island?

(This brings them to earth with a bump. LORD LOAM looks to his eldest daughter for the fitting response.)

LADY MARY (equal to the occasion). It makes only this difference--that you may go at once, Crichton, to some other part of the island.

(The faithful servant has been true to his superiors ever since he was created, and never more true than at this moment; but his fidelity is founded on trust in nature, and to be untrue to it would be to be untrue

to them. He lets the wood he has been gathering slip to the ground, and bows his sorrowful head. He turns to obey. Then affection for these great ones wells up in him.)

CRICHTON. My lady, let me work for you.

LADY MARY. Go.

CRICHTON. You need me so sorely; I can't desert you; I won't.

LADY MARY (in alarm, lest the others may yield). Then, father, there is but one alternative, we must leave him.

(LORD LOAM is looking yearningly at CRICHTON.)

TREHERNE. It seems a pity.

CATHERINE (forlornly). You will work for us?

TREHERNE. Most willingly. But I must warn you all that, so far, Crichton has done nine-tenths of the scoring.

LADY MARY. The question is, are we to leave this man?

LORD LOAM (wrapping himself in his dignity). Come, my dears.

CRICHTON. My lord!

LORD LOAM. Treherne--Ernest--get our things.

ERNEST. We don't have any, uncle. They all belong to Crichton.

TREHERNE. Everything we have he brought from the wreck--he went back to it before it sank. He risked his life.

CRICHTON. My lord, anything you would care to take is yours.

LADY MARY (quickly). Nothing.

ERNEST. Rot! If I could have your socks, Crichton--

LADY MARY. Come, father; we are ready.

(Followed by the others, she and LORD LOAM pick their way up the rocks. In their indignation they scarcely notice that daylight is coming to a sudden end.)

CRICHTON. My lord, I implore you--I am not desirous of being head. Do you have a try at it, my lord.

LORD LOAM (outraged). A try at it!

CRICHTON (eagerly). It may be that you will prove to be the best man.

LORD LOAM. May be! My children, come.

(They disappear proudly in single file.)

TREHERNE. Crichton, I'm sorry; but of course I must go with them.

CRICHTON. Certainly, sir.

(He calls to TWEENY, and she comes from behind the hut, where she has been watching breathlessly.)

Will you be so kind, sir, as to take her to the others?

TREHERNE. Assuredly.

TWEENY. But what do it all mean?

CRICHTON. Does, Tweeny, does. (He passes her up the rocks to TREHERNE.) We shall meet again soon, Tweeny. Good night, sir.

TREHERNE. Good night. I dare say they are not far away.

CRICHTON (thoughtfully). They went westward, sir, and the wind is blowing in that direction. That may mean, sir, that nature is already taking the matter into her own hands. They are all hungry, sir, and the pot has come a-boil. (He takes off the lid.) The smell will be borne westward. That pot is full of nature, Mr. Treherne. Good night, sir.

TREHERNE. Good night.

(He mounts the rocks with TWEENY, and they are heard for a little time after their figures are swallowed up in the fast growing darkness.

CRICHTON stands motionless, the lid in his hand, though he has forgotten it, and his reason for taking it off the pot. He is deeply stirred, but presently is ashamed of his dejection, for it is as if he doubted his principles. Bravely true to his faith that nature will decide now as ever before, he proceeds manfully with his preparations for the night. He lights a ship's lantern, one of several treasures he has brought ashore,

and is filling his pipe with crumbs of tobacco from various pockets, when the stealthy movements of some animal in the grass startles him. With the lantern in one hand and his cutlass in the other, he searches the ground around the hut. He returns, lights his pipe, and sits down by the fire, which casts weird moving shadows. There is a red gleam on his face; in the darkness he is a strong and perhaps rather sinister figure. In the great stillness that has fallen over the land, the wash of the surf seems to have increased in volume. The sound is indescribably mournful. Except where the fire is, desolation has fallen on the island like a pall.

Once or twice, as nature dictates, CRICHTON leans forward to stir the pot, and the smell is borne westward. He then resumes his silent vigil.

Shadows other than those cast by the fire begin to descend the rocks. They are the adventurers returning. One by one they steal nearer to the pot until they are squatted round it, with their hands out to the blaze. LADY MARY only is absent. Presently she comes within sight of the others, then stands against a tree with her teeth clenched. One wonders, perhaps, what nature is to make of her.)

End of Act II.