CHAPTER XII

The Moorsoms did manage to catch the homeward mail boat all right, but had only twenty-four hours in town. Thus the sentimental Willie could not see very much of them. This did not prevent him afterwards from relating at great length, with manly tears in his eyes, how poor Miss Moorsom—the fashionable and clever beauty—found her betrothed in Malata only to see him die in her arms. Most people were deeply touched by the sad story. It was the talk of a good many days.

But the all-knowing Editor, Renouard's only friend and crony, wanted to know more than the rest of the world. From professional incontinence, perhaps, he thirsted for a full cup of harrowing detail. And when he noticed Renouard's schooner lying in port day after day he sought the sailing master to learn the reason. The man told him that such were his instructions. He had been ordered to lie there a month before returning to Malata. And the month was nearly up. "I will ask you to give me a passage," said the Editor.

He landed in the morning at the bottom of the garden and found peace, stillness, sunshine reigning everywhere, the doors and windows of the bungalow standing wide open, no sight of a human being anywhere, the plants growing rank and tall on the deserted fields. For hours the Editor and the schooner's crew, excited by the mystery, roamed over the island shouting Renouard's name; and at last set themselves in grim silence to explore systematically the uncleared bush and the deeper ravines in search of his corpse. What had happened? Had he been murdered by the boys? Or had he simply, capricious and secretive, abandoned his plantation taking the people with him. It was impossible to tell what had happened. At last, towards the decline of the day, the Editor and the sailing master discovered a track of sandals crossing a strip of sandy beach on the north shore of the bay. Following this track fearfully, they passed round the spur of the headland, and there on a large stone found the sandals, Renouard's white jacket, and the Malay sarong of chequered pattern which the planter of Malata was well known to wear when going to bathe. These things made a little heap, and the sailor remarked, after gazing at it in silence—

"Birds have been hovering over this for many a day."

"He's gone bathing and got drowned," cried the Editor in dismay.

"I doubt it, sir. If he had been drowned anywhere within a mile from the shore the body would have been washed out on the reefs. And our boats have found

nothing so far."

Nothing was ever found—and Renouard's disappearance remained in the main inexplicable. For to whom could it have occurred that a man would set out calmly to swim beyond the confines of life—with a steady stroke—his eyes fixed on a star!

Next evening, from the receding schooner, the Editor looked back for the last time at the deserted island. A black cloud hung listlessly over the high rock on the middle hill; and under the mysterious silence of that shadow Malata lay mournful, with an air of anguish in the wild sunset, as if remembering the heart that was broken there.

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Dec. 1913.

THE PARTNER

"And that be hanged for a silly yarn. The boatmen here in Westport have been telling this lie to the summer visitors for years. The sort that gets taken out for a row at a shilling a head—and asks foolish questions—must be told something to pass the time away. D'ye know anything more silly than being pulled in a boat along a beach? . . . It's like drinking weak lemonade when you aren't thirsty. I don't know why they do it! They don't even get sick."

A forgotten glass of beer stood at his elbow; the locality was a small respectable smoking-room of a small respectable hotel, and a taste for forming chance acquaintances accounts for my sitting up late with him. His great, flat, furrowed cheeks were shaven; a thick, square wisp of white hairs hung from his chin; its waggling gave additional point to his deep utterance; and his general contempt for mankind with its activities and moralities was expressed in the rakish set of his big soft hat of black felt with a large rim, which he kept always on his head.

His appearance was that of an old adventurer, retired after many unholy experiences in the darkest parts of the earth; but I had every reason to believe that he had never been outside England. From a casual remark somebody dropped I gathered that in his early days he must have been somehow connected with shipping—with ships in docks. Of individuality he had plenty. And it was this which attracted my attention at first. But he was not easy to classify, and before the end of the week I gave him up with the vague definition, "an imposing

old ruffian."

One rainy afternoon, oppressed by infinite boredom, I went into the smoking-room. He was sitting there in absolute immobility, which was really fakir-like and impressive. I began to wonder what could be the associations of that sort of man, his "milieu," his private connections, his views, his morality, his friends, and even his wife—when to my surprise he opened a conversation in a deep, muttering voice.

I must say that since he had learned from somebody that I was a writer of stories he had been acknowledging my existence by means of some vague growls in the morning.

He was essentially a taciturn man. There was an effect of rudeness in his fragmentary sentences. It was some time before I discovered that what he would be at was the process by which stories—stories for periodicals—were produced.

What could one say to a fellow like that? But I was bored to death; the weather continued impossible; and I resolved to be amiable.

"And so you make these tales up on your own. How do they ever come into your head?" he rumbled.

I explained that one generally got a hint for a tale.

"What sort of hint?"

"Well, for instance," I said, "I got myself rowed out to the rocks the other day. My boatman told me of the wreck on these rocks nearly twenty years ago. That could be used as a hint for a mainly descriptive bit of story with some such title as 'In the Channel,' for instance."

It was then that he flew out at the boatmen and the summer visitors who listen to their tales. Without moving a muscle of his face he emitted a powerful "Rot," from somewhere out of the depths of his chest, and went on in his hoarse, fragmentary mumble. "Stare at the silly rocks—nod their silly heads [the visitors, I presume]. What do they think a man is—blown-out paper bag or what?—go off pop like that when he's hit—Damn silly yarn—Hint indeed! . . . A lie?"

You must imagine this statuesque ruffian enhaloed in the black rim of his hat, letting all this out as an old dog growls sometimes, with his head up and staring-away eyes.

"Indeed!" I exclaimed. "Well, but even if untrue it is a hint, enabling me to see these rocks, this gale they speak of, the heavy seas, etc., etc., in relation to mankind. The struggle against natural forces and the effect of the issue on at least one, say, exalted—"

He interrupted me by an aggressive—

"Would truth be any good to you?"

"I shouldn't like to say," I answered, cautiously. "It's said that truth is stranger than fiction."

"Who says that?" he mouthed.

"Oh! Nobody in particular."

I turned to the window; for the contemptuous beggar was oppressive to look at, with his immovable arm on the table. I suppose my unceremonious manner provoked him to a comparatively long speech.

"Did you ever see such a silly lot of rocks? Like plums in a slice of cold pudding."

I was looking at them—an acre or more of black dots scattered on the steel-grey shades of the level sea, under the uniform gossamer grey mist with a formless brighter patch in one place—the veiled whiteness of the cliff coming through, like a diffused, mysterious radiance. It was a delicate and wonderful picture, something expressive, suggestive, and desolate, a symphony in grey and black—a Whistler. But the next thing said by the voice behind me made me turn round. It growled out contempt for all associated notions of roaring seas with concise energy, then went on—

"I—no such foolishness—looking at the rocks out there—more likely call to mind an office—I used to look in sometimes at one time—office in London—one of them small streets behind Cannon Street Station. . . "

He was very deliberate; not jerky, only fragmentary; at times profane.

"That's a rather remote connection," I observed, approaching him.

"Connection? To Hades with your connections. It was an accident."

"Still," I said, "an accident has its backward and forward connections, which, if they could be set forth—"

Without moving he seemed to lend an attentive ear.

"Aye! Set forth. That's perhaps what you could do. Couldn't you now? There's no sea life in this connection. But you can put it in out of your head—if you like."

"Yes. I could, if necessary," I said. "Sometimes it pays to put in a lot out of one's head, and sometimes it doesn't. I mean that the story isn't worth it. Everything's in that."

It amused me to talk to him like this. He reflected audibly that he guessed story-writers were out after money like the rest of the world which had to live by its wits: and that it was extraordinary how far people who were out after money would go. . . Some of them.

Then he made a sally against sea life. Silly sort of life, he called it. No opportunities, no experience, no variety, nothing. Some fine men came out of it—he admitted—but no more chance in the world if put to it than fly. Kids. So Captain Harry Dunbar. Good sailor. Great name as a skipper. Big man; short side-whiskers going grey, fine face, loud voice. A good fellow, but no more up to people's tricks than a baby.

"That's the captain of the Sagamore you're talking about," I said, confidently.

After a low, scornful "Of course" he seemed now to hold on the wall with his fixed stare the vision of that city office, "at the back of Cannon Street Station," while he growled and mouthed a fragmentary description, jerking his chin up now and then, as if angry.

It was, according to his account, a modest place of business, not shady in any sense, but out of the way, in a small street now rebuilt from end to end. "Seven doors from the Cheshire Cat public house under the railway bridge. I used to take my lunch there when my business called me to the city. Cloete would come in to have his chop and make the girl laugh. No need to talk much, either, for that. Nothing but the way he would twinkle his spectacles on you and give a twitch of his thick mouth was enough to start you off before he began one of his little tales. Funny fellow, Cloete. C-l-o-e-t-e—Cloete."

"What was he—a Dutchman?" I asked, not seeing in the least what all this had to do with the Westport boatmen and the Westport summer visitors and this extraordinary old fellow's irritable view of them as liars and fools. "Devil knows," he grunted, his eyes on the wall as if not to miss a single movement of a cinematograph picture. "Spoke nothing but English, anyway. First I saw him—

comes off a ship in dock from the States—passenger. Asks me for a small hotel near by. Wanted to be quiet and have a look round for a few days. I took him to a place—friend of mine. . . Next time—in the City—Hallo! You're very obliging—have a drink. Talks plenty about himself. Been years in the States. All sorts of business all over the place. With some patent medicine people, too. Travels. Writes advertisements and all that. Tells me funny stories. Tall, loose-limbed fellow. Black hair up on end, like a brush; long face, long legs, long arms, twinkle in his specs, jocular way of speaking—in a low voice. . . See that?"

I nodded, but he was not looking at me.

"Never laughed so much in my life. The beggar—would make you laugh telling you how he skinned his own father. He was up to that, too. A man who's been in the patent-medicine trade will be up to anything from pitch-and-toss to wilful murder. And that's a bit of hard truth for you. Don't mind what they do—think they can carry off anything and talk themselves out of anything—all the world's a fool to them. Business man, too, Cloete. Came over with a few hundred pounds. Looking for something to do—in a quiet way. Nothing like the old country, after all, says he. . . And so we part—I with more drinks in me than I was used to. After a time, perhaps six months or so, I run up against him again in Mr. George Dunbar's office. Yes, that office. It wasn't often that I . . . However, there was a bit of his cargo in a ship in dock that I wanted to ask Mr. George about. In comes Cloete out of the room at the back with some papers in his hand. Partner. You understand?"

"Aha!" I said. "The few hundred pounds."

"And that tongue of his," he growled. "Don't forget that tongue. Some of his tales must have opened George Dunbar's eyes a bit as to what business means."

"A plausible fellow," I suggested.

"H'm! You must have it in your own way—of course. Well. Partner. George Dunbar puts his top-hat on and tells me to wait a moment. . . George always looked as though he were making a few thousands a year—a city swell. . . Come along, old man! And he and Captain Harry go out together—some business with a solicitor round the corner. Captain Harry, when he was in England, used to turn up in his brother's office regularly about twelve. Sat in a corner like a good boy, reading the paper and smoking his pipe. So they go out. . . Model brothers, says Cloete—two love-birds—I am looking after the tinned-fruit side of this cozy little show. . . Gives me that sort of talk. Then by-and-by: What sort of old thing is that Sagamore? Finest ship out—eh? I dare say all ships are fine to you. You live by them. I tell you what; I would just as soon put my money into an old

stocking. Sooner!"

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He drew a breath, and I noticed his hand, lying loosely on the table, close slowly into a fist. In that immovable man it was startling, ominous, like the famed nod of the Commander.

"So, already at that time—note—already," he growled.

"But hold on," I interrupted. "The Sagamore belonged to Mundy and Rogers, I've been told."

He snorted contemptuously. "Damn boatmen—know no better. Flew the firm's house-flag. That's another thing. Favour. It was like this: When old man Dunbar died, Captain Harry was already in command with the firm. George chucked the bank he was clerking in—to go on his own with what there was to share after the old chap. George was a smart man. Started warehousing; then two or three things at a time: wood-pulp, preserved-fruit trade, and so on. And Captain Harry let him have his share to work with. . . I am provided for in my ship, he says. . . But by-and-by Mundy and Rogers begin to sell out to foreigners all their ships—go into steam right away. Captain Harry gets very upset—lose command, part with the ship he was fond of—very wretched. Just then, so it happened, the brothers came in for some money—an old woman died or something. Quite a tidy bit. Then young George says: There's enough between us two to buy the Sagamore with. . . But you'll need more money for your business, cries Captain Harry—and the other laughs at him: My business is going on all right. Why, I can go out and make a handful of sovereigns while you are trying to get your pipe to draw, old man. . . Mundy and Rogers very friendly about it: Certainly, Captain. And we will manage her for you, if you like, as if she were still our own. . . Why, with a connection like that it was good investment to buy that ship. Good! Aye, at the time."

The turning of his head slightly toward me at this point was like a sign of strong feeling in any other man.

"You'll mind that this was long before Cloete came into it at all," he muttered, warningly.

"Yes. I will mind," I said. "We generally say: some years passed. That's soon done."

He eyed me for a while silently in an unseeing way, as if engrossed in the thought

of the years so easily dealt with; his own years, too, they were, the years before and the years (not so many) after Cloete came upon the scene. When he began to speak again, I discerned his intention to point out to me, in his obscure and graphic manner, the influence on George Dunbar of long association with Cloete's easy moral standards, unscrupulously persuasive gift of humour (funny fellow), and adventurously reckless disposition. He desired me anxiously to elaborate this view, and I assured him it was quite within my powers. He wished me also to understand that George's business had its ups and downs (the other brother was meantime sailing to and fro serenely); that he got into low water at times, which worried him rather, because he had married a young wife with expensive tastes. He was having a pretty anxious time of it generally; and just then Cloete ran up in the city somewhere against a man working a patent medicine (the fellow's old trade) with some success, but which, with capital, capital to the tune of thousands to be spent with both hands on advertising, could be turned into a great thing—infinitely better-paying than a gold-mine. Cloete became excited at the possibilities of that sort of business, in which he was an expert. I understood that George's partner was all on fire from the contact with this unique opportunity.

"So he goes in every day into George's room about eleven, and sings that tune till George gnashes his teeth with rage. Do shut up. What's the good? No money. Hardly any to go on with, let alone pouring thousands into advertising. Never dare propose to his brother Harry to sell the ship. Couldn't think of it. Worry him to death. It would be like the end of the world coming. And certainly not for a business of that kind! . . . Do you think it would be a swindle? asks Cloete, twitching his mouth. . . George owns up: No—would be no better than a squeamish ass if he thought that, after all these years in business.

"Cloete looks at him hard—Never thought of selling the ship. Expected the blamed old thing wouldn't fetch half her insured value by this time. Then George flies out at him. What's the meaning, then, of these silly jeers at ship-owning for the last three weeks? Had enough of them, anyhow.

"Angry at having his mouth made to water, see. Cloete don't get excited. . . I am no squeamish ass, either, says he, very slowly. 'Tisn't selling your old Sagamore wants. The blamed thing wants tomahawking (seems the name Sagamore means an Indian chief or something. The figure-head was a half-naked savage with a feather over one ear and a hatchet in his belt). Tomahawking, says he.

"What do you mean? asks George. . . Wrecking—it could be managed with perfect safety, goes on Cloete—your brother would then put in his share of insurance money. Needn't tell him exactly what for. He thinks you're the smartest business man that ever lived. Make his fortune, too. . . George grips the desk with both

hands in his rage. . . You think my brother's a man to cast away his ship on purpose. I wouldn't even dare think of such a thing in the same room with him—the finest fellow that ever lived. . . Don't make such noise; they'll hear you outside, says Cloete; and he tells him that his brother is the salted pattern of all virtues, but all that's necessary is to induce him to stay ashore for a voyage—for a holiday—take a rest—why not? . . . In fact, I have in view somebody up to that sort of game—Cloete whispers.

"George nearly chokes. . . So you think I am of that sort—you think me capable—What do you take me for? . . . He almost loses his head, while Cloete keeps cool, only gets white about the gills. . . I take you for a man who will be most cursedly hard up before long. . . He goes to the door and sends away the clerks—there were only two—to take their lunch hour. Comes back . . . What are you indignant about? Do I want you to rob the widow and orphan? Why, man! Lloyd's a corporation, it hasn't got a body to starve. There's forty or more of them perhaps who underwrote the lines on that silly ship of yours. Not one human being would go hungry or cold for it. They take every risk into consideration. Everything I tell you. . . That sort of talk. H'm! George too upset to speak—only gurgles and waves his arms; so sudden, you see. The other, warming his back at the fire, goes on. Wood-pulp business next door to a failure. Tinned-fruit trade nearly played out. . . You're frightened, he says; but the law is only meant to frighten fools away. . . And he shows how safe casting away that ship would be. Premiums paid for so many, many years. No shadow of suspicion could arise. And, dash it all! a ship must meet her end some day. . .

"I am not frightened. I am indignant," says George Dunbar.

"Cloete boiling with rage inside. Chance of a lifetime—his chance! And he says kindly: Your wife'll be much more indignant when you ask her to get out of that pretty house of yours and pile in into a two-pair back—with kids perhaps, too. . .

"George had no children. Married a couple of years; looked forward to a kid or two very much. Feels more upset than ever. Talks about an honest man for father, and so on. Cloete grins: You be quick before they come, and they'll have a rich man for father, and no one the worse for it. That's the beauty of the thing.

"George nearly cries. I believe he did cry at odd times. This went on for weeks. He couldn't quarrel with Cloete. Couldn't pay off his few hundreds; and besides, he was used to have him about. Weak fellow, George. Cloete generous, too. . . Don't think of my little pile, says he. Of course it's gone when we have to shut up. But I don't care, he says. . . And then there was George's new wife. When Cloete dines there, the beggar puts on a dress suit; little woman liked it; . . . Mr. Cloete, my husband's partner; such a clever man, man of the world, so amusing!

. . . When he dines there and they are alone: Oh, Mr. Cloete, I wish George would do something to improve our prospects. Our position is really so mediocre. . . And Cloete smiles, but isn't surprised, because he had put all these notions himself into her empty head. . . What your husband wants is enterprise, a little audacity. You can encourage him best, Mrs. Dunbar. . . She was a silly, extravagant little fool. Had made George take a house in Norwood. Live up to a lot of people better off than themselves. I saw her once; silk dress, pretty boots, all feathers and scent, pink face. More like the Promenade at the Alhambra than a decent home, it looked to me. But some women do get a devil of a hold on a man."

"Yes, some do," I assented. "Even when the man is the husband."

"My missis," he addressed me unexpectedly, in a solemn, surprisingly hollow tone, "could wind me round her little finger. I didn't find it out till she was gone. Aye. But she was a woman of sense, while that piece of goods ought to have been walking the streets, and that's all I can say. . . You must make her up out of your head. You will know the sort."

"Leave all that to me," I said.

"H'm!" he grunted, doubtfully, then going back to his scornful tone: "A month or so afterwards the Sagamore arrives home. All very jolly at first. . . Hallo, George boy! Hallo, Harry, old man! . . . But by and by Captain Harry thinks his clever brother is not looking very well. And George begins to look worse. He can't get rid of Cloete's notion. It has stuck in his head. . . There's nothing wrong—quite well. . . Captain Harry still anxious. Business going all right, eh? Quite right. Lots of business. Good business. . . Of course Captain Harry believes that easily. Starts chaffing his brother in his jolly way about rolling in money. George's shirt sticks to his back with perspiration, and he feels quite angry with the captain. . . The fool, he says to himself. Rolling in money, indeed! And then he thinks suddenly: Why not? . . . Because Cloete's notion has got hold of his mind.

"But next day he weakens and says to Cloete . . . Perhaps it would be best to sell. Couldn't you talk to my brother? and Cloete explains to him over again for the twentieth time why selling wouldn't do, anyhow. No! The Sagamore must be tomahawked—as he would call it; to spare George's feelings, maybe. But every time he says the word, George shudders. . . I've got a man at hand competent for the job who will do the trick for five hundred, and only too pleased at the chance, says Cloete. . . George shuts his eyes tight at that sort of talk—but at the same time he thinks: Humbug! There can be no such man. And yet if there was such a man it would be safe enough—perhaps.

"And Cloete always funny about it. He couldn't talk about anything without it seeming there was a great joke in it somewhere. . . Now, says he, I know you are a moral citizen, George. Morality is mostly funk, and I think you're the funkiest man I ever came across in my travels. Why, you are afraid to speak to your brother. Afraid to open your mouth to him with a fortune for us all in sight. . . George flares up at this: no, he ain't afraid; he will speak; bangs fist on the desk. And Cloete pats him on the back. . . We'll be made men presently, he says.

"But the first time George attempts to speak to Captain Harry his heart slides down into his boots. Captain Harry only laughs at the notion of staying ashore. He wants no holiday, not he. But Jane thinks of remaining in England this trip. Go about a bit and see some of her people. Jane was the Captain's wife; round-faced, pleasant lady. George gives up that time; but Cloete won't let him rest. So he tries again; and the Captain frowns. He frowns because he's puzzled. He can't make it out. He has no notion of living away from his Sagamore. . .

"Ah!" I cried. "Now I understand."

"No, you don't," he growled, his black, contemptuous stare turning on me crushingly.

"I beg your pardon," I murmured.

"H'm! Very well, then. Captain Harry looks very stern, and George crumples all up inside. . . He sees through me, he thinks. . . Of course it could not be; but George, by that time, was scared at his own shadow. He is shirking it with Cloete, too. Gives his partner to understand that his brother has half a mind to try a spell on shore, and so on. Cloete waits, gnawing his fingers; so anxious. Cloete really had found a man for the job. Believe it or not, he had found him inside the very boarding-house he lodged in—somewhere about Tottenham Court Road. He had noticed down-stairs a fellow—a boarder and not a boarder—hanging about the dark—part of the passage mostly; sort of 'man of the house,' a slinking chap. Black eyes. White face. The woman of the house—a widow lady, she called herself—very full of Mr. Stafford; Mr. Stafford this and Mr. Stafford that. . . Anyhow, Cloete one evening takes him out to have a drink. Cloete mostly passed away his evenings in saloon bars. No drunkard, though, Cloete; for company; liked to talk to all sorts there; just habit; American fashion.

"So Cloete takes that chap out more than once. Not very good company, though. Little to say for himself. Sits quiet and drinks what's given to him, eyes always half closed, speaks sort of demure. . . I've had misfortunes, he says. The truth was they had kicked him out of a big steam-ship company for disgraceful conduct; nothing to affect his certificate, you understand; and he had gone down

quite easily. Liked it, I expect. Anything's better than work. Lived on the widow lady who kept that boarding-house."

"That's almost incredible," I ventured to interrupt. "A man with a master's certificate, do you mean?"

"I do; I've known them 'bus cads," he growled, contemptuously. "Yes. Swing on the tail-board by the strap and yell, 'tuppence all the way.' Through drink. But this Stafford was of another kind. Hell's full of such Staffords; Cloete would make fun of him, and then there would be a nasty gleam in the fellow's half-shut eye. But Cloete was generally kind to him. Cloete was a fellow that would be kind to a mangy dog. Anyhow, he used to stand drinks to that object, and now and then gave him half a crown—because the widow lady kept Mr. Stafford short of pocket-money. They had rows almost every day down in the basement. . .

"It was the fellow being a sailor that put into Cloete's mind the first notion of doing away with the Sagamore. He studies him a bit, thinks there's enough devil in him yet to be tempted, and one evening he says to him . . . I suppose you wouldn't mind going to sea again, for a spell? . . . The other never raises his eyes; says it's scarcely worth one's while for the miserable salary one gets. . . Well, but what do you say to captain's wages for a time, and a couple of hundred extra if you are compelled to come home without the ship. Accidents will happen, says Cloete. . . Oh! sure to, says that Stafford; and goes on taking sips of his drink as if he had no interest in the matter.

"Cloete presses him a bit; but the other observes, impudent and languid like: You see, there's no future in a thing like that—is there? . . Oh! no, says Cloete. Certainly not. I don't mean this to have any future—as far as you are concerned. It's a 'once for all' transaction. Well, what do you estimate your future at? he asks. . . The fellow more listless than ever—nearly asleep.—I believe the skunk was really too lazy to care. Small cheating at cards, wheedling or bullying his living out of some woman or other, was more his style. Cloete swears at him in whispers something awful. All this in the saloon bar of the Horse Shoe, Tottenham Court Road. Finally they agree, over the second sixpennyworth of Scotch hot, on five hundred pounds as the price of tomahawking the Sagamore. And Cloete waits to see what George can do.

"A week or two goes by. The other fellow loafs about the house as if there had been nothing, and Cloete begins to doubt whether he really means ever to tackle that job. But one day he stops Cloete at the door, with his downcast eyes: What about that employment you wished to give me? he asks. . . You see, he had played some more than usual dirty trick on the woman and expected awful ructions presently; and to be fired out for sure. Cloete very pleased. George had

been prevaricating to him such a lot that he really thought the thing was as well as settled. And he says: Yes. It's time I introduced you to my friend. Just get your hat and we will go now. . .

"The two come into the office, and George at his desk sits up in a sudden panic—staring. Sees a tallish fellow, sort of nasty-handsome face, heavy eyes, half shut; short drab overcoat, shabby bowler hat, very careful—like in his movements. And he thinks to himself, Is that how such a man looks! No, the thing's impossible. . . Cloete does the introduction, and the fellow turns round to look behind him at the chair before he sits down. . . A thoroughly competent man, Cloete goes on . . . The man says nothing, sits perfectly quiet. And George can't speak, throat too dry. Then he makes an effort: H'm! H'm! Oh yes—unfortunately—sorry to disappoint—my brother—made other arrangements—going himself.

"The fellow gets up, never raising his eyes off the ground, like a modest girl, and goes out softly, right out of the office without a sound. Cloete sticks his chin in his hand and bites all his fingers at once. George's heart slows down and he speaks to Cloete. . . This can't be done. How can it be? Directly the ship is lost Harry would see through it. You know he is a man to go to the underwriters himself with his suspicions. And he would break his heart over me. How can I play that on him? There's only two of us in the world belonging to each other. . .

"Cloete lets out a horrid cuss-word, jumps up, bolts away into his room, and George hears him there banging things around. After a while he goes to the door and says in a trembling voice: You ask me for an impossibility. . . Cloete inside ready to fly out like a tiger and rend him; but he opens the door a little way and says softly: Talking of hearts, yours is no bigger than a mouse's, let me tell you. . . But George doesn't care—load off the heart, anyhow. And just then Captain Harry comes in. . . Hallo, George boy. I am little late. What about a chop at the Cheshire, now? . . . Right you are, old man. . . And off they go to lunch together. Cloete has nothing to eat that day.

"George feels a new man for a time; but all of a sudden that fellow Stafford begins to hang about the street, in sight of the house door. The first time George sees him he thinks he made a mistake. But no; next time he has to go out, there is the very fellow skulking on the other side of the road. It makes George nervous; but he must go out on business, and when the fellow cuts across the road-way he dodges him. He dodges him once, twice, three times; but at last he gets nabbed in his very doorway. . . What do you want? he says, trying to look fierce.

"It seems that ructions had come in the basement of that boarding-house, and the widow lady had turned on him (being jealous mad), to the extent of talking of the police. That Mr. Stafford couldn't stand; so he cleared out like a scared stag,

and there he was, chucked into the streets, so to speak. Cloete looked so savage as he went to and fro that he hadn't the spunk to tackle him; but George seemed a softer kind to his eye. He would have been glad of half a quid, anything. . . I've had misfortunes, he says softly, in his demure way, which frightens George more than a row would have done. . . Consider the severity of my disappointment, he says. . .

"George, instead of telling him to go to the devil, loses his head. . . I don't know you. What do you want? he cries, and bolts up-stairs to Cloete. . . . Look what's come of it, he gasps; now we are at the mercy of that horrid fellow. . . Cloete tries to show him that the fellow can do nothing; but George thinks that some sort of scandal may be forced on, anyhow. Says that he can't live with that horror haunting him. Cloete would laugh if he weren't too weary of it all. Then a thought strikes him and he changes his tune. . . Well, perhaps! I will go down-stairs and send him away to begin with. . . He comes back. . . He's gone. But perhaps you are right. The fellow's hard up, and that's what makes people desperate. The best thing would be to get him out of the country for a time. Look here, the poor devil is really in want of employment. I won't ask you much this time: only to hold your tongue; and I shall try to get your brother to take him as chief officer. At this George lays his arms and his head on his desk, so that Cloete feels sorry for him. But altogether Cloete feels more cheerful because he has shaken the ghost a bit into that Stafford. That very afternoon he buys him a suit of blue clothes, and tells him that he will have to turn to and work for his living now. Go to sea as mate of the Sagamore. The skunk wasn't very willing, but what with having nothing to eat and no place to sleep in, and the woman having frightened him with the talk of some prosecution or other, he had no choice, properly speaking. Cloete takes care of him for a couple of days. . . Our arrangement still stands, says he. Here's the ship bound for Port Elizabeth; not a safe anchorage at all. Should she by chance part from her anchors in a north-east gale and get lost on the beach, as many of them do, why, it's five hundred in your pocket—and a quick return home. You are up to the job, ain't you?

"Our Mr. Stafford takes it all in with downcast eyes. . . I am a competent seaman, he says, with his sly, modest air. A ship's chief mate has no doubt many opportunities to manipulate the chains and anchors to some purpose. . . At this Cloete thumps him on the back: You'll do, my noble sailor. Go in and win. . .

"Next thing George knows, his brother tells him that he had occasion to oblige his partner. And glad of it, too. Likes the partner no end. Took a friend of his as mate. Man had his troubles, been ashore a year nursing a dying wife, it seems. Down on his luck. . . George protests earnestly that he knows nothing of the person. Saw him once. Not very attractive to look at. . . And Captain Harry says in his hearty way, That's so, but must give the poor devil a chance. . .

"So Mr. Stafford joins in dock. And it seems that he did manage to monkey with one of the cables—keeping his mind on Port Elizabeth. The riggers had all the cable ranged on deck to clean lockers. The new mate watches them go ashore—dinner hour—and sends the ship-keeper out of the ship to fetch him a bottle of beer. Then he goes to work whittling away the forelock of the forty-five-fathom shackle-pin, gives it a tap or two with a hammer just to make it loose, and of course that cable wasn't safe any more. Riggers come back—you know what riggers are: come day, go day, and God send Sunday. Down goes the chain into the locker without their foreman looking at the shackles at all. What does he care? He ain't going in the ship. And two days later the ship goes to sea. . . "

* * * * *

At this point I was incautious enough to breathe out another "I see," which gave offence again, and brought on me a rude "No, you don't"—as before. But in the pause he remembered the glass of beer at his elbow. He drank half of it, wiped his mustaches, and remarked grimly—

"Don't you think that there will be any sea life in this, because there ain't. If you're going to put in any out of your own head, now's your chance. I suppose you know what ten days of bad weather in the Channel are like? I don't. Anyway, ten whole days go by. One Monday Cloete comes to the office a little late—hears a woman's voice in George's room and looks in. Newspapers on the desk, on the floor; Captain Harry's wife sitting with red eyes and a bag on the chair near her. . . Look at this, says George, in great excitement, showing him a paper. Cloete's heart gives a jump. Ha! Wreck in Westport Bay. The Sagamore gone ashore early hours of Sunday, and so the newspaper men had time to put in some of their work. Columns of it. Lifeboat out twice. Captain and crew remain by the ship. Tugs summoned to assist. If the weather improves, this well-known fine ship may yet be saved. . . You know the way these chaps put it. . . Mrs. Harry there on her way to catch a train from Cannon Street. Got an hour to wait.

"Cloete takes George aside and whispers: Ship saved yet! Oh, damn! That must never be; you hear? But George looks at him dazed, and Mrs. Harry keeps on sobbing quietly: . . . I ought to have been with him. But I am going to him. . . We are all going together, cries Cloete, all of a sudden. He rushes out, sends the woman a cup of hot bovril from the shop across the road, buys a rug for her, thinks of everything; and in the train tucks her in and keeps on talking, thirteen to the dozen, all the way, to keep her spirits up, as it were; but really because he can't hold his peace for very joy. Here's the thing done all at once, and nothing to pay. Done. Actually done. His head swims now and again when he thinks of it. What enormous luck! It almost frightens him. He would like to yell and sing.

Meantime George Dunbar sits in his corner, looking so deadly miserable that at last poor Mrs. Harry tries to comfort him, and so cheers herself up at the same time by talking about how her Harry is a prudent man; not likely to risk his crew's life or his own unnecessarily—and so on.

"First thing they hear at Westport station is that the life-boat has been out to the ship again, and has brought off the second officer, who had hurt himself, and a few sailors. Captain and the rest of the crew, about fifteen in all, are still on board. Tugs expected to arrive every moment.

"They take Mrs. Harry to the inn, nearly opposite the rocks; she bolts straight up-stairs to look out of the window, and she lets out a great cry when she sees the wreck. She won't rest till she gets on board to her Harry. Cloete soothes her all he can. . . All right; you try to eat a mouthful, and we will go to make inquiries.

"He draws George out of the room: Look here, she can't go on board, but I shall. I'll see to it that he doesn't stop in the ship too long. Let's go and find the coxswain of the life-boat. . . George follows him, shivering from time to time. The waves are washing over the old pier; not much wind, a wild, gloomy sky over the bay. In the whole world only one tug away off, heading to the seas, tossed in and out of sight every minute as regular as clockwork.

"They meet the coxswain and he tells them: Yes! He's going out again. No, they ain't in danger on board—not yet. But the ship's chance is very poor. Still, if the wind doesn't pipe up again and the sea goes down something might be tried. After some talk he agrees to take Cloete on board; supposed to be with an urgent message from the owners to the captain.

"Whenever Cloete looks at the sky he feels comforted; it looks so threatening. George Dunbar follows him about with a white face and saying nothing. Cloete takes him to have a drink or two, and by and by he begins to pick up. . . That's better, says Cloete; dash me if it wasn't like walking about with a dead man before. You ought to be throwing up your cap, man. I feel as if I wanted to stand in the street and cheer. Your brother is safe, the ship is lost, and we are made men.

"Are you certain she's lost? asks George. It would be an awful blow after all the agonies I have gone through in my mind, since you first spoke to me, if she were to be got off—and—and—all this temptation to begin over again. . . For we had nothing to do with this; had we?

"Of course not, says Cloete. Wasn't your brother himself in charge? It's providential. . . Oh! cries George, shocked. . . Well, say it's the devil, says Cloete,

cheerfully. I don't mind! You had nothing to do with it any more than a baby unborn, you great softy, you. . . Cloete has got so that he almost loved George Dunbar. Well. Yes. That was so. I don't mean he respected him. He was just fond of his partner.

"They go back, you may say fairly skipping, to the hotel, and find the wife of the captain at the open window, with her eyes on the ship as if she wanted to fly across the bay over there. . . Now then, Mrs. Dunbar, cries Cloete, you can't go, but I am going. Any messages? Don't be shy. I'll deliver every word faithfully. And if you would like to give me a kiss for him, I'll deliver that too, dash me if I don't.

"He makes Mrs. Harry laugh with his patter. . . Oh, dear Mr. Cloete, you are a calm, reasonable man. Make him behave sensibly. He's a bit obstinate, you know, and he's so fond of the ship, too. Tell him I am here—looking on. . . Trust me, Mrs. Dunbar. Only shut that window, that's a good girl. You will be sure to catch cold if you don't, and the Captain won't be pleased coming off the wreck to find you coughing and sneezing so that you can't tell him how happy you are. And now if you can get me a bit of tape to fasten my glasses on good to my ears, I will be going. . .

"How he gets on board I don't know. All wet and shaken and excited and out of breath, he does get on board. Ship lying over, smothered in sprays, but not moving very much; just enough to jag one's nerve a bit. He finds them all crowded on the deck-house forward, in their shiny oilskins, with faces like sick men. Captain Harry can't believe his eyes. What! Mr. Cloete! What are you doing here, in God's name? . . . Your wife's ashore there, looking on, gasps out Cloete; and after they had talked a bit, Captain Harry thinks it's uncommonly plucky and kind of his brother's partner to come off to him like this. Man glad to have somebody to talk to. . . It's a bad business, Mr. Cloete, he says. And Cloete rejoices to hear that. Captain Harry thinks he had done his best, but the cable had parted when he tried to anchor her. It was a great trial to lose the ship. Well, he would have to face it. He fetches a deep sigh now and then. Cloete almost sorry he had come on board, because to be on that wreck keeps his chest in a tight band all the time. They crouch out of the wind under the port boat, a little apart from the men. The life-boat had gone away after putting Cloete on board, but was coming back next high water to take off the crew if no attempt at getting the ship afloat could be made. Dusk was falling; winter's day; black sky; wind rising. Captain Harry felt melancholy. God's will be done. If she must be left on the rocks—why, she must. A man should take what God sends him standing up. . . Suddenly his voice breaks, and he squeezes Cloete's arm: It seems as if I couldn't leave her, he whispers. Cloete looks round at the men like a lot of huddled sheep and thinks to himself: They won't stay. . . Suddenly the

ship lifts a little and sets down with a thump. Tide rising. Everybody beginning to look out for the life-boat. Some of the men made her out far away and also two more tugs. But the gale has come on again, and everybody knows that no tug will ever dare come near the ship.

"That's the end, Captain Harry says, very low. . . . Cloete thinks he never felt so cold in all his life. . . And I feel as if I didn't care to live on just now, mutters Captain Harry . . . Your wife's ashore, looking on, says Cloete . . . Yes. Yes. It must be awful for her to look at the poor old ship lying here done for. Why, that's our home.

"Cloete thinks that as long as the Sagamore's done for he doesn't care, and only wishes himself somewhere else. The slightest movement of the ship cuts his breath like a blow. And he feels excited by the danger, too. The captain takes him aside. . . The life-boat can't come near us for more than an hour. Look here, Cloete, since you are here, and such a plucky one—do something for me. . . He tells him then that down in his cabin aft in a certain drawer there is a bundle of important papers and some sixty sovereigns in a small canvas bag. Asks Cloete to go and get these things out. He hasn't been below since the ship struck, and it seems to him that if he were to take his eyes off her she would fall to pieces. And then the men—a scared lot by this time—if he were to leave them by themselves they would attempt to launch one of the ship's boats in a panic at some heavier thump—and then some of them bound to get drowned. . . There are two or three boxes of matches about my shelves in my cabin if you want a light, says Captain Harry. Only wipe your wet hands before you begin to feel for them. . .

"Cloete doesn't like the job, but doesn't like to show funk, either—and he goes. Lots of water on the main-deck, and he splashes along; it was getting dark, too. All at once, by the mainmast, somebody catches him by the arm. Stafford. He wasn't thinking of Stafford at all. Captain Harry had said something as to the mate not being quite satisfactory, but it wasn't much. Cloete doesn't recognise him in his oilskins at first. He sees a white face with big eyes peering at him. . . Are you pleased, Mr. Cloete . . . ?

"Cloete is moved to laugh at the whine, and shakes him off. But the fellow scrambles on after him on the poop and follows him down into the cabin of that wrecked ship. And there they are, the two of them; can hardly see each other. . . You don't mean to make me believe you have had anything to do with this, says Cloete. . .

"They both shiver, nearly out of their wits with the excitement of being on board that ship. She thumps and lurches, and they stagger together, feeling sick. Cloete again bursts out laughing at that wretched creature Stafford pretending to

have been up to something so desperate. . . Is that how you think you can treat me now? yells the other man all of a sudden. . .

“A sea strikes the stern, the ship trembles and groans all round them, there’s the noise of the seas about and overhead, confusing Cloete, and he hears the other screaming as if crazy. . . Ah, you don’t believe me! Go and look at the port chain. Parted? Eh? Go and see if it’s parted. Go and find the broken link. You can’t. There’s no broken link. That means a thousand pounds for me. No less. A thousand the day after we get ashore—prompt. I won’t wait till she breaks up, Mr. Cloete. To the underwriters I go if I’ve to walk to London on my bare feet. Port cable! Look at her port cable, I will say to them. I doctored it—for the owners—tempted by a low rascal called Cloete.

“Cloete does not understand what it means exactly. All he sees is that the fellow means to make mischief. He sees trouble ahead. . . Do you think you can scare me? he asks,—you poor miserable skunk. . . And Stafford faces him out—both holding on to the cabin table: No, damn you, you are only a dirty vagabond; but I can scare the other, the chap in the black coat. . .

“Meaning George Dunbar. Cloete’s brain reels at the thought. He doesn’t imagine the fellow can do any real harm, but he knows what George is; give the show away; upset the whole business he had set his heart on. He says nothing; he hears the other, what with the funk and strain and excitement, panting like a dog—and then a snarl. . . A thousand down, twenty-four hours after we get ashore; day after to-morrow. That’s my last word, Mr. Cloete. . . A thousand pounds, day after to-morrow, says Cloete. Oh yes. And to-day take this, you dirty cur. . . He hits straight from the shoulder in sheer rage, nothing else. Stafford goes away spinning along the bulk-head. Seeing this, Cloete steps out and lands him another one somewhere about the jaw. The fellow staggers backward right into the captain’s cabin through the open door. Cloete, following him up, hears him fall down heavily and roll to leeward, then slams the door to and turns the key. . . There! says he to himself, that will stop you from making trouble.”

“By Jove!” I murmured.

The old fellow departed from his impressive immobility to turn his rakishly hatted head and look at me with his old, black, lack-lustre eyes.

“He did leave him there,” he uttered, weightily, returning to the contemplation of the wall. “Cloete didn’t mean to allow anybody, let alone a thing like Stafford, to stand in the way of his great notion of making George and himself, and Captain Harry, too, for that matter, rich men. And he didn’t think much of consequences.

These patent-medicine chaps don't care what they say or what they do. They think the world's bound to swallow any story they like to tell. . . He stands listening for a bit. And it gives him quite a turn to hear a thump at the door and a sort of muffled raving screech inside the captain's room. He thinks he hears his own name, too, through the awful crash as the old Sagamore rises and falls to a sea. That noise and that awful shock make him clear out of the cabin. He collects his senses on the poop. But his heart sinks a little at the black wildness of the night. Chances that he will get drowned himself before long. Puts his head down the companion. Through the wind and breaking seas he can hear the noise of Stafford's beating against the door and cursing. He listens and says to himself: No. Can't trust him now. . .

"When he gets back to the top of the deck-house he says to Captain Harry, who asks him if he got the things, that he is very sorry. There was something wrong with the door. Couldn't open it. And to tell you the truth, says he, I didn't like to stop any longer in that cabin. There are noises there as if the ship were going to pieces. . . Captain Harry thinks: Nervous; can't be anything wrong with the door. But he says: Thanks—never mind, never mind. . . All hands looking out now for the life-boat. Everybody thinking of himself rather. Cloete asks himself, will they miss him? But the fact is that Mr. Stafford had made such poor show at sea that after the ship struck nobody ever paid any attention to him. Nobody cared what he did or where he was. Pitch dark, too—no counting of heads. The light of the tug with the lifeboat in tow is seen making for the ship, and Captain Harry asks: Are we all there? . . . Somebody answers: All here, sir. . . Stand by to leave the ship, then, says Captain Harry; and two of you help the gentleman over first. . . Aye, aye, sir. . . Cloete was moved to ask Captain Harry to let him stay till last, but the life-boat drops on a grapnel abreast the fore-rigging, two chaps lay hold of him, watch their chance, and drop him into her, all safe.

"He's nearly exhausted; not used to that sort of thing, you see. He sits in the stern-sheets with his eyes shut. Don't want to look at the white water boiling all around. The men drop into the boat one after another. Then he hears Captain Harry's voice shouting in the wind to the coxswain, to hold on a moment, and some other words he can't catch, and the coxswain yelling back: Don't be long, sir. . . What is it? Cloete asks feeling faint. . . Something about the ship's papers, says the coxswain, very anxious. It's no time to be fooling about alongside, you understand. They haul the boat off a little and wait. The water flies over her in sheets. Cloete's senses almost leave him. He thinks of nothing. He's numb all over, till there's a shout: Here he is! . . . They see a figure in the fore-rigging waiting—they slack away on the grapnel-line and get him in the boat quite easy. There is a little shouting—it's all mixed up with the noise of the sea. Cloete fancies that Stafford's voice is talking away quite close to his ear. There's a lull in the wind, and Stafford's voice seems to be speaking very fast to the coxswain; he

tells him that of course he was near his skipper, was all the time near him, till the old man said at the last moment that he must go and get the ship's papers from aft; would insist on going himself; told him, Stafford, to get into the life-boat. . . He had meant to wait for his skipper, only there came this smooth of the seas, and he thought he would take his chance at once.

"Cloete opens his eyes. Yes. There's Stafford sitting close by him in that crowded life-boat. The coxswain stoops over Cloete and cries: Did you hear what the mate said, sir? . . . Cloete's face feels as if it were set in plaster, lips and all. Yes, I did, he forces himself to answer. The coxswain waits a moment, then says: I don't like it. . . And he turns to the mate, telling him it was a pity he did not try to run along the deck and hurry up the captain when the lull came. Stafford answers at once that he did think of it, only he was afraid of missing him on the deck in the dark. For, says he, the captain might have got over at once, thinking I was already in the life-boat, and you would have hauled off perhaps, leaving me behind. . . True enough, says the coxswain. A minute or so passes. This won't do, mutters the coxswain. Suddenly Stafford speaks up in a sort of hollow voice: I was by when he told Mr. Cloete here that he didn't know how he would ever have the courage to leave the old ship; didn't he, now? . . . And Cloete feels his arm being gripped quietly in the dark. . . Didn't he now? We were standing together just before you went over, Mr. Cloete? . . .

"Just then the coxswain cries out: I'm going on board to see. . . Cloete tears his arm away: I am going with you. . .

"When they get aboard, the coxswain tells Cloete to go aft along one side of the ship and he would go along the other so as not to miss the captain. . . And feel about with your hands, too, says he; he might have fallen and be lying insensible somewhere on the deck. . . When Cloete gets at last to the cabin companion on the poop the coxswain is already there, peering down and sniffing. I detect a smell of smoke down there, says he. And he yells: Are you there, sir? . . . This is not a case for shouting, says Cloete, feeling his heart go stony, as it were. . . Down they go. Pitch dark; the inclination so sharp that the coxswain, groping his way into the captain's room, slips and goes tumbling down. Cloete hears him cry out as though he had hurt himself, and asks what's the matter. And the coxswain answers quietly that he had fallen on the captain, lying there insensible. Cloete without a word begins to grope all over the shelves for a box of matches, finds one, and strikes a light. He sees the coxswain in his cork jacket kneeling over Captain Harry. . . Blood, says the coxswain, looking up, and the match goes out. . .

"Wait a bit, says Cloete; I'll make paper spills. . . He had felt the back of books on the shelves. And so he stands lighting one spill from another while the coxswain

turns poor Captain Harry over. Dead, he says. Shot through the heart. Here's the revolver. . . He hands it up to Cloete, who looks at it before putting it in his pocket, and sees a plate on the butt with H. Dunbar on it. . . His own, he mutters. . . Whose else revolver did you expect to find? snaps the coxswain. And look, he took off his long oilskin in the cabin before he went in. But what's this lot of burnt paper? What could he want to burn the ship's papers for? . . .

Cloete sees all, the little drawers drawn out, and asks the coxswain to look well into them. . . There's nothing, says the man. Cleaned out. Seems to have pulled out all he could lay his hands on and set fire to the lot. Mad—that's what it is—went mad. And now he's dead. You'll have to break it to his wife. . .

"I feel as if I were going mad myself, says Cloete, suddenly, and the coxswain begs him for God's sake to pull himself together, and drags him away from the cabin. They had to leave the body, and as it was they were just in time before a furious squall came on. Cloete is dragged into the life-boat and the coxswain tumbles in. Haul away on the grapnel, he shouts; the captain has shot himself. . .

"Cloete was like a dead man—didn't care for anything. He let that Stafford pinch his arm twice without making a sign. Most of Westport was on the old pier to see the men out of the life-boat, and at first there was a sort of confused cheery uproar when she came alongside; but after the coxswain has shouted something the voices die out, and everybody is very quiet. As soon as Cloete has set foot on something firm he becomes himself again. The coxswain shakes hands with him: Poor woman, poor woman, I'd rather you had the job than I. . .

"Where's the mate?" asks Cloete. He's the last man who spoke to the master. . . Somebody ran along—the crew were being taken to the Mission Hall, where there was a fire and shake-downs ready for them—somebody ran along the pier and caught up with Stafford. . . Here! The owner's agent wants you. . . Cloete tucks the fellow's arm under his own and walks away with him to the left, where the fishing-harbour is. . . I suppose I haven't misunderstood you. You wish me to look after you a bit, says he. The other hangs on him rather limp, but gives a nasty little laugh: You had better, he mumbles; but mind, no tricks; no tricks, Mr. Cloete; we are on land now.

"There's a police office within fifty yards from here, says Cloete. He turns into a little public house, pushes Stafford along the passage. The landlord runs out of the bar. . . This is the mate of the ship on the rocks, Cloete explains; I wish you would take care of him a bit to-night. . . What's the matter with him? asks the man. Stafford leans against the wall in the passage, looking ghastly. And Cloete says it's nothing—done up, of course. . . I will be responsible for the expense; I am the owner's agent. I'll be round in an hour or two to see him.

And Cloete gets back to the hotel. The news had travelled there already, and the first thing he sees is George outside the door as white as a sheet waiting for him. Cloete just gives him a nod and they go in. Mrs. Harry stands at the head of the stairs, and, when she sees only these two coming up, flings her arms above her head and runs into her room. Nobody had dared tell her, but not seeing her husband was enough. Cloete hears an awful shriek. . . Go to her, he says to George.

"While he's alone in the private parlour Cloete drinks a glass of brandy and thinks it all out. Then George comes in. . . The landlady's with her, he says. And he begins to walk up and down the room, flinging his arms about and talking, disconnected like, his face set hard as Cloete has never seen it before. . . What must be, must be. Dead—only brother. Well, dead—his troubles over. But we are living, he says to Cloete; and I suppose, says he, glaring at him with hot, dry eyes, that you won't forget to wire in the morning to your friend that we are coming in for certain. . .

"Meaning the patent-medicine fellow. . . Death is death and business is business, George goes on; and look—my hands are clean, he says, showing them to Cloete. Cloete thinks: He's going crazy. He catches hold of him by the shoulders and begins to shake him: Damn you—if you had had the sense to know what to say to your brother, if you had had the spunk to speak to him at all, you moral creature you, he would be alive now, he shouts.

"At this George stares, then bursts out weeping with a great bellow. He throws himself on the couch, buries his face in a cushion, and howls like a kid. . . That's better, thinks Cloete, and he leaves him, telling the landlord that he must go out, as he has some little business to attend to that night. The landlord's wife, weeping herself, catches him on the stairs: Oh, sir, that poor lady will go out of her mind. . .

"Cloete shakes her off, thinking to himself: Oh no! She won't. She will get over it. Nobody will go mad about this affair unless I do. It isn't sorrow that makes people go mad, but worry.

"There Cloete was wrong. What affected Mrs. Harry was that her husband should take his own life, with her, as it were, looking on. She brooded over it so that in less than a year they had to put her into a Home. She was very, very quiet; just gentle melancholy. She lived for quite a long time.

"Well, Cloete splashes along in the wind and rain. Nobody in the streets—all the excitement over. The publican runs out to meet him in the passage and says to

him: Not this way. He isn't in his room. We couldn't get him to go to bed nohow. He's in the little parlour there. We've lighted him a fire. . . You have been giving him drinks too, says Cloete; I never said I would be responsible for drinks. How many? . . . Two, says the other. It's all right. I don't mind doing that much for a shipwrecked sailor. . . Cloete smiles his funny smile: Eh? Come. He paid for them. . . The publican just blinks. . . Gave you gold, didn't he? Speak up! . . . What of that! cries the man. What are you after, anyway? He had the right change for his sovereign.

"Just so, says Cloete. He walks into the parlour, and there he sees our Stafford; hair all up on end, landlord's shirt and pants on, bare feet in slippers, sitting by the fire. When he sees Cloete he casts his eyes down.

"You didn't mean us ever to meet again, Mr. Cloete, Stafford says, demurely. . . That fellow, when he had the drink he wanted—he wasn't a drunkard—would put on this sort of sly, modest air. . . But since the captain committed suicide, he says, I have been sitting here thinking it out. All sorts of things happen. Conspiracy to lose the ship—attempted murder—and this suicide. For if it was not suicide, Mr. Cloete, then I know of a victim of the most cruel, cold-blooded attempt at murder; somebody who has suffered a thousand deaths. And that makes the thousand pounds of which we spoke once a quite insignificant sum. Look how very convenient this suicide is. . .

"He looks up at Cloete then, who smiles at him and comes quite close to the table.

"You killed Harry Dunbar, he whispers. . . The fellow glares at him and shows his teeth: Of course I did! I had been in that cabin for an hour and a half like a rat in a trap. . . Shut up and left to drown in that wreck. Let flesh and blood judge. Of course I shot him! I thought it was you, you murdering scoundrel, come back to settle me. He opens the door flying and tumbles right down upon me; I had a revolver in my hand, and I shot him. I was crazy. Men have gone crazy for less.

"Cloete looks at him without flinching. Aha! That's your story, is it? . . . And he shakes the table a little in his passion as he speaks. . . Now listen to mine. What's this conspiracy? Who's going to prove it? You were there to rob. You were rifling his cabin; he came upon you unawares with your hands in the drawer; and you shot him with his own revolver. You killed to steal—to steal! His brother and the clerks in the office know that he took sixty pounds with him to sea. Sixty pounds in gold in a canvas bag. He told me where they were. The coxswain of the life-boat can swear to it that the drawers were all empty. And you are such a fool that before you're half an hour ashore you change a sovereign to pay for a drink. Listen to me. If you don't turn up day after to-morrow at George Dunbar's

solicitors, to make the proper deposition as to the loss of the ship, I shall set the police on your track. Day after to-morrow. . .

"And then what do you think? That Stafford begins to tear his hair. Just so. Tugs at it with both hands without saying anything. Cloete gives a push to the table which nearly sends the fellow off his chair, tumbling inside the fender; so that he has got to catch hold of it to save himself. . .

"You know the sort of man I am, Cloete says, fiercely. I've got to a point that I don't care what happens to me. I would shoot you now for tuppence.

"At this the cur dodges under the table. Then Cloete goes out, and as he turns in the street—you know, little fishermen's cottages, all dark; raining in torrents, too—the other opens the window of the parlour and speaks in a sort of crying voice—

"You low Yankee fiend—I'll pay you off some day.

"Cloete passes by with a damn bitter laugh, because he thinks that the fellow in a way has paid him off already, if he only knew it."

* * * * *

My impressive ruffian drank what remained of his beer, while his black, sunken eyes looked at me over the rim.

"I don't quite understand this," I said. "In what way?"

He unbent a little and explained without too much scorn that Captain Harry being dead, his half of the insurance money went to his wife, and her trustees of course bought consols with it. Enough to keep her comfortable. George Dunbar's half, as Cloete feared from the first, did not prove sufficient to launch the medicine well; other moneyed men stepped in, and these two had to go out of that business, pretty nearly shorn of everything.

"I am curious," I said, "to learn what the motive force of this tragic affair was—I mean the patent medicine. Do you know?"

He named it, and I whistled respectfully. Nothing less than Parker's Lively Lumbago Pills. Enormous property! You know it; all the world knows it. Every second man, at least, on this globe of ours has tried it.

"Why!" I cried, "they missed an immense fortune."

"Yes," he mumbled, "by the price of a revolver-shot."

He told me also that eventually Cloete returned to the States, passenger in a cargo-boat from Albert Dock. The night before he sailed he met him wandering about the quays, and took him home for a drink. "Funny chap, Cloete. We sat all night drinking grogs, till it was time for him to go on board."

It was then that Cloete, unembittered but weary, told him this story, with that utterly unconscious frankness of a patent-medicine man stranger to all moral standards. Cloete concluded by remarking that he, had "had enough of the old country." George Dunbar had turned on him, too, in the end. Cloete was clearly somewhat disillusioned.

As to Stafford, he died, professed loafer, in some East End hospital or other, and on his last day clamoured "for a parson," because his conscience worried him for killing an innocent man. "Wanted somebody to tell him it was all right," growled my old ruffian, contemptuously. "He told the parson that I knew this Cloete who had tried to murder him, and so the parson (he worked among the dock labourers) once spoke to me about it. That skunk of a fellow finding himself trapped yelled for mercy. . . Promised to be good and so on. . . Then he went crazy . . . screamed and threw himself about, beat his head against the bulkheads . . . you can guess all that—eh? . . . till he was exhausted. Gave up. Threw himself down, shut his eyes, and wanted to pray. So he says. Tried to think of some prayer for a quick death—he was that terrified. Thought that if he had a knife or something he would cut his throat, and be done with it. Then he thinks: No! Would try to cut away the wood about the lock. . . He had no knife in his pocket. . . he was weeping and calling on God to send him a tool of some kind when suddenly he thinks: Axe! In most ships there is a spare emergency axe kept in the master's room in some locker or other. . . Up he jumps. . . Pitch dark. Pulls at the drawers to find matches and, groping for them, the first thing he comes upon—Captain Harry's revolver. Loaded too. He goes perfectly quiet all over. Can shoot the lock to pieces. See? Saved! God's providence! There are boxes of matches too. Thinks he: I may just as well see what I am about.

"Strikes a light and sees the little canvas bag tucked away at the back of the drawer. Knew at once what that was. Rams it into his pocket quick. Aha! says he to himself: this requires more light. So he pitches a lot of paper on the floor, set fire to it, and starts in a hurry rummaging for more valuables. Did you ever? He told that East-End parson that the devil tempted him. First God's mercy—then devil's work. Turn and turn about. . .

"Any squirming skunk can talk like that. He was so busy with the drawers that

the first thing he heard was a shout, Great Heavens. He looks up and there was the door open (Cloete had left the key in the lock) and Captain Harry holding on, well above him, very fierce in the light of the burning papers. His eyes were starting out of his head. Thieving, he thunders at him. A sailor! An officer! No! A wretch like you deserves no better than to be left here to drown.

"This Stafford—on his death-bed—told the parson that when he heard these words he went crazy again. He snatched his hand with the revolver in it out of the drawer, and fired without aiming. Captain Harry fell right in with a crash like a stone on top of the burning papers, putting the blaze out. All dark. Not a sound. He listened for a bit then dropped the revolver and scrambled out on deck like mad."

The old fellow struck the table with his ponderous fist.

"What makes me sick is to hear these silly boat-men telling people the captain committed suicide. Pah! Captain Harry was a man that could face his Maker any time up there, and here below, too. He wasn't the sort to slink out of life. Not he! He was a good man down to the ground. He gave me my first job as stevedore only three days after I got married."

As the vindication of Captain Harry from the charge of suicide seemed to be his only object, I did not thank him very effusively for his material. And then it was not worth many thanks in any case.

For it is too startling even to think of such things happening in our respectable Channel in full view, so to speak, of the luxurious continental traffic to Switzerland and Monte Carlo. This story to be acceptable should have been transposed to somewhere in the South Seas. But it would have been too much trouble to cook it for the consumption of magazine readers. So here it is raw, so to speak—just as it was told to me—but unfortunately robbed of the striking effect of the narrator; the most imposing old ruffian that ever followed the unromantic trade of master stevedore in the port of London.

* * * * *

Oct. 1910.

THE INN OF THE TWO WITCHES A FIND

This tale, episode, experience—call it how you will—was related in the fifties of

the last century by a man who, by his own confession, was sixty years old at the time. Sixty is not a bad age—unless in perspective, when no doubt it is contemplated by the majority of us with mixed feelings. It is a calm age; the game is practically over by then; and standing aside one begins to remember with a certain vividness what a fine fellow one used to be. I have observed that, by an amiable attention of Providence, most people at sixty begin to take a romantic view of themselves. Their very failures exhale a charm of peculiar potency. And indeed the hopes of the future are a fine company to live with, exquisite forms, fascinating if you like, but—so to speak—naked, stripped for a run. The robes of glamour are luckily the property of the immovable past which, without them, would sit, a shivery sort of thing, under the gathering shadows.

I suppose it was the romanticism of growing age which set our man to relate his experience for his own satisfaction or for the wonder of his posterity. It could not have been for his glory, because the experience was simply that of an abominable fright—terror he calls it. You would have guessed that the relation alluded to in the very first lines was in writing.

This writing constitutes the Find declared in the sub-title. The title itself is my own contrivance, (can't call it invention), and has the merit of veracity. We will be concerned with an inn here. As to the witches that's merely a conventional expression, and we must take our man's word for it that it fits the case.

The Find was made in a box of books bought in London, in a street which no longer exists, from a second-hand bookseller in the last stage of decay. As to the books themselves they were at least twentieth-hand, and on inspection turned out not worth the very small sum of money I disbursed. It might have been some premonition of that fact which made me say: "But I must have the box too." The decayed bookseller assented by the careless, tragic gesture of a man already doomed to extinction.

A litter of loose pages at the bottom of the box excited my curiosity but faintly. The close, neat, regular handwriting was not attractive at first sight. But in one place the statement that in A.D. 1813 the writer was twenty-two years old caught my eye. Two and twenty is an interesting age in which one is easily reckless and easily frightened; the faculty of reflection being weak and the power of imagination strong.

In another place the phrase: "At night we stood in again," arrested my languid attention, because it was a sea phrase. "Let's see what it is all about," I thought, without excitement.

Oh! but it was a dull-faced MS., each line resembling every other line in their

close-set and regular order. It was like the drone of a monotonous voice. A treatise on sugar-refining (the dreariest subject I can think of) could have been given a more lively appearance. "In A.D. 1813, I was twenty-two years old," he begins earnestly and goes on with every appearance of calm, horrible industry. Don't imagine, however, that there is anything archaic in my find. Diabolic ingenuity in invention though as old as the world is by no means a lost art. Look at the telephones for shattering the little peace of mind given to us in this world, or at the machine guns for letting with dispatch life out of our bodies. Now-a-days any blear-eyed old witch if only strong enough to turn an insignificant little handle could lay low a hundred young men of twenty in the twinkling of an eye.

If this isn't progress! . . . Why immense! We have moved on, and so you must expect to meet here a certain naiveness of contrivance and simplicity of aim appertaining to the remote epoch. And of course no motoring tourist can hope to find such an inn anywhere, now. This one, the one of the title, was situated in Spain. That much I discovered only from internal evidence, because a good many pages of that relation were missing—perhaps not a great misfortune after all. The writer seemed to have entered into a most elaborate detail of the why and wherefore of his presence on that coast—presumably the north coast of Spain. His experience has nothing to do with the sea, though. As far as I can make it out, he was an officer on board a sloop-of-war. There's nothing strange in that. At all stages of the long Peninsular campaign many of our men-of-war of the smaller kind were cruising off the north coast of Spain—as risky and disagreeable a station as can be well imagined.

It looks as though that ship of his had had some special service to perform. A careful explanation of all the circumstances was to be expected from our man, only, as I've said, some of his pages (good tough paper too) were missing: gone in covers for jampots or in wadding for the fowling-pieces of his irreverent posterity. But it is to be seen clearly that communication with the shore and even the sending of messengers inland was part of her service, either to obtain intelligence from or to transmit orders or advice to patriotic Spaniards, guerilleros or secret juntas of the province. Something of the sort. All this can be only inferred from the preserved scraps of his conscientious writing.

Next we come upon the panegyric of a very fine sailor, a member of the ship's company, having the rating of the captain's coxswain. He was known on board as Cuba Tom; not because he was Cuban however; he was indeed the best type of a genuine British tar of that time, and a man-of-war's man for years. He came by the name on account of some wonderful adventures he had in that island in his young days, adventures which were the favourite subject of the yarns he was in the habit of spinning to his shipmates of an evening on the forecastle head. He was intelligent, very strong, and of proved courage. Incidentally we are told, so

exact is our narrator, that Tom had the finest pigtail for thickness and length of any man in the Navy. This appendage, much cared for and sheathed tightly in a porpoise skin, hung half way down his broad back to the great admiration of all beholders and to the great envy of some.

Our young officer dwells on the manly qualities of Cuba Tom with something like affection. This sort of relation between officer and man was not then very rare. A youngster on joining the service was put under the charge of a trustworthy seaman, who slung his first hammock for him and often later on became a sort of humble friend to the junior officer. The narrator on joining the sloop had found this man on board after some years of separation. There is something touching in the warm pleasure he remembers and records at this meeting with the professional mentor of his boyhood.

We discover then that, no Spaniard being forthcoming for the service, this worthy seaman with the unique pigtail and a very high character for courage and steadiness had been selected as messenger for one of these missions inland which have been mentioned. His preparations were not elaborate. One gloomy autumn morning the sloop ran close to a shallow cove where a landing could be made on that iron-bound shore. A boat was lowered, and pulled in with Tom Corbin (Cuba Tom) perched in the bow, and our young man (Mr. Edgar Byrne was his name on this earth which knows him no more) sitting in the stern sheets.

A few inhabitants of a hamlet, whose grey stone houses could be seen a hundred yards or so up a deep ravine, had come down to the shore and watched the approach of the boat. The two Englishmen leaped ashore. Either from dullness or astonishment the peasants gave no greeting, and only fell back in silence.

Mr. Byrne had made up his mind to see Tom Corbin started fairly on his way. He looked round at the heavy surprised faces.

“There isn’t much to get out of them,” he said. “Let us walk up to the village. There will be a wine shop for sure where we may find somebody more promising to talk to and get some information from.”

“Aye, aye, sir,” said Tom falling into step behind his officer. “A bit of palaver as to courses and distances can do no harm; I crossed the broadest part of Cuba by the help of my tongue tho’ knowing far less Spanish than I do now. As they say themselves it was ‘four words and no more’ with me, that time when I got left behind on shore by the Blanche, frigate.”

He made light of what was before him, which was but a day’s journey into the mountains. It is true that there was a full day’s journey before striking the

mountain path, but that was nothing for a man who had crossed the island of Cuba on his two legs, and with no more than four words of the language to begin with.

The officer and the man were walking now on a thick sodden bed of dead leaves, which the peasants thereabouts accumulate in the streets of their villages to rot during the winter for field manure. Turning his head Mr. Byrne perceived that the whole male population of the hamlet was following them on the noiseless springy carpet. Women stared from the doors of the houses and the children had apparently gone into hiding. The village knew the ship by sight, afar off, but no stranger had landed on that spot perhaps for a hundred years or more. The cocked hat of Mr. Byrne, the bushy whiskers and the enormous pigtail of the sailor, filled them with mute wonder. They pressed behind the two Englishmen staring like those islanders discovered by Captain Cook in the South Seas.

It was then that Byrne had his first glimpse of the little cloaked man in a yellow hat. Faded and dingy as it was, this covering for his head made him noticeable.

The entrance to the wine shop was like a rough hole in a wall of flints. The owner was the only person who was not in the street, for he came out from the darkness at the back where the inflated forms of wine skins hung on nails could be vaguely distinguished. He was a tall, one-eyed Asturian with scrubby, hollow cheeks; a grave expression of countenance contrasted enigmatically with the roaming restlessness of his solitary eye. On learning that the matter in hand was the sending on his way of that English mariner toward a certain Gonzales in the mountains, he closed his good eye for a moment as if in meditation. Then opened it, very lively again.

“Possibly, possibly. It could be done.”

A friendly murmur arose in the group in the doorway at the name of Gonzales, the local leader against the French. Inquiring as to the safety of the road Byrne was glad to learn that no troops of that nation had been seen in the neighbourhood for months. Not the smallest little detachment of these impious polizones. While giving these answers the owner of the wine-shop busied himself in drawing into an earthenware jug some wine which he set before the heretic English, pocketing with grave abstraction the small piece of money the officer threw upon the table in recognition of the unwritten law that none may enter a wine-shop without buying drink. His eye was in constant motion as if it were trying to do the work of the two; but when Byrne made inquiries as to the possibility of hiring a mule, it became immovably fixed in the direction of the door which was closely besieged by the curious. In front of them, just within the threshold, the little man in the large cloak and yellow hat had taken his stand.

He was a diminutive person, a mere homunculus, Byrne describes him, in a ridiculously mysterious, yet assertive attitude, a corner of his cloak thrown cavalierly over his left shoulder, muffling his chin and mouth; while the broad-brimmed yellow hat hung on a corner of his square little head. He stood there taking snuff, repeatedly.

"A mule," repeated the wine-seller, his eyes fixed on that quaint and snuffy figure. . . "No, señor officer! Decidedly no mule is to be got in this poor place."

The coxswain, who stood by with the true sailor's air of unconcern in strange surroundings, struck in quietly—

"If your honour will believe me Shank's pony's the best for this job. I would have to leave the beast somewhere, anyhow, since the captain has told me that half my way will be along paths fit only for goats."

The diminutive man made a step forward, and speaking through the folds of the cloak which seemed to muffle a sarcastic intention—

"Si, señor. They are too honest in this village to have a single mule amongst them for your worship's service. To that I can bear testimony. In these times it's only rogues or very clever men who can manage to have mules or any other four-footed beasts and the wherewithal to keep them. But what this valiant mariner wants is a guide; and here, señor, behold my brother-in-law, Bernardino, wine-seller, and alcade of this most Christian and hospitable village, who will find you one."

This, Mr. Byrne says in his relation, was the only thing to do. A youth in a ragged coat and goat-skin breeches was produced after some more talk. The English officer stood treat to the whole village, and while the peasants drank he and Cuba Tom took their departure accompanied by the guide. The diminutive man in the cloak had disappeared.

Byrne went along with the coxswain out of the village. He wanted to see him fairly on his way; and he would have gone a greater distance, if the seaman had not suggested respectfully the advisability of return so as not to keep the ship a moment longer than necessary so close in with the shore on such an unpromising looking morning. A wild gloomy sky hung over their heads when they took leave of each other, and their surroundings of rank bushes and stony fields were dreary.

"In four days' time," were Byrne's last words, "the ship will stand in and send a boat on shore if the weather permits. If not you'll have to make it out on shore the best you can till we come along to take you off."

"Right you are, sir," answered Tom, and strode on. Byrne watched him step out on a narrow path. In a thick pea-jacket with a pair of pistols in his belt, a cutlass by his side, and a stout cudgel in his hand, he looked a sturdy figure and well able to take care of himself. He turned round for a moment to wave his hand, giving to Byrne one more view of his honest bronzed face with bushy whiskers. The lad in goatskin breeches looking, Byrne says, like a faun or a young satyr leaping ahead, stopped to wait for him, and then went off at a bound. Both disappeared.

Byrne turned back. The hamlet was hidden in a fold of the ground, and the spot seemed the most lonely corner of the earth and as if accursed in its uninhabited desolate barrenness. Before he had walked many yards, there appeared very suddenly from behind a bush the muffled up diminutive Spaniard. Naturally Byrne stopped short.

The other made a mysterious gesture with a tiny hand peeping from under his cloak. His hat hung very much at the side of his head. "Señor," he said without any preliminaries. "Caution! It is a positive fact that one-eyed Bernardino, my brother-in-law, has at this moment a mule in his stable. And why he who is not clever has a mule there? Because he is a rogue; a man without conscience. Because I had to give up the macho to him to secure for myself a roof to sleep under and a mouthful of olla to keep my soul in this insignificant body of mine. Yet, señor, it contains a heart many times bigger than the mean thing which beats in the breast of that brute connection of mine of which I am ashamed, though I opposed that marriage with all my power. Well, the misguided woman suffered enough. She had her purgatory on this earth—God rest her soul."

Byrne says he was so astonished by the sudden appearance of that sprite-like being, and by the sardonic bitterness of the speech, that he was unable to disentangle the significant fact from what seemed but a piece of family history fired out at him without rhyme or reason. Not at first. He was confounded and at the same time he was impressed by the rapid forcible delivery, quite different from the frothy excited loquacity of an Italian. So he stared while the homunculus letting his cloak fall about him, aspired an immense quantity of snuff out of the hollow of his palm.

"A mule," exclaimed Byrne seizing at last the real aspect of the discourse. "You say he has got a mule? That's queer! Why did he refuse to let me have it?"

The diminutive Spaniard muffled himself up again with great dignity.

"Quien sabe," he said coldly, with a shrug of his draped shoulders. "He is a great

politico in everything he does. But one thing your worship may be certain of—that his intentions are always rascally. This husband of my defunta sister ought to have been married a long time ago to the widow with the wooden legs." {188}

"I see. But remember that, whatever your motives, your worship countenanced him in this lie."

The bright unhappy eyes on each side of a predatory nose confronted Byrne without wincing, while with that testiness which lurks so often at the bottom of Spanish dignity—

"No doubt the señor officer would not lose an ounce of blood if I were stuck under the fifth rib," he retorted. "But what of this poor sinner here?" Then changing his tone. "Señor, by the necessities of the times I live here in exile, a Castilian and an old Christian, existing miserably in the midst of these brute Asturians, and dependent on the worst of them all, who has less conscience and scruples than a wolf. And being a man of intelligence I govern myself accordingly. Yet I can hardly contain my scorn. You have heard the way I spoke. A caballero of parts like your worship might have guessed that there was a cat in there."

"What cat?" said Byrne uneasily. "Oh, I see. Something suspicious. No, señor. I guessed nothing. My nation are not good guessers at that sort of thing; and, therefore, I ask you plainly whether that wine-seller has spoken the truth in other particulars?"

"There are certainly no Frenchmen anywhere about," said the little man with a return to his indifferent manner.

"Or robbers—ladrones?"

"Ladrones en grande—no! Assuredly not," was the answer in a cold philosophical tone. "What is there left for them to do after the French? And nobody travels in these times. But who can say! Opportunity makes the robber. Still that mariner of yours has a fierce aspect, and with the son of a cat rats will have no play. But there is a saying, too, that where honey is there will soon be flies."

This oracular discourse exasperated Byrne. "In the name of God," he cried, "tell me plainly if you think my man is reasonably safe on his journey."

The homunculus, undergoing one of his rapid changes, seized the officer's arm. The grip of his little hand was astonishing.

"Señor! Bernardino had taken notice of him. What more do you want? And

listen—men have disappeared on this road—on a certain portion of this road, when Bernardino kept a meson, an inn, and I, his brother-in-law, had coaches and mules for hire. Now there are no travellers, no coaches. The French have ruined me. Bernardino has retired here for reasons of his own after my sister died. They were three to torment the life out of her, he and Erminia and Lucilla, two aunts of his—all affiliated to the devil. And now he has robbed me of my last mule. You are an armed man. Demand the macho from him, with a pistol to his head, señor—it is not his, I tell you—and ride after your man who is so precious to you. And then you shall both be safe, for no two travellers have been ever known to disappear together in these days. As to the beast, I, its owner, I confide it to your honour."

They were staring hard at each other, and Byrne nearly burst into a laugh at the ingenuity and transparency of the little man's plot to regain possession of his mule. But he had no difficulty to keep a straight face because he felt deep within himself a strange inclination to do that very extraordinary thing. He did not laugh, but his lip quivered; at which the diminutive Spaniard, detaching his black glittering eyes from Byrne's face, turned his back on him brusquely with a gesture and a fling of the cloak which somehow expressed contempt, bitterness, and discouragement all at once. He turned away and stood still, his hat aslant, muffled up to the ears. But he was not offended to the point of refusing the silver duro which Byrne offered him with a non-committal speech as if nothing extraordinary had passed between them.

"I must make haste on board now," said Byrne, then.

"Vaya usted con Dios," muttered the gnome. And this interview ended with a sarcastic low sweep of the hat which was replaced at the same perilous angle as before.

Directly the boat had been hoisted the ship's sails were filled on the off-shore tack, and Byrne imparted the whole story to his captain, who was but a very few years older than himself. There was some amused indignation at it—but while they laughed they looked gravely at each other. A Spanish dwarf trying to beguile an officer of his majesty's navy into stealing a mule for him—that was too funny, too ridiculous, too incredible. Those were the exclamations of the captain. He couldn't get over the grotesqueness of it.

"Incredible. That's just it," murmured Byrne at last in a significant tone.

They exchanged a long stare. "It's as clear as daylight," affirmed the captain impatiently, because in his heart he was not certain. And Tom the best seaman in the ship for one, the good-humouredly deferential friend of his boyhood for the

other, was becoming endowed with a compelling fascination, like a symbolic figure of loyalty appealing to their feelings and their conscience, so that they could not detach their thoughts from his safety. Several times they went up on deck, only to look at the coast, as if it could tell them something of his fate. It stretched away, lengthening in the distance, mute, naked, and savage, veiled now and then by the slanting cold shafts of rain. The westerly swell rolled its interminable angry lines of foam and big dark clouds flew over the ship in a sinister procession.

"I wish to goodness you had done what your little friend in the yellow hat wanted you to do," said the commander of the sloop late in the afternoon with visible exasperation.

"Do you, sir?" answered Byrne, bitter with positive anguish. "I wonder what you would have said afterwards? Why! I might have been kicked out of the service for looting a mule from a nation in alliance with His Majesty. Or I might have been battered to a pulp with flails and pitch-forks—a pretty tale to get abroad about one of your officers—while trying to steal a mule. Or chased ignominiously to the boat—for you would not have expected me to shoot down unoffending people for the sake of a mangy mule. . . And yet," he added in a low voice, "I almost wish myself I had done it."

Before dark those two young men had worked themselves up into a highly complex psychological state of scornful scepticism and alarmed credulity. It tormented them exceedingly; and the thought that it would have to last for six days at least, and possibly be prolonged further for an indefinite time, was not to be borne. The ship was therefore put on the inshore tack at dark. All through the gusty dark night she went towards the land to look for her man, at times lying over in the heavy puffs, at others rolling idle in the swell, nearly stationary, as if she too had a mind of her own to swing perplexed between cool reason and warm impulse.

Then just at daybreak a boat put off from her and went on tossed by the seas towards the shallow cove where, with considerable difficulty, an officer in a thick coat and a round hat managed to land on a strip of shingle.

"It was my wish," writes Mr. Byrne, "a wish of which my captain approved, to land secretly if possible. I did not want to be seen either by my aggrieved friend in the yellow hat, whose motives were not clear, or by the one-eyed wine-seller, who may or may not have been affiliated to the devil, or indeed by any other dweller in that primitive village. But unfortunately the cove was the only possible landing place for miles; and from the steepness of the ravine I couldn't make a circuit to avoid the houses."

"Fortunately," he goes on, "all the people were yet in their beds. It was barely daylight when I found myself walking on the thick layer of sodden leaves filling the only street. No soul was stirring abroad, no dog barked. The silence was profound, and I had concluded with some wonder that apparently no dogs were kept in the hamlet, when I heard a low snarl, and from a noisome alley between two hovels emerged a vile cur with its tail between its legs. He slunk off silently showing me his teeth as he ran before me, and he disappeared so suddenly that he might have been the unclean incarnation of the Evil One. There was, too, something so weird in the manner of its coming and vanishing, that my spirits, already by no means very high, became further depressed by the revolting sight of this creature as if by an unlucky presage."

He got away from the coast unobserved, as far as he knew, then struggled manfully to the west against wind and rain, on a barren dark upland, under a sky of ashes. Far away the harsh and desolate mountains raising their scarped and denuded ridges seemed to wait for him menacingly. The evening found him fairly near to them, but, in sailor language, uncertain of his position, hungry, wet, and tired out by a day of steady tramping over broken ground during which he had seen very few people, and had been unable to obtain the slightest intelligence of Tom Corbin's passage. "On! on! I must push on," he had been saying to himself through the hours of solitary effort, spurred more by incertitude than by any definite fear or definite hope.

The lowering daylight died out quickly, leaving him faced by a broken bridge. He descended into the ravine, forded a narrow stream by the last gleam of rapid water, and clambering out on the other side was met by the night which fell like a bandage over his eyes. The wind sweeping in the darkness the broadside of the sierra worried his ears by a continuous roaring noise as of a maddened sea. He suspected that he had lost the road. Even in daylight, with its ruts and mud-holes and ledges of outcropping stone, it was difficult to distinguish from the dreary waste of the moor interspersed with boulders and clumps of naked bushes. But, as he says, "he steered his course by the feel of the wind," his hat rammed low on his brow, his head down, stopping now and again from mere weariness of mind rather than of body—as if not his strength but his resolution were being overtaxed by the strain of endeavour half suspected to be vain, and by the unrest of his feelings.

In one of these pauses borne in the wind faintly as if from very far away he heard a sound of knocking, just knocking on wood. He noticed that the wind had lulled suddenly.

His heart started beating tumultuously because in himself he carried the

impression of the desert solitudes he had been traversing for the last six hours—the oppressive sense of an uninhabited world. When he raised his head a gleam of light, illusory as it often happens in dense darkness, swam before his eyes. While he peered, the sound of feeble knocking was repeated—and suddenly he felt rather than saw the existence of a massive obstacle in his path. What was it? The spur of a hill? Or was it a house! Yes. It was a house right close, as though it had risen from the ground or had come gliding to meet him, dumb and pallid; from some dark recess of the night. It towered loftily. He had come up under its lee; another three steps and he could have touched the wall with his hand. It was no doubt a posada and some other traveller was trying for admittance. He heard again the sound of cautious knocking.

Next moment a broad band of light fell into the night through the opened door. Byrne stepped eagerly into it, whereupon the person outside leaped with a stifled cry away into the night. An exclamation of surprise was heard too, from within. Byrne, flinging himself against the half closed door, forced his way in against some considerable resistance.

A miserable candle, a mere rushlight, burned at the end of a long deal table. And in its light Byrne saw, staggering yet, the girl he had driven from the door. She had a short black skirt, an orange shawl, a dark complexion—and the escaped single hairs from the mass, sombre and thick like a forest and held up by a comb, made a black mist about her low forehead. A shrill lamentable howl of: "Misericordia!" came in two voices from the further end of the long room, where the fire-light of an open hearth played between heavy shadows. The girl recovering herself drew a hissing breath through her set teeth.

It is unnecessary to report the long process of questions and answers by which he soothed the fears of two old women who sat on each side of the fire, on which stood a large earthenware pot. Byrne thought at once of two witches watching the brewing of some deadly potion. But all the same, when one of them raising forward painfully her broken form lifted the cover of the pot, the escaping steam had an appetising smell. The other did not budge, but sat hunched up, her head trembling all the time.

They were horrible. There was something grotesque in their decrepitude. Their toothless mouths, their hooked noses, the meagreness of the active one, and the hanging yellow cheeks of the other (the still one, whose head trembled) would have been laughable if the sight of their dreadful physical degradation had not been appalling to one's eyes, had not gripped one's heart with poignant amazement at the unspeakable misery of age, at the awful persistency of life becoming at last an object of disgust and dread.

To get over it Byrne began to talk, saying that he was an Englishman, and that he was in search of a countryman who ought to have passed this way. Directly he had spoken the recollection of his parting with Tom came up in his mind with amazing vividness: the silent villagers, the angry gnome, the one-eyed wine-seller, Bernardino. Why! These two unspeakable frights must be that man's aunts—affiliated to the devil.

Whatever they had been once it was impossible to imagine what use such feeble creatures could be to the devil, now, in the world of the living. Which was Lucilla and which was Erminia? They were now things without a name. A moment of suspended animation followed Byrne's words. The sorceress with the spoon ceased stirring the mess in the iron pot, the very trembling of the other's head stopped for the space of breath. In this infinitesimal fraction of a second Byrne had the sense of being really on his quest, of having reached the turn of the path, almost within hail of Tom.

"They have seen him," he thought with conviction. Here was at last somebody who had seen him. He made sure they would deny all knowledge of the Ingles; but on the contrary they were eager to tell him that he had eaten and slept the night in the house. They both started talking together, describing his appearance and behaviour. An excitement quite fierce in its feebleness possessed them. The doubled-up sorceress flourished aloft her wooden spoon, the puffy monster got off her stool and screeched, stepping from one foot to the other, while the trembling of her head was accelerated to positive vibration. Byrne was quite disconcerted by their excited behaviour. . . Yes! The big, fierce Ingles went away in the morning, after eating a piece of bread and drinking some wine. And if the caballero wished to follow the same path nothing could be easier—in the morning.

"You will give me somebody to show me the way?" said Byrne.

"Si, señor. A proper youth. The man the caballero saw going out."

"But he was knocking at the door," protested Byrne. "He only bolted when he saw me. He was coming in."

"No! No!" the two horrid witches screamed out together. "Going out. Going out!"

After all it may have been true. The sound of knocking had been faint, elusive, reflected Byrne. Perhaps only the effect of his fancy. He asked—

"Who is that man?"

"Her novio." They screamed pointing to the girl. "He is gone home to a village far away from here. But he will return in the morning. Her novio! And she is an orphan—the child of poor Christian people. She lives with us for the love of God, for the love of God."

The orphan crouching on the corner of the hearth had been looking at Byrne. He thought that she was more like a child of Satan kept there by these two weird harridans for the love of the Devil. Her eyes were a little oblique, her mouth rather thick, but admirably formed; her dark face had a wild beauty, voluptuous and untamed. As to the character of her steadfast gaze attached upon him with a sensuously savage attention, "to know what it was like," says Mr. Byrne, "you have only to observe a hungry cat watching a bird in a cage or a mouse inside a trap."

It was she who served him the food, of which he was glad; though with those big slanting black eyes examining him at close range, as if he had something curious written on his face, she gave him an uncomfortable sensation. But anything was better than being approached by these blear-eyed nightmarish witches. His apprehensions somehow had been soothed; perhaps by the sensation of warmth after severe exposure and the ease of resting after the exertion of fighting the gale inch by inch all the way. He had no doubt of Tom's safety. He was now sleeping in the mountain camp having been met by Gonzales' men.

Byrne rose, filled a tin goblet with wine out of a skin hanging on the wall, and sat down again. The witch with the mummy face began to talk to him, ramblingly of old times; she boasted of the inn's fame in those better days. Great people in their own coaches stopped there. An archbishop slept once in the casa, a long, long time ago.

The witch with the puffy face seemed to be listening from her stool, motionless, except for the trembling of her head. The girl (Byrne was certain she was a casual gipsy admitted there for some reason or other) sat on the hearth stone in the glow of the embers. She hummed a tune to herself, rattling a pair of castanets slightly now and then. At the mention of the archbishop she chuckled impiously and turned her head to look at Byrne, so that the red glow of the fire flashed in her black eyes and on her white teeth under the dark cowl of the enormous overmantel. And he smiled at her.

He rested now in the ease of security. His advent not having been expected there could be no plot against him in existence. Drowsiness stole upon his senses. He enjoyed it, but keeping a hold, so he thought at least, on his wits; but he must have been gone further than he thought because he was startled beyond measure by a fiendish uproar. He had never heard anything so pitilessly strident in his

life. The witches had started a fierce quarrel about something or other. Whatever its origin they were now only abusing each other violently, without arguments; their senile screams expressed nothing but wicked anger and ferocious dismay. The gipsy girl's black eyes flew from one to the other. Never before had Byrne felt himself so removed from fellowship with human beings. Before he had really time to understand the subject of the quarrel, the girl jumped up rattling her castanets loudly. A silence fell. She came up to the table and bending over, her eyes in his—

"Señor," she said with decision, "You shall sleep in the archbishop's room."

Neither of the witches objected. The dried-up one bent double was propped on a stick. The puffy faced one had now a crutch.

Byrne got up, walked to the door, and turning the key in the enormous lock put it coolly in his pocket. This was clearly the only entrance, and he did not mean to be taken unawares by whatever danger there might have been lurking outside.

When he turned from the door he saw the two witches "affiliated to the Devil" and the Satanic girl looking at him in silence. He wondered if Tom Corbin took the same precaution last might. And thinking of him he had again that queer impression of his nearness. The world was perfectly dumb. And in this stillness he heard the blood beating in his ears with a confused rushing noise, in which there seemed to be a voice uttering the words: "Mr. Byrne, look out, sir." Tom's voice. He shuddered; for the delusions of the senses of hearing are the most vivid of all, and from their nature have a compelling character.

It seemed impossible that Tom should not be there. Again a slight chill as of stealthy draught penetrated through his very clothes and passed over all his body. He shook off the impression with an effort.

It was the girl who preceded him upstairs carrying an iron lamp from the naked flame of which ascended a thin thread of smoke. Her soiled white stockings were full of holes.

With the same quiet resolution with which he had locked the door below, Byrne threw open one after another the doors in the corridor. All the rooms were empty except for some nondescript lumber in one or two. And the girl seeing what he would be at stopped every time, raising the smoky light in each doorway patiently. Meantime she observed him with sustained attention. The last door of all she threw open herself.

"You sleep here, señor," she murmured in a voice light like a child's breath,

offering him the lamp.

“Buenos noches, senorita,” he said politely, taking it from her.

She didn’t return the wish audibly, though her lips did move a little, while her gaze black like a starless night never for a moment wavered before him. He stepped in, and as he turned to close the door she was still there motionless and disturbing, with her voluptuous mouth and slanting eyes, with the expression of expectant sensual ferocity of a baffled cat. He hesitated for a moment, and in the dumb house he heard again the blood pulsating ponderously in his ears, while once more the illusion of Tom’s voice speaking earnestly somewhere near by was specially terrifying, because this time he could not make out the words.

He slammed the door in the girl’s face at last, leaving her in the dark; and he opened it again almost on the instant. Nobody. She had vanished without the slightest sound. He closed the door quickly and bolted it with two heavy bolts.

A profound mistrust possessed him suddenly. Why did the witches quarrel about letting him sleep here? And what meant that stare of the girl as if she wanted to impress his features for ever in her mind? His own nervousness alarmed him. He seemed to himself to be removed very far from mankind.

He examined his room. It was not very high, just high enough to take the bed which stood under an enormous baldaquin-like canopy from which fell heavy curtains at foot and head; a bed certainly worthy of an archbishop. There was a heavy table carved all round the edges, some arm-chairs of enormous weight like the spoils of a grandee’s palace; a tall shallow wardrobe placed against the wall and with double doors. He tried them. Locked. A suspicion came into his mind, and he snatched the lamp to make a closer examination. No, it was not a disguised entrance. That heavy, tall piece of furniture stood clear of the wall by quite an inch. He glanced at the bolts of his room door. No! No one could get at him treacherously while he slept. But would he be able to sleep? he asked himself anxiously. If only he had Tom there—the trusty seaman who had fought at his right hand in a cutting out affair or two, and had always preached to him the necessity to take care of himself. “For it’s no great trick,” he used to say, “to get yourself killed in a hot fight. Any fool can do that. The proper pastime is to fight the Frenchies and then live to fight another day.”

Byrne found it a hard matter not to fall into listening to the silence. Somehow he had the conviction that nothing would break it unless he heard again the haunting sound of Tom’s voice. He had heard it twice before. Odd! And yet no wonder, he argued with himself reasonably, since he had been thinking of the man for over thirty hours continuously and, what’s more, inconclusively. For his

anxiety for Tom had never taken a definite shape. "Disappear," was the only word connected with the idea of Tom's danger. It was very vague and awful. "Disappear!" What did that mean?

Byrne shuddered, and then said to himself that he must be a little feverish. But Tom had not disappeared. Byrne had just heard of him. And again the young man felt the blood beating in his ears. He sat still expecting every moment to hear through the pulsating strokes the sound of Tom's voice. He waited straining his ears, but nothing came. Suddenly the thought occurred to him: "He has not disappeared, but he cannot make himself heard."

He jumped up from the arm-chair. How absurd! Laying his pistol and his hanger on the table he took off his boots and, feeling suddenly too tired to stand, flung himself on the bed which he found soft and comfortable beyond his hopes.

He had felt very wakeful, but he must have dozed off after all, because the next thing he knew he was sitting up in bed and trying to recollect what it was that Tom's voice had said. Oh! He remembered it now. It had said: "Mr. Byrne! Look out, sir!" A warning this. But against what?

He landed with one leap in the middle of the floor, gasped once, then looked all round the room. The window was shuttered and barred with an iron bar. Again he ran his eyes slowly all round the bare walls, and even looked up at the ceiling, which was rather high. Afterwards he went to the door to examine the fastenings. They consisted of two enormous iron bolts sliding into holes made in the wall; and as the corridor outside was too narrow to admit of any battering arrangement or even to permit an axe to be swung, nothing could burst the door open—unless gunpowder. But while he was still making sure that the lower bolt was pushed well home, he received the impression of somebody's presence in the room. It was so strong that he spun round quicker than lightning. There was no one. Who could there be? And yet . . .

It was then that he lost the decorum and restraint a man keeps up for his own sake. He got down on his hands and knees, with the lamp on the floor, to look under the bed, like a silly girl. He saw a lot of dust and nothing else. He got up, his cheeks burning, and walked about discontented with his own behaviour and unreasonably angry with Tom for not leaving him alone. The words: "Mr. Byrne! Look out, sir," kept on repeating themselves in his head in a tone of warning.

"Hadn't I better just throw myself on the bed and try to go to sleep," he asked himself. But his eyes fell on the tall wardrobe, and he went towards it feeling irritated with himself and yet unable to desist. How he could explain to-morrow the burglarious misdeed to the two odious witches he had no idea. Nevertheless

he inserted the point of his hanger between the two halves of the door and tried to prize them open. They resisted. He swore, sticking now hotly to his purpose. His mutter: "I hope you will be satisfied, confound you," was addressed to the absent Tom. Just then the doors gave way and flew open.

He was there.

He—the trusty, sagacious, and courageous Tom was there, drawn up shadowy and stiff, in a prudent silence, which his wide-open eyes by their fixed gleam seemed to command Byrne to respect. But Byrne was too startled to make a sound. Amazed, he stepped back a little—and on the instant the seaman flung himself forward headlong as if to clasp his officer round the neck. Instinctively Byrne put out his faltering arms; he felt the horrible rigidity of the body and then the coldness of death as their heads knocked together and their faces came into contact. They reeled, Byrne hugging Tom close to his breast in order not to let him fall with a crash. He had just strength enough to lower the awful burden gently to the floor—then his head swam, his legs gave way, and he sank on his knees, leaning over the body with his hands resting on the breast of that man once full of generous life, and now as insensible as a stone.

"Dead! my poor Tom, dead," he repeated mentally. The light of the lamp standing near the edge of the table fell from above straight on the stony empty stare of these eyes which naturally had a mobile and merry expression.

Byrne turned his own away from them. Tom's black silk neckerchief was not knotted on his breast. It was gone. The murderers had also taken off his shoes and stockings. And noticing this spoliation, the exposed throat, the bare up-turned feet, Byrne felt his eyes run full of tears. In other respects the seaman was fully dressed; neither was his clothing disarranged as it must have been in a violent struggle. Only his checked shirt had been pulled a little out the waistband in one place, just enough to ascertain whether he had a money belt fastened round his body. Byrne began to sob into his handkerchief.

It was a nervous outburst which passed off quickly. Remaining on his knees he contemplated sadly the athletic body of as fine a seaman as ever had drawn a cutlass, laid a gun, or passed the weather earring in a gale, lying stiff and cold, his cheery, fearless spirit departed—perhaps turning to him, his boy chum, to his ship out there rolling on the grey seas off an iron-bound coast, at the very moment of its flight.

He perceived that the six brass buttons of Tom's jacket had been cut off. He shuddered at the notion of the two miserable and repulsive witches busying themselves ghoulishly about the defenceless body of his friend. Cut off. Perhaps

with the same knife which . . . The head of one trembled; the other was bent double, and their eyes were red and bleared, their infamous claws unsteady. . . It must have been in this very room too, for Tom could not have been killed in the open and brought in here afterwards. Of that Byrne was certain. Yet those devilish crones could not have killed him themselves even by taking him unawares—and Tom would be always on his guard of course. Tom was a very wide awake wary man when engaged on any service. . . And in fact how did they murder him? Who did? In what way?

Byrne jumped up, snatched the lamp off the table, and stooped swiftly over the body. The light revealed on the clothing no stain, no trace, no spot of blood anywhere. Byrne's hands began to shake so that he had to set the lamp on the floor and turn away his head in order to recover from this agitation.

Then he began to explore that cold, still, and rigid body for a stab, a gunshot wound, for the trace of some killing blow. He felt all over the skull anxiously. It was whole. He slipped his hand under the neck. It was unbroken. With terrified eyes he peered close under the chin and saw no marks of strangulation on the throat.

There were no signs anywhere. He was just dead.

Impulsively Byrne got away from the body as if the mystery of an incomprehensible death had changed his pity into suspicion and dread. The lamp on the floor near the set, still face of the seaman showed it staring at the ceiling as if despairingly. In the circle of light Byrne saw by the undisturbed patches of thick dust on the floor that there had been no struggle in that room. "He has died outside," he thought. Yes, outside in that narrow corridor, where there was hardly room to turn, the mysterious death had come to his poor dear Tom. The impulse of snatching up his pistols and rushing out of the room abandoned Byrne suddenly. For Tom, too, had been armed—with just such powerless weapons as he himself possessed—pistols, a cutlass! And Tom had died a nameless death, by incomprehensible means.

A new thought came to Byrne. That stranger knocking at the door and fleeing so swiftly at his appearance had come there to remove the body. Aha! That was the guide the withered witch had promised would show the English officer the shortest way of rejoining his man. A promise, he saw it now, of dreadful import. He who had knocked would have two bodies to deal with. Man and officer would go forth from the house together. For Byrne was certain now that he would have to die before the morning—and in the same mysterious manner, leaving behind him an unmarked body.

The sight of a smashed head, of a throat cut, of a gaping gunshot wound, would have been an inexpressible relief. It would have soothed all his fears. His soul cried within him to that dead man whom he had never found wanting in danger. "Why don't you tell me what I am to look for, Tom? Why don't you?" But in rigid immobility, extended on his back, he seemed to preserve an austere silence, as if disdaining in the finality of his awful knowledge to hold converse with the living.

Suddenly Byrne flung himself on his knees by the side of the body, and dry-eyed, fierce, opened the shirt wide on the breast, as if to tear the secret forcibly from that cold heart which had been so loyal to him in life! Nothing! Nothing! He raised the lamp, and all the sign vouchsafed to him by that face which used to be so kindly in expression was a small bruise on the forehead—the least thing, a mere mark. The skin even was not broken. He stared at it a long time as if lost in a dreadful dream. Then he observed that Tom's hands were clenched as though he had fallen facing somebody in a fight with fists. His knuckles, on closer view, appeared somewhat abraded. Both hands.

The discovery of these slight signs was more appalling to Byrne than the absolute absence of every mark would have been. So Tom had died striking against something which could be hit, and yet could kill one without leaving a wound—by a breath.

Terror, hot terror, began to play about Byrne's heart like a tongue of flame that touches and withdraws before it turns a thing to ashes. He backed away from the body as far as he could, then came forward stealthily casting fearful glances to steal another look at the bruised forehead. There would perhaps be such a faint bruise on his own forehead—before the morning.

"I can't bear it," he whispered to himself. Tom was for him now an object of horror, a sight at once tempting and revolting to his fear. He couldn't bear to look at him.

At last, desperation getting the better of his increasing horror, he stepped forward from the wall against which he had been leaning, seized the corpse under the armpits, and began to lug it over to the bed. The bare heels of the seaman trailed on the floor noiselessly. He was heavy with the dead weight of inanimate objects. With a last effort Byrne landed him face downwards on the edge of the bed, rolled him over, snatched from under this stiff passive thing a sheet with which he covered it over. Then he spread the curtains at head and foot so that joining together as he shook their folds they hid the bed altogether from his sight.

He stumbled towards a chair, and fell on it. The perspiration poured from his face for a moment, and then his veins seemed to carry for a while a thin stream of

half, frozen blood. Complete terror had possession of him now, a nameless terror which had turned his heart to ashes.

He sat upright in the straight-backed chair, the lamp burning at his feet, his pistols and his hanger at his left elbow on the end of the table, his eyes turning incessantly in their sockets round the walls, over the ceiling, over the floor, in the expectation of a mysterious and appalling vision. The thing which could deal death in a breath was outside that bolted door. But Byrne believed neither in walls nor bolts now. Unreasoning terror turning everything to account, his old time boyish admiration of the athletic Tom, the undaunted Tom (he had seemed to him invincible), helped to paralyse his faculties, added to his despair.

He was no longer Edgar Byrne. He was a tortured soul suffering more anguish than any sinner's body had ever suffered from rack or boot. The depth of his torment may be measured when I say that this young man, as brave at least as the average of his kind, contemplated seizing a pistol and firing into his own head. But a deadly, chilly, langour was spreading over his limbs. It was as if his flesh had been wet plaster stiffening slowly about his ribs. Presently, he thought, the two witches will be coming in, with crutch and stick—horrible, grotesque, monstrous—affiliated to the devil—to put a mark on his forehead, the tiny little bruise of death. And he wouldn't be able to do anything. Tom had struck out at something, but he was not like Tom. His limbs were dead already. He sat still, dying the death over and over again; and the only part of him which moved were his eyes, turning round and round in their sockets, running over the walls, the floor, the ceiling, again and again till suddenly they became motionless and stony—starting out of his head fixed in the direction of the bed.

He had seen the heavy curtains stir and shake as if the dead body they concealed had turned over and sat up. Byrne, who thought the world could hold no more terrors in store, felt his hair stir at the roots. He gripped the arms of the chair, his jaw fell, and the sweat broke out on his brow while his dry tongue clove suddenly to the roof of his mouth. Again the curtains stirred, but did not open. "Don't, Tom!" Byrne made effort to shout, but all he heard was a slight moan such as an uneasy sleeper may make. He felt that his brain was going, for, now, it seemed to him that the ceiling over the bed had moved, had slanted, and came level again—and once more the closed curtains swayed gently as if about to part.

Byrne closed his eyes not to see the awful apparition of the seaman's corpse coming out animated by an evil spirit. In the profound silence of the room he endured a moment of frightful agony, then opened his eyes again. And he saw at once that the curtains remained closed still, but that the ceiling over the bed had risen quite a foot. With the last gleam of reason left to him he understood that it was the enormous baldaquin over the bed which was coming down, while the

curtains attached to it swayed softly, sinking gradually to the floor. His drooping jaw snapped to—and half rising in his chair he watched mutely the noiseless descent of the monstrous canopy. It came down in short smooth rushes till lowered half way or more, when it took a run and settled swiftly its turtle-back shape with the deep border piece fitting exactly the edge of the bedstead. A slight crack or two of wood were heard, and the overpowering stillness of the room resumed its sway.

Byrne stood up, gasped for breath, and let out a cry of rage and dismay, the first sound which he is perfectly certain did make its way past his lips on this night of terrors. This then was the death he had escaped! This was the devilish artifice of murder poor Tom's soul had perhaps tried from beyond the border to warn him of. For this was how he had died. Byrne was certain he had heard the voice of the seaman, faintly distinct in his familiar phrase, "Mr. Byrne! Look out, sir!" and again uttering words he could not make out. But then the distance separating the living from the dead is so great! Poor Tom had tried. Byrne ran to the bed and attempted to lift up, to push off the horrible lid smothering the body. It resisted his efforts, heavy as lead, immovable like a tombstone. The rage of vengeance made him desist; his head buzzed with chaotic thoughts of extermination, he turned round the room as if he could find neither his weapons nor the way out; and all the time he stammered awful menaces. . .

A violent battering at the door of the inn recalled him to his soberer senses. He flew to the window pulled the shutters open, and looked out. In the faint dawn he saw below him a mob of men. Ha! He would go and face at once this murderous lot collected no doubt for his undoing. After his struggle with nameless terrors he yearned for an open fray with armed enemies. But he must have remained yet bereft of his reason, because forgetting his weapons he rushed downstairs with a wild cry, unbarred the door while blows were raining on it outside, and flinging it open flew with his bare hands at the throat of the first man he saw before him. They rolled over together. Byrne's hazy intention was to break through, to fly up the mountain path, and come back presently with Gonzales' men to exact an exemplary vengeance. He fought furiously till a tree, a house, a mountain, seemed to crash down upon his head—and he knew no more.

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Here Mr. Byrne describes in detail the skilful manner in which he found his broken head bandaged, informs us that he had lost a great deal of blood, and ascribes the preservation of his sanity to that circumstance. He sets down Gonzales' profuse apologies in full too. For it was Gonzales who, tired of waiting for news from the English, had come down to the inn with half his band, on his way to the sea. "His excellency," he explained, "rushed out with fierce

impetuosity, and, moreover, was not known to us for a friend, and so we . . . etc., etc. When asked what had become of the witches, he only pointed his finger silently to the ground, then voiced calmly a moral reflection: "The passion for gold is pitiless in the very old, señor," he said. "No doubt in former days they have put many a solitary traveller to sleep in the archbishop's bed."

"There was also a gipsy girl there," said Byrne feebly from the improvised litter on which he was being carried to the coast by a squad of guerilleros.

"It was she who winched up that infernal machine, and it was she too who lowered it that night," was the answer.

"But why? Why?" exclaimed Byrne. "Why should she wish for my death?"

"No doubt for the sake of your excellency's coat buttons," said politely the saturnine Gonzales. "We found those of the dead mariner concealed on her person. But your excellency may rest assured that everything that is fitting has been done on this occasion."

Byrne asked no more questions. There was still another death which was considered by Gonzales as "fitting to the occasion." The one-eyed Bernardino stuck against the wall of his wine-shop received the charge of six escopettas into his breast. As the shots rang out the rough bier with Tom's body on it went past carried by a bandit-like gang of Spanish patriots down the ravine to the shore, where two boats from the ship were waiting for what was left on earth of her best seaman.

Mr. Byrne, very pale and weak, stepped into the boat which carried the body of his humble friend. For it was decided that Tom Corbin should rest far out in the bay of Biscay. The officer took the tiller and, turning his head for the last look at the shore, saw on the grey hillside something moving, which he made out to be a little man in a yellow hat mounted on a mule—that mule without which the fate of Tom Corbin would have remained mysterious for ever.

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June, 1913.