II

THE END OF THE "ZANZIBAR."

"Until half an hour ago? Then why----" and Benita stopped.

"Have I changed my very modest scheme of life? Miss Clifford, as you are so good as to be sufficiently interested, I will tell you. It is because a temptation which hitherto I have been able to resist, has during the last thirty minutes become too strong for me. You know everything has its breaking strain." He puffed nervously at his cigar, threw it into the sea, paused, then went on: "Miss Clifford, I have dared to fall in love with you. No; hear me out. When I have done it will be quite time enough to give me the answer that I expect. Meanwhile, for the first time in my life, allow me the luxury of being in earnest. To me it is a new sensation, and therefore very priceless. May I go on?"

Benita made no answer. He rose with a certain deliberateness which characterized all his movements--for Robert Seymour never seemed to be in a hurry--and stood in front of her so that the moonlight shone upon her face, while his own remained in shadow.

"Beyond that £2,000 of which I have spoken, and incidentally its owner, I have nothing whatsoever to offer to you. I am an indigent and worthless person. Even in my prosperous days, when I could look forward to a large estate, although it was often suggested to me, I never

considered myself justified in asking any lady to share--the prospective estate. I think now that the real reason was that I never cared sufficiently for any lady, since otherwise my selfishness would probably have overcome my scruples, as it does to-night. Benita, for I will call you so, if for the first and last time, I--I--love you.

"Listen now," he went on, dropping his measured manner, and speaking hurriedly, like a man with an earnest message and little time in which to deliver it, "it is an odd thing, an incomprehensible thing, but true, true--I fell in love with you the first time I saw your face. You remember, you stood there leaning over the bulwark when I came on board at Southampton, and as I walked up the gangway, I looked and my eyes met yours. Then I stopped, and that stout old lady who got off at Madeira bumped into me, and asked me to be good enough to make up my mind if I were going backward or forward. Do you remember?"

"Yes," she answered in a low voice.

"Which things are an allegory," he continued. "I felt it so at the time. Yes, I had half a mind to answer 'Backward' and give up my berth in this ship. Then I looked at you again, and something inside of me said 'Forward.' So I came up the rest of the gangway and took off my hat to you, a salutation I had no right to make, but which, I recall, you acknowledged."

He paused, then continued: "As it began, so it has gone on. It is always

like that, is it not? The beginning is everything, the end must follow. And now it has come out, as I was fully determined that it should not do half an hour ago, when suddenly you developed eyes in the back of your head, and--oh! dearest, I love you. No, please be quiet; I have not done. I have told you what I am, and really there isn't much more to say about me, for I have no particular vices except the worst of them all, idleness, and not the slightest trace of any virtue that I can discover. But I have a certain knowledge of the world acquired in a long course of shooting parties, and as a man of the world I will venture to give you a bit of advice. It is possible that to you my life and death affair is a mere matter of board-ship amusement. Yet it is possible also that you might take another view of the matter. In that case, as a friend and a man of the world, I entreat you--don't. Have nothing to do with me. Send me about my business; you will never regret it."

"Are you making fun, or is all this meant, Mr. Seymour?" asked Benita, still speaking beneath her breath, and looking straight before her.

"Meant? Of course it is meant. How can you ask?"

"Because I have always understood that on such occasions people wish to make the best of themselves."

"Quite so, but I never do what I ought, a fact for which I am grateful now come to think of it, since otherwise I should not be here to-night. I wish to make the worst of myself, the very worst, for whatever I am

not, at least I am honest. Now having told you that I am, or was half an hour ago, an idler, a good-for-nothing, prospectless failure, I ask you--if you care to hear any more?"

She half rose, and, glancing at him for the first time, saw his face contract itself and turn pale in the moonlight. It may be that the sight of it affected her, even to the extent of removing some adverse impression left by the bitter mocking of his self-blame. At any rate, Benita seemed to change her mind, and sat down again, saying:

"Go on, if you wish."

He bowed slightly, and said:

"I thank you. I have told you what I was half an hour ago; now, hoping that you will believe me, I will tell you what I am. I am a truly repentant man, one upon whom a new light has risen. I am not very old, and I think that underneath it all I have some ability. Opportunity may still come my way; if it does not, for your sake I will make the opportunity. I do not believe that you can ever find anyone who would love you better or care for you more tenderly. I desire to live for you in the future, more completely even than in the past I have lived for myself. I do not wish to influence you by personal appeals, but in fact I stand at the parting of the ways. If you will give yourself to me I feel as though I might still become a husband of whom you could be proud--if not, I write 'Finis' upon the tombstone of the possibilities

of Robert Seymour. I adore you. You are the one woman with whom I desire to pass my days; it is you who have always been lacking to my life. I ask you to be brave, to take the risk of marrying me, although I can see nothing but poverty ahead of us, for I am an adventurer."

"Don't speak like that," she said quickly. "We are all of us adventurers in this world, and I more than you. We have just to consider ourselves, not what we have or have not."

"So be it, Miss Clifford. Then I have nothing more to say; now it is for you to answer."

Just then the sound of the piano and the fiddle in the saloon ceased. One of the waltzes was over, and some of the dancers came upon deck to flirt or to cool themselves. One pair, engaged very obviously in the former occupation, stationed themselves so near to Robert and Benita that further conversation between them was impossible, and there proceeded to interchange the remarks common to such occasions.

For a good ten minutes did they stand thus, carrying on a mock quarrel as to a dance of which one of them was supposed to have been defrauded, until Robert Seymour, generally a very philosophical person, could have slain those innocent lovers. He felt, he knew not why, that his chances were slipping away from him; that sensation of something bad about to happen, of which Benita had spoken, spread from her to him. The suspense grew exasperating, terrible even, nor could it be ended. To ask her to

come elsewhere was under the circumstances not feasible, especially as he would also have been obliged to request the other pair to make way for them, and all this time, with a sinking of the heart, he felt that probably Benita was beating down any tenderness which she might feel towards him; that when her long-delayed answer did come the chances were it would be "No."

The piano began to play again in the saloon, and the young people, still squabbling archly, at length prepared to depart. Suddenly there was a stir upon the bridge, and against the tender sky Robert saw a man dash forward. Next instant the engine-room bell rang fiercely. He knew the signal--it was "Stop," followed at once by other ringings that meant "Full speed astern."

"I wonder what is up?" said the young man to the young woman.

Before the words had left his lips they knew. There was a sensation as though all the hull of the great ship had come to a complete standstill, while the top part of her continued to travel forward; followed by another sensation still more terrible and sickening in its nature--that of slipping over something, helplessly, heavily, as a man slips upon ice or a polished floor. Spars cracked, ropes flew in two with a noise as of pistol shots. Heavy objects rushed about the deck, travelling forwards all of them. Benita was hurled from her chair against Robert so that the two of them rolled into the scuppers. He was unhurt and picked himself up, but she lay still, and he saw that something had struck her upon the

head, for blood was running down her cheek. He lifted her, and, filled with black horror and despair--for he thought her gone--pressed his hand upon her heart. Thank God! it began to beat again--she still lived.

The music in the saloon had stopped, and for a little while there was silence. Then of an instant there arose the horrible clamour of shipwreck; wild-eyed people rushed to and fro aimlessly; here and there women and children shrieked; a clergyman fell upon his knees and began to pray.

This went on for a space, till presently the second officer appeared and, affecting an unconcerned air, called out that it was all right, the captain said no one was to be afraid. He added that they were not more than six miles from the shore, and that the ship would be beached in half an hour. Indeed, as he spoke the engines, which had been stopped, commenced to work again, and her head swung round in a wide circle, pointing to the land. Evidently they had passed over the rock and were once more in deep water, through which they travelled at a good speed but with a heavy list to starboard. The pumps got to work also with a monotonous, clanging beat, throwing out great columns of foaming water on to the oily sea. Men began to cut the covers off the boats, and to swing some of them outboard. Such were the things that went on about them.

With the senseless Benita clasped to his breast, the blood from her cut head running down his shoulder, Robert stood still awhile, thinking.

Then he made up his mind. As it chanced, she had a deck cabin, and thither he forced his way, carrying her tenderly and with patience through the distracted throng of passengers, for there were five hundred souls on board that ship. He reached the place to find that it was quite empty, her cabinmate having fled. Laying Benita upon the lower bunk, he lit the swinging candle. As soon as it burned up he searched for the lifebelts and by good fortune found two of them, one of which, not without great difficulty, he succeeded in fastening round her. Then he took a sponge and bathed her head with water. There was a great bruise upon her temple where the block or whatever it was had struck her, and the blood still flowed; but the wound was not very deep or extensive, nor, so far as he could discover, did the bone appear to be broken or driven in. He had good hope that she was only stunned, and would revive presently. Unable to do more for her, a thought struck him. On the floor of the cabin, thrown by the shock from the rack, lay her writing case. He opened it, and taking a piece of paper wrote these words hurriedly in pencil:

"You gave me no answer, and it is more than probable that I shall receive none in this world which one or both of us may be upon the verge of leaving. In the latter case we can settle the matter elsewhere--perhaps. In the former, should it be my lot to go and yours to stay, I hope that you will think kindly of me at times as of one who loved you truly. Should it be yours to go, then you will never read these words. Yet if to the dead is given knowledge, be assured that as you left me so you shall find me, yours and yours alone. Or perhaps we

both may live; I pray so.--S. R. S."

Folding up the paper, he undid a button of Benita's blouse and thrust it away there, knowing that thus she would certainly find it should she survive. Then he stepped out on to the deck to see what was happening. The vessel still steamed, but made slow progress; moreover, the list to starboard was now so pronounced that it was difficult to stand upright. On account of it nearly all the passengers were huddled together upon the port side, having instinctively taken refuge as far as possible above the water. A man with a white, distraught face staggered towards him, supporting himself by the bulwarks. It was the captain. For a moment he paused as though to think, holding to a stanchion. Robert Seymour saw his opportunity and addressed him.

"Forgive me," he said; "I do not like interfering with other people's business, but for reasons unconnected with myself I suggest to you that it would be wise to stop this ship and get out the boats. The sea is calm; if it is not left till too late there should be no difficulty in launching them."

The man stared at him absently, then said:

"They won't hold everybody, Mr. Seymour. I hope to beach her."

"At least they will hold some," he answered, "whereas----" And he pointed to the water, which by now was almost level with the deck.

"Perhaps you are right, Mr. Seymour. It doesn't matter to me, anyway. I am a ruined man; but the poor passengers--the poor passengers!" And he scrambled away fiercely towards the bridge like a wounded cat along the bough of a tree, whence in a few seconds Robert heard him shouting orders.

A minute or so afterwards the steamer stopped. Too late the captain had decided to sacrifice his ship and save those she carried. They were beginning to get out the boats. Now Robert returned to the cabin where Benita was lying senseless, and wrapped her up in a cloak and some blankets. Then, seeing the second lifebelt on the floor, by an afterthought he put it on, knowing that there was time to spare. Next he lifted Benita, and feeling sure that the rush would be for the starboard side, on which the boats were quite near the water, carried her, with difficulty, for the slope was steep, to the port-cutter, which he knew would be in the charge of a good man, the second officer, whom he had seen in command there at Sunday boat-drills.

Here, as he had anticipated, the crowd was small, since most people thought that it would not be possible to get this boat down safely to the water; or if their powers of reflection were gone, instinct told them so. That skilful seaman, the second officer, and his appointed crew, were already at work lowering the cutter from the davits.

"Now," he said, "women and children first."

A number rushed in, and Robert saw that the boat would soon be full.

"I am afraid," he said, "that I must count myself a woman as I carry one," and by a great effort, holding Benita with one arm, with the other he let himself down the falls and, assisted by a quartermaster, gained the boat in safety.

One or two other men scrambled after him.

"Push her off," said the officer; "she can hold no more," and the ropes were let go.

When they were about twelve feet from the ship's side, from which they thrust themselves clear with oars, there came a rush of people, disappointed of places in the starboard boats. A few of the boldest of these swarmed down the falls, others jumped and fell among them, or missed and dropped into the sea, or struck upon the sides of the boat and were killed. Still she reached the water upon an even keel, though now much overladen. The oars were got out, and they rowed round the bow of the great ship wallowing in her death-throes, their first idea being to make for the shore, which was not three miles away.

This brought them to the starboard side, where they saw a hideous scene. Hundreds of people seemed to be fighting for room, with the result that some of the boats were overturned, precipitating their occupants into

the water. Others hung by the prow or the stern, the ropes having jammed in the davits in the frantic haste and confusion, while from them human beings dropped one by one. Round others not yet launched a hellish struggle was in progress, the struggle of men, women, and children battling for their lives, in which the strong, mad with terror, showed no mercy to the weak.

From that mass of humanity, most of them about to perish, went up a babel of sounds which in its sum shaped itself to one prolonged scream, such as might proceed from a Titan in his agony. All this beneath a brooding, moonlit sky, and on a sea as smooth as glass. Upon the ship, which now lay upon her side, the siren still sent up its yells for succour, and some brave man continued to fire rockets, which rushed heavenwards and burst in showers of stars.

Robert remembered that the last rocket he had seen was fired at an evening fête for the amusement of the audience. The contrast struck him as dreadful. He wondered whether there were any power or infernal population that could be amused by a tragedy such as enacted itself before his eyes; how it came about also that such a tragedy was permitted by the merciful Strength in which mankind put their faith.

The vessel was turning over, compressed air or steam burst up the decks with loud reports; fragments of wreckage flew into the air. There the poor captain still clung to the rail of the bridge. Seymour could see his white face--the moonlight seemed to paint it with a ghastly smile.

The officer in command of their boat shouted to the crew to give way lest they should be sucked down with the steamer.

Look! Now she wallowed like a dying whale, the moonrays shone white upon her bottom, showing the jagged rent made in it by the rock on which she had struck, and now she was gone. Only a little cloud of smoke and steam remained to mark where the Zanzibar had been.