

III

HOW ROBERT CAME ASHORE

In place of the Zanzibar a great pit on the face of the ocean, in which the waters boiled and black objects appeared and disappeared.

"Sit still, for your lives' sake," said the officer in a quiet voice;
"the suck is coming."

In another minute it came, dragging them downward till the water trickled over the sides of the boat, and backward towards the pit. But before ever they reached it the deep had digested its prey, and, save for the great air-bubbles which burst about them and a mixed, unnatural swell, was calm again. For the moment they were safe.

"Passengers," said the officer, "I am going to put out to sea--at any rate, till daylight. We may meet a vessel there, and if we try to row ashore we shall certainly be swamped in the breakers."

No one objected; they seemed too stunned to speak, but Robert thought to himself that the man was wise. They began to move, but before they had gone a dozen yards something dark rose beside them. It was a piece of wreckage, and clinging to it a woman, who clasped a bundle to her breast. More, she was alive, for she began to cry to them to take her in.

"Save me and my child!" she cried. "For God's sake save me!"

Robert recognized the choking voice; it was that of a young married lady with whom he had been very friendly, who was going out with her baby to join her husband in Natal. He stretched out his hand and caught hold of her, whereon the officer said, heavily:

"The boat is already overladen. I must warn you that to take more aboard is not safe."

Thereon the passengers awoke from their stupor.

"Push her off," cried a voice; "she must take her chance." And there was a murmur of approval at the dreadful words.

"For Christ's sake--for Christ's sake!" wailed the drowning woman, who clung desperately to Robert's hand.

"If you try to pull her in, we will throw you overboard," said the voice again, and a knife was lifted as though to hack at his arm. Then the officer spoke once more.

"This lady cannot come into the boat unless someone goes out of it. I would myself, but it is my duty to stay. Is there any man here who will make place for her?"

But all the men there--seven of them, besides the crew--hung their heads and were silent.

"Give way," said the officer in the same heavy voice; "she will drop off presently."

While the words passed his lips Robert seemed to live a year. Here was an opportunity of atonement for his idle and luxurious life. An hour ago he would have taken it gladly, but now--now, with Benita senseless on his breast, and that answer still locked in her sleeping heart? Yet Benita would approve of such a death as this, and even if she loved him not in life, would learn to love his memory. In an instant his mind was made up, and he was speaking rapidly.

"Thompson," he said to the officer, "if I go, will you swear to take her in and her child?"

"Certainly, Mr. Seymour."

"Then lay to; I am going. If any of you live, tell this lady how I died," and he pointed to Benita, "and say I thought that she would wish it."

"She shall be told," said the officer again, "and saved, too, if I can do it."

"Hold Mrs. Jeffreys, then, till I am out of this. I'll leave my coat to cover her."

A sailor obeyed, and with difficulty Robert wrenched free his hand.

Very deliberately he pressed Benita to his breast and kissed her on the forehead, then let her gently slide on to the bottom of the boat. Next he slipped off his overcoat and slowly rolled himself over the gunwale into the sea.

"Now," he said, "pull Mrs. Jeffreys in."

"God bless you; you are a brave man," said Thompson. "I shall remember you if I live a hundred years."

But no one else said anything; perhaps they were all too much ashamed, even then.

"I have only done my duty," Seymour answered from the water. "How far is it to the shore?"

"About three miles," shouted Thompson. "But keep on that plank, or you will never live through the rollers. Good-bye."

"Good-bye," answered Robert.

Then the boat passed away from him and soon vanished in the misty face of the deep.

Resting on the plank which had saved the life of Mrs. Jeffreys, Robert Seymour looked about him and listened. Now and again he heard a faint, choking scream uttered by some drowning wretch, and a few hundred yards away caught sight of a black object which he thought might be a boat. If so, he reflected that it must be full. Moreover, he could not overtake it. No; his only chance was to make for the shore. He was a strong swimmer, and happily the water was almost as warm as milk. There seemed to be no reason why he should not reach it, supported as he was by a lifebelt, if the sharks would leave him alone, which they might, as there was plenty for them to feed on. The direction he knew well enough, for now in the great silence of the sea he could hear the boom of the mighty rollers breaking on the beach.

Ah, those rollers! He remembered how that very afternoon Benita and he had watched them through his field glass sprouting up against the cruel walls of rock, and wondered that when the ocean was so calm they had still such power. Now, should he live to reach them, he was doomed to match himself against that power. Well, the sooner he did so the sooner it would be over, one way or the other. This was in his favour: the tide had turned, and was flowing shorewards. Indeed, he had little to do but to rest upon his plank, which he placed crosswise beneath his breast, and steered himself with his feet. Even thus he made good progress,

nearly a mile an hour perhaps. He could have gone faster had he swum, but he was saving his strength.

It was a strange journey upon that silent sea beneath those silent stars, and strange thoughts came into Robert's soul. He wondered whether Benita would live and what she would say. Perhaps, however, she was already dead, and he would meet her presently. He wondered if he were doomed to die, and whether this sacrifice of his would be allowed to atone for his past errors. He hoped so, and put up a petition to that effect, for himself and for Benita, and for all the poor people who had gone before, hurled from their pleasure into the halls of Death.

So he floated on while the boom of the breakers grew ever nearer, companioned by his wild, fretful thoughts, till at length what he took to be a shark appeared quite close to him, and in the urgency of the moment he gave up wondering. It proved to be only a piece of wood, but later on a real shark did come, for he saw its back fin. However, this cruel creature was either gorged or timid, for when he splashed upon the water and shouted, it went away, to return no more.

Now, at length, Robert entered upon the deep hill and valley swell which preceded the field of the rollers. Suddenly he shot down a smooth slope, and without effort of his own found himself borne up an opposing steep, from the crest of which he had a view of white lines of foam, and beyond them of a dim and rocky shore. At one spot, a little to his right, the foam seemed thinner and the line of cliff to be broken, as though here

there was a cleft. For this cleft, then, he steered his plank, taking the swell obliquely, which by good fortune the set of the tide enabled him to do without any great exertion.

The valleys grew deeper, and the tops of the opposing ridges were crested with foam. He had entered the rollers, and the struggle for life began. Before him they rushed solemn and mighty. Viewed from some safe place even the sight of these combers is terrible, as any who have watched them from this coast, or from that of the Island of Ascension, can bear witness. What their aspect was to this shipwrecked man, supported by a single plank, may therefore be imagined, seen, as he saw them, in the mysterious moonlight and in utter loneliness. Yet his spirit rose to meet the dread emergency; if he were to die, he would die fighting. He had grown cold and tired, but now the chill and weariness left him; he felt warm and strong. From the crest of one of the high rollers he thought he saw that about half a mile away from him a little river ran down the centre of the gorge, and for the mouth of this river he laid his course.

At first all went well. He was borne up the seas; he slid down the seas in a lather of white foam. Presently the rise and fall grew steeper, and the foam began to break over his head. Robert could no longer guide himself; he must go as he was carried. Then in an instant he was carried into a hell of waters where, had it not been for his lifebelt and the plank, he must have been beaten down and have perished. As it was, now he was driven into the depths, and now he emerged upon their surface to

hear their seething hiss around him, and above it all a continuous boom as of great guns--the boom of the breaking seas.

The plank was almost twisted from his grasp, but he clung to it desperately, although its edges tore his arms. When the rollers broke over him he held his breath, and when he was tossed skywards on their curves, drew it again in quick, sweet gasps. Now he sat upon the very brow of one of them as a merman might; now he dived like a dolphin, and now, just as his senses were leaving him, his feet touched bottom. Another moment and Robert was being rolled along that bottom with a weight on him like the weight of mountains. The plank was rent from him, but his cork jacket brought him up. The backwash drew him with it into deeper water, where he lay helpless and despairing, for he no longer had any strength to struggle against his doom.

Then it was that there came a mighty roller, bigger than any that he had seen--such a one as on that coast the Kaffirs call "a father of waves." It caught him in the embrace of its vast green curve. It bore him forward as though he were but a straw, far forward over the stretch of cruel rocks. It broke in thunder, dashing him again upon the stones and sand of the little river bar, rolling him along with its resistless might, till even that might was exhausted, and its foam began to return seawards, sucking him with it.

Robert's mind was almost gone, but enough of it remained to tell him that if once more he was dragged into the deep water he must be lost. As

the current haled him along he gripped at the bottom with his hands, and by the mercy of Heaven they closed on something. It may have been a tree-stump embedded there, or a rock--he never knew. At least, it was firm, and to it he hung despairingly. Would that rush never cease? His lungs were bursting; he must let go! Oh! the foam was thinning; his head was above it now; now it had departed, leaving him like a stranded fish upon the shingle. For half a minute or more he lay there gasping, then looked behind him to see another comber approaching through the gloom. He struggled to his feet, fell, rose again, and ran, or rather, staggered forward with that tigerish water hissing at his heels. Forward, still forward, till he was beyond its reach--yes, on dry sand. Then his vital forces failed him; one of his legs gave way, and, bleeding from a hundred hurts, he fell heavily onto his face, and there was still.

The boat in which Benita lay, being so deep in the water, proved very hard to row against the tide, for the number of its passengers encumbered the oarsmen. After a while a light off land breeze sprang up, as here it often does towards morning; and the officer, Thompson, determined to risk hoisting the sail. Accordingly this was done--with some difficulty, for the mast had to be drawn out and shipped--although the women screamed as the weight of the air bent their frail craft over till the gunwale was almost level with the water.

"Anyone who moves shall be thrown overboard!" said the officer, who steered, after which they were quiet.

Now they made good progress seawards, but the anxieties of those who knew were very great, since the wind showed signs of rising, and if any swell should spring up that crowded cutter could scarcely hope to live. In fact, two hours later they were forced to lower the sail again and drift, waiting for the dawn. Mr. Thompson strove to cheer them, saying that now they were in the track of vessels, and if they could see none when the light came, he would run along the shore in the hope of finding a place free of breakers where they might land. If they did not inspire hope, at least his words calmed them, and they sat in heavy silence, watching the sky.

At length it grew grey, and then, with a sudden glory peculiar to South Africa, the great red sun arose and began to dispel the mist from the surface of the sea. Half an hour more and this was gone, and now the bright rays brought life back into their chilled frames as they stared at each other to see which of their company were still left alive. They even asked for food, and biscuit was given to them with water.

All this while Benita remained unconscious. Indeed, one callous fellow, who had been using her body as a footstool, said that she must be dead, and had better be thrown overboard, as it would lighten the boat.

"If you throw that lady into the sea, living or dead," said Mr. Thompson, with an ominous lift of his eye, "you go with her, Mr. Batten. Remember who brought her here and how he died."

Then Mr. Batten held his peace, while Thompson stood up and scanned the wide expanse of sea. Presently he whispered to a sailor near him, who also stood up, looked, and nodded.

"That will be the other Line's intermediate boat," he said, and the passengers, craning their heads round, saw far away to the right a streak of smoke upon the horizon. Orders were given, a little corner of sail was hoisted, with a white cloth of some sort tied above it, and the oars were got out. Once more the cutter moved forward, bearing to the left in the hope of intercepting the steamer.

She came on with terrible swiftness, and they who had miles of water to cover, dared hoist no more sail in that breeze. In half an hour she was nearly opposite to them, and they were still far away. A little more sail was let out, driving them through the water at as quick a rate as they could venture to go. The steamer was passing three miles or so away, and black despair took hold of them. Now the resourceful Thompson, without apologies, undressed, and removing the white shirt that he had worn at the dance, bade a sailor to tie it to an oar and wave it to and fro.

Still the steamer went on, until presently they heard her siren going, and saw that she was putting about.

"She has seen us," said Thompson. "Thank God, all of you, for there is

wind coming up. Pull down that sail; we shan't need it any more."

Half an hour later, with many precautions, for the wind he prophesied was already troubling the sea and sending little splashes of water over the stern of their deeply laden boat, they were fast to a line thrown from the deck of the three thousand ton steamer Castle, bound for Natal. Then, with a rattle, down came the accommodation ladder, and strong-armed men, standing on its grating, dragged them one by one from the death to which they had been so near. The last to be lifted up, except Thompson, was Benita, round whom it was necessary to reeve a rope.

"Any use?" asked the officer on the grating as he glanced at her quiet form.

"Can't say; I hope so," answered Thompson. "Call your doctor." And gently enough she was borne up the ship's side.

They wanted to cast off the boat, but Thompson remonstrated, and in the end that also was dragged to deck. Meanwhile the news had spread, and the awakened passengers of the Castle, clad in pyjamas, dressing-gowns, and even blankets, were crowding round the poor castaways or helping them to their cabins.

"I am a teetotaller," said second officer Thompson when he had made a brief report to the captain of the Castle, "but if anyone will stand

me a whiskey and soda I shall be obliged to him."