CHAPTER VIII

THE SUNK ROCKS AND THE SINGER

Morris arrived home in safety, and speedily settled the question of the drainage mill to the satisfaction of all concerned. But he did not return to Beaulieu. To begin with, although the rural authorities ceased to trouble them, his father was most urgent that he should stay and supervise the putting up of the new farm buildings, and wrote to him nearly every day to this effect. It occurred to his son that under the circumstances he might have come to look after the buildings himself; also, that perhaps he found the villa at Beaulieu more comfortable without his presence; a conjecture in which he was perfectly correct.

Upon the first point, also, letters from Mary soon enlightened him. It appeared that shortly after his departure Sir Jonah, in a violent fit of rage, brought on by drink and a remark of his wife's that had she married Colonel Monk she "would have been a happy woman," burst a small blood-vessel in his head, with the strange result that from a raging animal of a man he had been turned into an amiable and perfectly harmless imbecile. Under so trying a domestic blow, naturally, Mary explained, Colonel Monk felt it to be his duty to support and comfort his old friend to the best of his ability. "This," added Mary, "he does for about three hours every day. I believe, indeed, that a place is always laid for him at meals, while poor Sir Jonah, for whom I feel quite sorry, although he was such a horrid man, sits in an armchair and

smiles at him continually."

So Morris determined to take the advice which Mary gave him very plainly, and abandoned all idea of returning to Beaulieu, at any rate, on this side of Christmas. His plans settled, he went to work with a will, and was soon deeply absorbed in the manufacture of experimental receivers made from the new substance. So completely, indeed, did these possess his mind that, as Mary at last complained, his letters to her might with equal fitness have been addressed to an electrical journal, since from them even diagrams were not lacking.

So things went on until the event occurred which was destined profoundly and mysteriously to affect the lives of Morris and his affianced wife. That event was the shipwreck of the steam tramp, Trondhjem, upon the well-known Sunk Rocks outside the Sands which run parallel to the coast at a distance of about five knots from the Monksland cliff. In this year of our story, about the middle of November, the weather set in very mild and misty. It was the third of these "roky" nights, and the sea-fog poured along the land like vapour from an opened jar of chemicals. Morris was experimenting at the forge in his workshop very late--or, rather early, for it was near to two o'clock in the morning--when of a sudden through the open window, rising from the quiet sea beneath, he heard the rattle of oars in rowlocks. Wondering what a boat could be doing so near inshore at a season when there was no night fishing, he went to the window to listen. Presently he caught the sound of voices shouting in a tongue with which he was unacquainted, followed by another

sound, that of a boat being beached upon the shingle immediately below the Abbey. Now guessing that something unusual must have happened, Morris took his hat and coat, and, unlocking the Abbot's door, lit a lantern, and descended the cement steps to the beach. Here he found himself in the midst of ten or twelve men, most of them tall and bearded, who were gathered about a ship's boat which they had dragged up high and dry. One of these men, who from his uniform he judged to be the captain, approached and addressed him in a language that he did not understand, but imagined must be Danish or Norwegian.

Morris shook his head to convey the blankness of his ignorance, whereupon other men addressed him, also in northern tongues. Then, as he still shook his head, a lad of about nineteen came forward and spoke in broken and barbarous French.

"Naufrage la bas," he said; "bateau a vapeur, naufrage sur les rochers--brouillard. Nouse echappe."

"Tous?" asked Morris.

The young man shrugged his shoulders as though he were doubtful on the point, then added, pointing to the boat:

"Homme beaucoup blesse, pasteur anglais."

Morris went to the cutter, and, holding up the lantern, looked down, to

find an oldish man with sharp features, dark eyes, and grizzled beard, lying under a tarpaulin in the bottom of the boat. He was clothed only in a dressing gown and a blood-stained nightshirt, groaning and semi-unconscious.

"Jambe casse, beaucoup mal casse," explained the French scholar.

"Apportez-le vite apres moi," said Morris. This order having been translated by the youth, several stalwart sailors lifted up the injured man, and, placing the tarpaulin beneath him, took hold of it by the sides and corners. Then, following Morris, they bore him as gently as they could up the steps into the Abbey to a large bedroom upon the first floor, where they laid him upon the bed.

Meanwhile, by the industrious ringing of bells as they went, Morris had succeeded in rousing a groom, a page-boy, and the cook. The first of these he sent off post haste for Dr. Charters. Next, having directed the cook to give the foreign sailormen some food and beer, he told the page-boy to conduct them to the Sailors' Home, a place of refuge provided, as is common upon this stormy coast, for the accommodation of distressed and shipwrecked mariners. As he could extract nothing further, it seemed useless to detain them at the Abbey. Then, pending the arrival of the doctor, with the assistance of the old housekeeper, he set to work to examine the patient. This did not take long, for his injuries were obvious. The right thigh was broken and badly bruised, and he bled from a contusion upon the forehead. This wound upon his head

seemed also to have affected his brain; at any rate, he was unable to speak coherently or to do more than mutter something about "shipwreck" and "steamer Trondhjem," and to ask for water.

Thinking that at least it could do no harm, Morris gave him a cup of soup, which had been hastily prepared. Just as the patient finished drinking it, which he did eagerly, the doctor arrived, and after a swift examination administered some anaesthetic, and got to work to set the broken limb.

"It's a bad smash--very bad," he explained to Morris; "something must have fallen on him, I think. If it had been an inch or two higher, he'd have lost his leg, or his life, or both, as perhaps he will now. At the best it means a couple of months or so on his back. No, I think the cut on his head isn't serious, although it has knocked him silly for a while."

At length the horrid work was done, and the doctor, who had to return to a confinement case in the village, departed. Before he went he told Morris that he hoped to be back by five o'clock. He promised also that before his return he would call in at the Sailor's Home to see that the crew were comfortable, and discover what he could of the details of the catastrophe. Meanwhile for his part, Morris undertook to watch in the sick-room.

For nearly three hours, while the drug retained his grip of him, the

patient remained comatose. All this while Morris sat at his bedside wondering who he might be, and what curious circumstance could have brought him into the company of these rough Northmen sailors. To his profession he had a clue, although no sure one, for round his neck the man wore a silver cross suspended by a chain. This suggested that he might be a clergyman, and went far to confirm the broken talk of the French-speaking sailor. Clearly, also, he was a person of some breeding and position, the refinement of his face and the delicacy of his hands showed as much. While Morris was watching and wondering, suddenly the man awoke, and began to talk in a confused fashion.

"Where am I?" he asked.

"At Monksland," answered Morris.

"That's all right, that's where I should be, but the ship, the ship"--then a pause and a cry: "Stella, Stella!"

Morris pricked his ears. "Where is Stella?" he asked.

"On the rocks. She struck, then darkness, all darkness. Stella, come here, Stella!"

A memory awoke in the mind of Morris, and he leant over the patient, who again had sunk into delirium.

"Do you mean Stella Fregelius?" he asked.

The man turned his flushed face and opened his dark eyes.

"Of course, Stella Fregelius--who else? There is only one Stella," and again he became incoherent.

For a while Morris plied him with further questions; but as he could obtain no coherent answer, he gave him his medicine and left him quiet. Then for another half-hour or so he sat and watched, while a certain theory took shape in his mind. This gentleman must be the new rector. It seemed as though, probably accompanied by his daughter, he had taken passage in a Danish tramp boat bound for Northwold, which had touched at some Northumbrian port. Morris knew that the incoming clergyman had a daughter, for, now that he thought of it, he had heard Mr. Tomley mention the fact at the dinner-party on the night when he became engaged. Yes, and certainly she was named Stella. But there was no woman among those who had come to land, and he understood the injured man to suggest that his daughter had been left upon the steamer which was said to have gone ashore upon some rocks; or, perhaps, upon the Sunk Rocks themselves.

Now, the only rocks within twenty miles of them were these famous Sunk Rocks, about six knots away. Even within his own lifetime four vessels had been lost there, either because they had missed, or mistaken, the lightship signal further out to sea, as sometimes happened in a fog such

as prevailed this night, or through false reckonings. The fate of all these vessels had been identical; they had struck upon the reef, rebounded or slid off, and foundered in deep water. Probably in this case the same thing had happened. At least, the facts, so far as he knew them, pointed to that conclusion. Evidently the escape of the crew had been very hurried, for they had saved nothing. He judged also that the clergyman, Mr. Fregelius, having rushed on deck, had been injured by the fall of some spar or block consequent upon the violence of the impact of the vessel upon the reef, and in this hurt condition had been thrown into the boat by the sailors.

Then where was the daughter Stella? Was she killed in the same fashion or drowned? Probably one or the other. But there was a third bare possibility, which did no credit to the crew, that she had been forgotten in the panic and hurry, and left behind on the sinking ship.

At first Morris thought of rousing the captain of the lifeboat. On reflection, however, he abandoned this idea, for really what had he to go on beyond the scanty and disjointed ravings of a delirious man? Very possibly the girl Stella was not upon the ship at all. Probably, also, hours ago that vessel had vanished from the eyes of men for ever. To send out the lifeboat upon such a wild-goose chase would be to turn himself into a laughing-stock.

Still something drew his thoughts to that hidden line of reef, and the ship which might still be hanging on it, and the woman who might still

be living in the ship.

It was a painful vision from which he could not free his mind.

Then there came to him an idea. Why should he not go to the Sunk Rocks and look? There was a light breeze off land, and with the help of the page-boy, who was sitting up, as the tide was nearing its full he could manage to launch his small sailing-boat, which by good fortune was still berthed near the beach steps. It was a curious chance that this should be so, seeing that in most seasons she would have been by now removed to the shed a mile away, to be out of reach of possible damage from the furious winter gales. As it happened, however, the weather remaining so open, this had not been done. Further, the codlings having begun to run in unusual numbers, as is common upon this coast in late autumn, Morris that very morning had taken the boat out to fish for them, an amusement which he proposed to resume on the morrow in the hope of better sport. Therefore the boat had her sails on board, and was in every way ready for sea.

Why should he not go? For one reason only that he could suggest. There was a certain amount of risk in sailing about the Sunk Rocks in a fog, even for a tiny craft like his, for here the currents were very sharp; also, in many places the points of the rocks were only just beneath the surface of the water. But he knew the dangerous places well enough if he could see them, as he ought to be able to do, for the dawn should break before he arrived. And, after all, what was a risk more or less in life?

He would go. He felt impelled--strangely impelled--to go, though of course it was all nonsense, and probably he would be back by nine o'clock, having seen nothing at all.

By this time the injured Mr. Fregelius had sunk into sleep or stupor, doubtless beneath the influence of the second draught which he had administered to him in obedience to the doctor's orders. On his account, therefore, Morris had no anxiety, since the cook, a steady, middle-aged woman, could watch by him for the present.

He called her and gave her instructions, bidding her tell the doctor when he came that he had gone to see if he could make out anything more about the wreck, and that he would be back soon. Then, ordering the page-boy, a stout lad, to accompany him, he descended the steps, and together, with some difficulty, they succeeded in launching the boat. Now for a moment Morris hesitated, wondering whether he should take the young man with him; but remembering that this journey was not without its dangers, finally he decided to go alone.

"I am just going to have a sail round, Thomas, to look if I can make out anything about that ship."

"Yes, sir," remarked Thomas, doubtfully. "But it is rather a queer time to hunt for her, and in this sea-haze too, especially round the Sunk Rocks. Shall I leave the lunch basket in the locker, sir, or take it up to the house?"

"Leave it; it wasn't touched to-day, and I might be glad of some breakfast," Morris answered. Then, having hoisted his sail, he sat himself in the stern, with the tiller in one hand and the sheet in the other. Instantly the water began to lap gently against the bow, and in another minute he glided away from the sight of the doubting Thomas, vanishing like some sea-ghost into the haze and that chill darkness which precedes the dawn.

It was very dark, and the mist was very damp, and the wind, what there was of it, very cold, especially as in his hurry he had forgotten to bring a thick ulster, and had nothing but a covert coat and a thin oil-skin to wear. Moreover, he could not see in the least where he was going, or do more than lay his course for the Sunk Rocks by means of the boat's compass, which he consulted from time to time by the help of a bull's-eye lantern.

This went on for nearly an hour, by the end of which Morris began to wonder why he had started upon such a fool's errand. Also, he was growing alarmed. He knew that by now he should be in the neighbourhood of the reef, and fancied, indeed, that he could hear the water lapping against its rocks. Accordingly, as this reef was ill company in the dark, Morris hauled down his sail, and in case he should have reached the shallows, threw out his little anchor, which was attached to six fathoms of chain. At first it swung loose, but four or five minutes later, the boat having been carried onward into fleeter water by the

swift current that was one of the terrors of the Sunk Rocks, it touched bottom, dragged a little, and held fast.

Morris gave a sigh of relief, for that blind journey among unknown dangers was neither safe nor pleasant. Now, at least, in this quiet weather he could lie where he was till light came, praying that a wind might not come first. Already the cold November dawn was breaking in the east; he was able to see the reflection of it upon the fog, and the surface of the water, black and oily-looking, became visible as it swept past the sides of his boat. Now, too, he was sure that the rocks must be close at hand, for he could hear the running tide distinctly as it washed against them and through the dense growth of seaweed that clung to their crests and ridges.

Presently, too, he heard something else, which at first caused him to rub his eyes in the belief that he must have fallen asleep and dreamt; nothing less, indeed, than the sound of a woman's voice. He began to reason with himself. What was there strange in this? He was told, or had inferred, that a woman had been left upon a ship. Doubtless this was she, upon some rock or raft, perhaps. Only then she would have been crying for help, and this voice was singing, and in a strange tongue, more sweetly than he had heard woman sing before.

It was incredible, it was impossible. What woman would sing in a winter daybreak upon the Sunk Rocks--sing like the siren of old fable? Yet, there, quite close to him, over the quiet sea rose the song, strong,

clear, and thrilling. Once it ceased, then began again in a deeper, more triumphant note, such as a Valkyrie might have sung as she led some Norn-doomed host to their last battle.

Morris sat and listened with parted lips and eyes staring at the fleecy mist. He did not move or call out, because he was certain that he must be the victim of some hallucination, bred of fog, or of fatigue, or of cold; and, as it was very strange and moving, he had no desire to break in upon its charm.

So there he sat while the triumphant, splendid song rolled and thrilled above him, and by degrees the grey light of morning grew to right and left. To right and left it grew, but, strangely enough, although he never noted it at the time, he and his boat lay steeped in shadow. Then of a sudden there was a change.

A puff of wind from the north seemed to catch the fog and roll it up like a curtain, so that instantly all the sea became visible, broken here and there by round-headed, weed-draped rocks. Out of the east also poured a flood of light from the huge ball of the rising sun, and now it was that Morris learned why the gloom had been so thick about him, for his boat lay anchored full in the shadow of the lost ship Trondhjem. There, not thirty yards away, rose her great prow; the cutwater, which stood up almost clear, showing that she had forced herself on to a ridge of rock. There, too, poised at the extreme point of the sloping forecastle, and supporting herself with one hand by a wire rope that ran

thence to the foremast, was the woman to whose siren-like song he had been listening.

At that distance he could see little of her face; but the new-wakened wind blew the long dark hair about her head, while round her, falling almost to her naked feet, was wrapped a full red cloak. Had Morris wished to draw the picture of a Viking's daughter guiding her father's ship into the fray, there, down to the red cloak, bare feet, and flying tresses, stood its perfect model.

The wild scene gripped his heart. Whoever saw the like of it? This girl who sang in the teeth of death, the desolate grey face of ocean, the brown and hungry rocks, the huge, abandoned ship, and over all the angry rays of a winter sunrise.

Thus, out of the darkness of the winter night, out of the bewildering white mists of the morning, did this woman arise upon his sight, this strange new star begin to shine upon his life and direct his destiny.

At the moment that he saw her she seemed to see him. At any rate, she ceased her ringing, defiant song, and, leaning over the netting rail, stared downwards.

Morris began to haul at his anchor; but, though he was a strong man, at first he could not lift it. Just as he was thinking of slipping the cable, however, the little flukes came loose from the sand or weeds in

which they were embedded, and with toil and trouble he got it shipped. Then he took a pair of sculls and rowed until he was nearly under the prow of the Trondhjem. It was he, too, who spoke first.

"You must come to me," he called.

"Yes," the woman answered, leaning over the rail; "I will come, but how? Shall I jump into the water?"

"No," he said, "it is too dangerous. You might strike against a rock or be taken by the current. The companion ladder seems to be down on the starboard side. Go aft to it, I will row round the ship and meet you there."

She nodded her head, and Morris started on his journey. It proved perilous. To begin with, there were rocks all about. Also, here the tide or the current, or both, ran with the speed of a mill-race, so that in places the sea bubbled and swirled like a boiling kettle. However skilled and strong he might be, it was hard for one man to deal with such difficulties and escape disaster. Still following the port side of the ship, since owing to the presence of certain rocks he dared not attempt the direct starboard passage, he came at last to her stern. Then he saw how imminent was the danger, for the poop of the vessel, which seemed to be of about a thousand tons burden, was awash and water-logged, but rolling and lifting beneath the pressure of the tide as it drew on to flood.

To Morris, who had lived all his life by the sea, and understood such matters, it was plain that presently she would float, or be torn off the point of the rock on which she hung, broken-backed, and sink in the hundred-fathom-deep water which lay beyond the reef. There was no time to spare, and he laboured at his oars fiercely, till at length, partly by skill and partly by good fortune, he reached the companion ladder and fastened to it with a boat-hook.

Now no woman was to be seen; she had vanished. Morris called and called, but could get no answer, while the great dead carcass of the ship rolled and laboured above, its towering mass of iron threatening to fall and crush him and his tiny craft to nothingness. He shouted and shouted again; then in despair lashed his boat to the companion, and ran up the ladder.

Where could she have gone? He hurried forward along the heaving, jerking deck to the main hatchway. Here he hesitated for a moment; then, knowing that, if anywhere, she must be below, set his teeth and descended. The saloon was a foot deep in water, which washed from side to side with a heavy, sickening splash, and there, carrying a bag in one hand, holding up her garments with the other, and wading towards him from the dry upper part of the cabin, at last he found the lady whom he sought.

"Be quick!" he shouted; "for God's sake, be quick! The ship is coming off the rock."

She splashed towards him; now he had her by the hand; now they were on the deck, and now he was dragging her after him down the companion ladder. They reached the boat, and just as the ship gave a great roll towards them, Morris seized the oars and rowed like a madman.

"Help me!" he gasped; "the current is against us." And, sitting opposite to him, she placed her hands upon his hands, pressing forward as he pulled. Her slight strength made a difference, and the boat forged ahead--thirty, forty, seventy yards--till they reached a rock to which, exhausted, he grappled with a hook, bidding her hold on to the floating seaweed. Thus they rested for thirty seconds, perhaps, when she spoke for the first time:

"Look!" she said.

As she spoke the steamer slid and lifted off the reef. For a few moments she wallowed; then suddenly her stern settled, her prow rose slowly in the air till it stood up straight, fifty or sixty feet of it. Then, with a majestic, but hideous rush, down went the Trondhjem and vanished for ever.

All round about her the sea boiled and foamed, while in the great hollow which she made on the face of the waters black lumps of wreckage appeared and disappeared.

"Tight! hold tight!" he cried, "or she will suck us after her."

Suck she did, till the water poured over the gunwale. Then, the worst passed, and the boat rose again. The foam bubbles burst or floated away in little snowy heaps; the sea resumed its level, and, save for the floating debris, became as it had been for thousands of years before the lost Trondhjem rushed downward to its depths.

Now, for the first time, knowing the immediate peril past, Morris looked at the face of his companion. It was a fine face, and beautiful in its way. Dark eyes, very large and perfect, whereof the pupils seemed to expand and contract in answer to every impulse of the thoughts within. Above the eyes long curving lashes and delicately pencilled, arched eyebrows, and above them again a forehead low and broad. The chin rounded; the lips full, rich, and sensitive; the complexion of a clear and beautiful pallor; the ears tiny; the hands delicate; the figure slim, of medium height, and alive with grace; the general effect most uncommon, and, without being lovely, breathing a curious power and personality.

Such was the woman whom he had saved from death.

"Oh, how splendid!" she said in her deep voice, and clasping her hands. "What a death! For ship or man, what a death! And after it the great calm sea, taking and ready to take for ever."

"Thank Heaven that it did not take you," answered Morris wrathfully.

"Why?" she answered.

"Because you are still alive, who by now would have been dead."

"It seems that it was not fated this time," she answered, adding: "The next it may be different."

"Yes," he said reflectively; "the next it may be different, Miss Fregelius."

She started. "How do you know my name?" she asked.

"From your father's lips. He is ashore at my house. The sailors must have seen the light in my workshop and steered for it."

"My father?" she gasped. "He is still alive? But, oh, how is that possible? He would never have left me."

"Yes, he lives, but with a broken thigh and his head cut open. He was brought ashore senseless, so you need not be ashamed of him. Those sailors are the cowards."

She sighed, as though in deep relief. "I am very glad. I had made up my mind that he must be dead, for of course I knew that he would never have

left me otherwise. It did not occur to me that he might be carried away senseless. Is he--" and she paused, then added: "tell me the worst--quick."

"No; the doctor thinks in no danger at present; only a break of the thigh and a scalp wound. Of course, he could not help himself, for he can have known no more than a corpse of what was passing," he went on. "It is those sailors who are to blame--for leaving you on the ship, I mean."

She shrugged her shoulders contemptuously.

"The sailors! From such rough men one does not expect much. They had little time, and thought of themselves, not of a passenger, whom they had scarcely seen. Thank God they did not leave my father behind also."

"You do not thank God for yourself," said Morris curiously, as he prepared to hoist the sail, for his mind harked back to his old wonderment.

"Yes, I do, but it was not His will that I should die last night. I have told you that it was not fated," she answered.

"Quite so. That is evident now; but were I in your case this really remarkable escape would make me wonder what is fated."

"Yes, it does a little; but not too much, for you see I shall learn in time. You might as well wonder how it happened that you arrived to save me, and to what end."

Morris hesitated, for this was a new view of the case, before he answered.

"That your life should be saved, I suppose."

"And why should it happen that your boat should come to save me?"

"I don't know; chance, I suppose."

"Neither do I; but I don't believe in chance. Everything has its meaning and purpose."

"Only one so seldom finds it out. Life is too short, I suppose," replied Morris.

By now the sail was up, the boat was drawing ahead, and he was seated at her side holding the tiller.

"Why did you go down into the saloon, Miss Fregelius?" he asked presently.

She glanced at herself, and now, for the first time, he noticed that she

wore a dress beneath her red cloak, and that there were slippers on her feet, which had been bare.

"I could not come into the boat as I was," she explained, dropping her eyes. "The costume which is good enough to be drowned in is not fitted for company. My cabin was well forward, and I guessed that by wading I could reach it. Also, I had some trinkets and one or two books I did not wish to lose," and she nodded at the hand-bag which she had thrown into the boat.

Morris smiled. "It is very nice of you to pay so much respect to appearances," he said; "but I suppose you forgot that the vessel might come off the rocks at any moment and crush me, who was waiting."

"Oh, no," she answered; "I thought of it. I have always been accustomed to the sea, and know about such things."

"And still you went for your dress and your trinkets?"

"Yes, because I was certain that it wouldn't happen and that no harm would come to either of us by waiting a few minutes."

"Indeed, and who told you that?"

"I don't know, but from the moment that I saw you in the boat I was certain that the danger was done with--at least, the immediate danger,"

she added.