NO MAN'S ISLAND

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"THEY RESCUED WHAT THEY COULD." See page 152.

NO MAN'S ISLAND

BY
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COMPLETE LIST OF STORIES

ADVENTURES OF DICK TREVANION, THE
ADVENTURES OF HARRY ROCHESTER, THE
A GENTLEMAN AT ARMS
A HERO OF LIEGE
AIR PATROL, THE
AIR SCOUT, THE

BARCLAY OF THE GUIDES
BLUE RAIDER, THE
BOYS OF THE LIGHT BRIGADE
BRIGHT IDEAS
BROWN OF MOUKDEN
BURTON OF THE FLYING CORPS
CARRY ON
CRUISE OF THE GYRO-CAR, THE
FIGHTING WITH FRENCH
FLYING BOAT, THE
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KING OF THE AIR
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LONG TRAIL, THE
LORD OF THE SEAS
MOTOR SCOUT, THE
NO MAN'S ISLAND
OLD MAN OF THE MOUNTAIN, THE
ONE OF CLIVE'S HEROES
PALM TREE ISLAND
ROB THE RANGER
ROUND THE WORLD IN SEVEN DAYS
SAMBA
SETTLERS AND SCOUTS
SULTAN JIM
SWIFT AND SURE
THROUGH THE ENEMY'S LINES
TOM BURNABY
TOM WILLOUGHBY'S SCOUTS
WITH DRAKE ON THE SPANISH MAIN
WITH HAIG ON THE SOMME

CONTENTS

CHAP.

I. NO MAN'S ISLAND

II. BELOW THE BELT

III. PRATTLE

IV. THE FACE IN THE THICKET

V. THE GAME BEGINS

VI. A SCRAP OF PAPER

VII. TIN-TACKS

VIII. PIN-PRICKS

IX. REPRISALS

X. A SOFT ANSWER

XI. INFORMATION RECEIVED

XII. QUEER FISH

XIII. FIRE!

XIV. A CIRCULAR TOUR

XV. UNDERGROUND

XVI. WATERMARKS

XVII. THE TOPMOST ROOM

XVIII. ZERO

XIX. THE PRISONER

XX. THE PACE QUICKENS

XXI. TRAPPED

XXII. A PARLEY

XXIII. "VI ET ARMIS"

XXIV. A LEVY EN MASSE

XXV. SQUARING ACCOUNTS

EPILOGUE

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

"THEY RESCUED WHAT THEY COULD" (see p. 152) . . . *Frontispiece in Colour*

"'CLEAR UP ALL THIS DISGUSTING LITTER'"

"THE FOREIGNER CHARGED UPON HIM LIKE AN INFURIATED BULL"

"THE OTHER WAS DIVING INTO THE STREAM"

"'GOT A PUNCTURE, OLD MAN?'"

"THEY SHINNED UP A SMALL TREE"

"HALF A MINUTE LATER THE CAR RAN PAST"

"PRATT THREW THE INTRUDER HEAVILY TO THE GROUND"

"'ZE TOWER? NO, IT IS RUIN, FALL TO PIECES'"

"THEY LIFTED THE BUNDLES OF GEAR, AND CARRIED THEM INTO THE HUT"

"'THE BOTTOM'S ONLY ABOUT FIVE FEET DEEP'"

"THEY SAW A SHORT, STOUT MAN DRAWING SHEETS OF PAPER FROM THE OPENED PACKAGE"

"BETWEEN THEM THE TWO BOYS ASSISTED THE MOTHER"

"HE STRODE UP AND DOWN, HIS LARGE BONY HANDS CLASPED BEHIND HIM"

"HE REMAINED FOR AN INSTANT IN HIS BENT POSITION, MOTIONLESS"

"RUSH SWIFTLY ROPED HIS ARMS AND LEGS TOGETHER"

"HE STAGGERED BACKWARD, AND THE PISTOL WAS KNOCKED FROM HIS HAND"

"'SQUEEZE INTO THE BOAT'"

"THE FARMER WAS UPPERMOST"

CHAPTER I

NO MAN'S ISLAND

One hot August afternoon, a motor-boat, with a little dinghy in tow, was thrashing its way up a narrow, winding river in Southern Wessex. The stream, swollen by the drainage of overnight rain from the high moors that loomed in the hazy blue distance, was running riotously, casting buffets of spray across the bows of the little craft, and tossing like a cork the dinghy astern. On either side a dense entanglement of shrubs, bushes, and saplings overhung the water's edge, forming a sort of rampart or outwork for the taller trees behind.

The occupants of the boat were three. Amidships, its owner, Phil Warrender, was dividing his attention between the engine and the tiller. Warrender was tall, lithe, swarthy, with crisp black hair which seemed to lift his cap as an irksome incubus. A little abaft of him sat Jack Armstrong, bent forward over an Ordnance map: he had the lean, tight-skinned features, spare frame, and hard muscles of the athlete, and his hay-coloured hair was cropped as close as a prize-fighter's. In the bows, on the scrap of deck, Percy Pratt, facing the others, squatted cross-legged like an Oriental cobbler, and dreamily twanged a banjo. He was shorter and of stouter build than his companions, with a round, chubby face and brown curly hair clustering close to his poll, and caressing the edge of his cap like the tendrils of a creeper. All three boys were in their eighteenth year, and wore the

flannels, caps, and blazers of their school Eleven.

"We ought to be nearing this island," remarked Armstrong, looking up from his map. "I say, Pratt, you've been here before: can't you remember something about it?"

Pratt thrummed his strings, smiled sweetly, and sang, in the head notes of a light tenor–

"The roses have made me remember
All that I tried to forget;
The past with its pain comes back again,
Filling my heart with—-

Sorry, old man, I've pitched it a bit too high. Lend me your ears while I modulate from G to E flat."

"Keep your Percy's Reliques for serenading the moon. You were here as a kid; aren't we nearly there?"

"'The past with its pain'–fact! It *was* pain. My old uncle could beat any beak at licking. He made a very pretty criss-cross pattern on me that day–all for pinching a peach! Frightful temper he had. My people said it was due to sunstroke on his travels. Jolly lot of good being a famous traveller, if it makes you a beast. He was more ratty every time he came home. I don't wonder my pater had a royal row with him, and hasn't been near the place since. Rough luck, to have to desert your ancestral dust-heap.

"I try, try to forget you,
But I only love you more."

"Isn't that the island? Away there to starboard?" Warrender interposed. "But

I thought you said we might camp there, my Percy?"

"True, sober Philip. We picnicked there in the days of yore."

"Well, we'd have to do a week's clearing before we camped there now. Look at it!"

Pratt swung lazily round on his elbow, and gazed over the starboard quarter towards the left bank. The river was parted by what was evidently an island. The channel between it and the left bank was very narrow, and almost impassable by reason of the low, overhanging branches, which formed a tunnel of foliage. Warrender steered across the broader channel towards the right bank, all three scanning the island intently as they coasted along.

"Shows how old Tempus fugit," said Pratt. "In the dim and distant ages

when I was a kid that island was a lawn; now it's a wilderness. Think what your beardless cheeks will be like in ten years' time, Armstrong. See what Nature will do unless you use the razor. The place seems quite changed somehow. But I'd never have believed trees could grow so fast. As we're not dicky birds, we certainly can't pitch our camp there. Drive on, old shover."

The island was, indeed, to all appearances, more densely wooded than the river banks. By the map scale it was about a third of a mile long, and at its widest part fully half as broad. Nowhere along its whole extent did they see a spot suitable for camping.

They ran past the island. The stream narrowed; the wooded character of the mainland banks was unchanged.

"We might as well be on the Congo," growled Armstrong. "Are you sure your uncle didn't bring back a bit of Africa in his carpet bag, Pratt, and plank it down here?"

"Let the great big world keep turning,
Never mind, if I've got you,"

hummed Pratt. "Turn your eyes three points a-starboard, Armstrong, and you'll see, peeping at you through the sylvan groves, the gables of my ancestors' eligible and beautifully situated riverside residence. It's pretty nearly a quarter-mile from the river, but that's a detail."

Warrender slowed down so that they might get a better view of the stately old house of which they caught glimpses through gaps in the woodland.

"You behold that ruined ivy-clad tower about a cable's length away from it," Pratt went on. "Tradition saith that one of my ancestors incarcerated there a foeman unworthy of his steel, and forgot to feed him."

"Well, I want my tea," said Armstrong. "We had next to no lunch, and I can't live on memories."

A sharp crack cut the air.

"Some one's shooting in the woods ahead," said Warrender. "Perhaps we'll catch sight of them, and get a direction."

"Why not make a polite inquiry of that woodland faun or satyr smoking a clay pipe yonder?" suggested Pratt, pointing with his banjo to the left bank.

On a tree-stump near the water's edge sat a thick-set man, square-faced, beetle-browed, blear-eyed, a cloth cap pushed back on his close-cropped bullet head, a red cloth tie knotted about his neck. He wore a rusty, much-rubbed velveteen jacket, corduroy breeches, and a pair of shabby leggings. Warrender slowed down until the boat just held its own against the current, and called–"Hi! can you tell us of a clear space where we can camp?"

The man looked suspiciously from one to another, chewing the stem of his pipe.

”Can’t,” said he, surlily.

”Surely there’s a stretch of turf somewhere?” Warrender persisted.

”Bain’t. Not hereabouts. Woods, from here to village up along.”

”Nothing back on the island?”

The man half closed his eyes, and again suspicion lurked in the glance he gave the speaker.

”No. No Man’s Island be nought but furze and thicket. Nothing hereabouts. Better go on and doss at the Ferry Inn.”

Then, however, he leered, barely recovering his pipe as it slipped from between his discoloured teeth. ”Ay, I were forgetting,” he said with a chuckle. ”There be a patch farther up. Ay, that might suit ’ee. A party camped there last week. Ay, try en.”

He chuckled again. Warrender opened the throttle, and when the boat had run a few yards up a guffaw, quickly stifled, sounded astern.

”Pleasant fellow,” remarked Armstrong.

”When you are near, the dullest day seems bright;
Doubts disappear, my load of care grows light,”

warbled Pratt. ”But he didn’t say which bank it’s on.”

”We can’t miss it,” said Warrender,–”unless he was pulling our leg.”

Within three minutes, however, they found that the man had not misled them. There was disclosed, on the right bank, a considerable stretch of smooth green sward, affording ample space for their bell-tent and the simple impedimenta of their camp. Warrender ran the boat in, and hitched it to a sapling; then the three began to transfer their equipment to the shore. Besides their tent, they had a Primus stove, a kettle, a couple of saucepans, pots, cups and plates of enamel, pewter forks and, stainless knives, cases of provisions, three sleeping-bags, three folding stools, and other oddments.

While Warrender and Armstrong were stretching and pegging out the tent, Pratt started the stove, filled the kettle from the river, and assembled such utensils as they needed for their tea. These operations were punctuated by renewed sounds of shooting, which were drawing nearer through the woods that skirted the clearing.

”I say, you chaps,” cried Pratt, ”I wonder if I talked nicely, if I could coax out of them something gamey for supper to-night?”

”Wouldn’t you like to sing for your supper, like little Tommy Tucker?” said Armstrong.

”Excellent idea! As you know, I’ve got a select and extensive repertoire, and–hallo! Here’s my little dog Bingo.”

A retriever came trotting out of the wood, stopped in the middle of the clearing, and gazed for a moment inquiringly at the tent, just erected; then turned tail and trotted back.

”A very gentlemanly dog,” said Pratt. ”No loud discordant bark, no inquisitive snuffling; evidence of good breeding and a kind master.”

”Hi, there!” called a loud voice. ”What are you doing on my land? Who the deuce gave you permission to camp?”

A stout, florid, white-whiskered gentleman of some sixty years, wearing a loose shooting costume, and carrying a shot-gun under his arm, hurried across the clearing, the retriever at his heels.

”I’m sorry, sir,” said Warrender, politely. ”We’ve come up the river, and this is the first suitable place we’ve found. If we had known—-”

”Known!” interrupted the stranger. ”You knew it wasn’t common land–public property. If you didn’t know, any one about here would have told you.”

”Just so, sir. But we understood that a party had camped here a short while ago, and—-”

”You understood, boy? And where did you get your information?”

”From a gamekeeper sort of man a little below on the other bank. He—-”

”That’ll do,” snapped the sportsman. ”Take down that tent. Clear up all this disgusting litter, and be off. The place reeks with paraffin. Look alive, now.”

[image]

”’CLEAR UP ALL THIS DISGUSTING LITTER.’”

In silence Warrender and Armstrong began to loosen the tent guys, while Pratt put out the stove and started to carry the properties down to the boat. He alone of the three showed no sign of feeling; his friends sometimes said that he was perennially happy because he was fat, not, as he himself explained, because he had music in his soul. Warrender’s mouth had hardened, his face grown pale–sure indications of wrath. Armstrong, on the contrary, had flushed over the cheek-bones, and expended his anger in muscular energy, heaving unaided the tent to his back, and carrying it, the pole, guys, and pegs, with the ease of a coal-porter. The landowner stood sternly on guard until the place was cleared.

The boat moved off.

”Dashed old curmudgeon!” growled Armstrong.

”He and my uncle Ambrose would make a pretty pair,” remarked Pratt. ”I’d

give anything to hear a slanging match between 'em. Anything but this," he added, taking up his banjo.

"I had a little dog,
And his name was Bingo.

His master's name ought to be 'Stingo!' Eh, what?"

"It happens to be Crawshay," said Warrender, pointing to a tree. Upon it was nailed a board, facing upstream, and bearing the half-obliterated legend, "Trespassers will be Prosecuted." Below this, however, in fresh paint, were the words, "Camping Prohibited.–D. CRAWSHAY."

"Precisely; D. Crawshay," said Armstrong.

CHAPTER II
BELOW THE BELT

Something less than a mile up the river they came upon an old-fashioned gabled cottage of red brick, standing back a few yards from the left bank. The walls were half-covered with Virginia creeper; a purple clematis climbed over the porch and round a sign-board bearing the words, "Ferry Inn." Beyond it, on rising ground some little distance away, glowed the red-tiled roofs of a straggling village. A ferry boat, or rather punt, lay alongside of a narrow landing-stage.

The lads tied the boat to a post, and stepped on to the planking. At the closed door of the inn, standing with legs wide apart, was a little, round man whose jolly, rubicund, clean-shaven face and twinkling eyes bespoke good humour and a contented soul. He was bare-headed, in shirt-sleeves, and wore an apron. His brown, straight hair was obviously a wig. In front of him stood a group of villagers.

"'Tis past opening time, I tell 'ee," one of them was saying. "I can tell by the feel of my thropple."

"'Twould be always opening time if you trusted to that, Mick," said the landlord, with a laugh. "I go by my watch." He pulled out with some difficulty from the tight band of his apron a large silver timepiece. "There you are; three minutes to the hour."

"Well, I reckon you be three minutes slow, and so you could swear to if so

be—-"

A slight jerk of the landlord's head caused the rustic to look along the road to the right. Strolling towards the inn was the village policeman.

"He's had me fined once, and I didn't deserve it," the landlord remarked. "And there's another who'd like to catch me tripping."

His eyes travelled beyond the policeman, and rested on a thin, loose-jointed man with a stubbly fair moustache and a close-cut beard, who was hurrying to catch up with the constable.

"Ay, Sammy Blevins do have a nature for such," said another of the rustics. "'Tis my belief he'll be caught tripping himself one o' these days."

"Ay, and Constable Hardstone too," said the first. "Birds of a feather. They be thick as thieves, they two, and no friends o' yours, Joe. Well, I bain't the man to glory in a friend's tribulation, and so you may keep your door shut till three minutes past."

"Say, when is this blamed door opening?"

The loud, hoarse voice caused a general turning of heads. From round the corner of the inn sauntered, somewhat unsteadily, his hands in his pockets, a big burly fellow whose red waistcoat, tight leather breeches, and long gaiters proclaimed some connection with horseflesh. His accent was nasal, but there was an undefinable something in his pronunciation that suggested a European rather than an American origin. A long, fair moustache drooped round the corners of a wide, straight mouth; his clean-shaven cheeks were thin and hard; his pale-blue eyes heavy-lidded and watery. The rustics appeared to fall back a little as he approached. He leant one shoulder against a post of the porch, and scowled at the landlord, attitude and gesture indicating that, so far from needing refreshment, he had anticipated the opening of the door.

"All in good time, Mr. Jensen," said the landlord, placably. "Law's law, you know."

"Law!" scoffed the man. "I'm sober. I want a lemon-squash. See, if you don't open that door—- Ah! I guess you know me."

The landlord, consulting his watch, had turned, and now threw open the door leading into the bar. The foreigner entered behind him, and was followed by the villagers one by one. A pleasant-faced, motherly woman came out into the porch, and looked inquiringly at the three lads. They walked up from the landing-stage, where they had lingered watching the scene.

"Can we have some tea?" asked Warrender.

"Ay sure," replied the woman. "They told me as three young gemmen had come up along in boat, and I says to myself 'tis tea, as like as not. Sit 'ee down at thikky table, and I'll bring it out to 'ee."

"We're pretty hungry," said Armstrong. "What can you give us?"

”Why, there ’tis–I’ve nothing but eggs and bacon.”

”Glorious!” said Pratt. ”Two eggs apiece, and bacon to match.”

”Ay, I know what young gemmen’s appetite be,” said Mrs. Rogers, smiling as she bustled away.

They sat down at a table placed outside the window. Within they saw Rogers, the landlord, energetically pulling ale for his customers. He had laid aside his snuff-coloured wig, revealing a scalp perfectly bald.

While they were awaiting their meal, a girl, dressed in white, riding a bicycle, came along the road on the far side of the river, and, dismounting at the landing-stage, rang her bell continuously as a summons to the ferryman. An old weather-beaten man emerged from the back premises of the inn, touched his hat, hobbled down to his boat, and slowly poled it across. The girl wheeled her bicycle on to it, chatted to the old man while he recrossed the river, paid him with a silver coin and smiling thanks, and, having remounted, sped on towards the village.

”Why didn’t I bring up my banjo?” said Pratt, dolefully. ”Of course, I can sing without accompaniment.

”There’s no sunbeam as bright as your smile,
There’s no gold like the sheen of your hair—-

but you do want the one-two-tum, one-two-tum to get the full effect, don’t you, eh?”

”You sentimental owl!” exclaimed Armstrong, laughing. ”Here comes our tea.”

They had finished their meal, and were leaning back comfortably in their chairs, when the drone of talk within the inn was suddenly broken by voices raised in altercation. The clamour subsided for a moment under the landlord’s protest, but burst forth again. There was a noise of scuffling, then two men appeared in the doorway, struggling together in the first aimless clinches of a fight. They stumbled over the step; behind them came the villagers in a group, some of them making half-hearted attempts by word and act to separate the combatants. These, reaching the open, shook off restraint, swung their arms as if to clear a space, and, after a preliminary feint or two, rushed upon each other.

Warrender and his friends got up; were there ever schoolboys, even sixth-formers and prefects, who were not interested in a fight? The antagonists were not unequally matched. Height and weight were on the side of the foreigner, but his opponent, apparently a young farmer, though slighter in build, had clear eyes and a healthy skin, contrasting with the other’s well-marked signs of habitual excess.

The rustics formed up on one side, looking on stolidly. The three lads moved round until they faced the inn door. On the step stood the landlord with arms akimbo. His wife came behind him, slapped his wig on to his head, and retreated.

For a minute or two the combatants, displaying more energy than science, employed their arms like erratic piston-rods, hitting the air more often than each other's body. Armstrong's lip curled with amusement as he watched them. Then they appeared to realise that they had started too precipitately, and drew apart to throw off their coats and recover their wind.

"What's the quarrel?" asked Warrender, in the brief interval, of the nearest bystander.

"Furriner chap he said as the Germans be better fighters than us Englishmen, and that riled Henery Drew, he having the military medal and all. You can see the ribbon on his coat."

Stripped to their shirts, the combatants faced each other. They sparred warily for a moment, then the farmer darted forward on his toes, landed a blow on the foreigner's nose, between the eyes, and, springing back out of reach, just escaped his opponent's counter.

"One for his jib!" murmured Armstrong.

The blow, and the subdued applause of the rustic onlookers, enraged the foreigner. Swinging his bulk forward he bore down on the slighter Englishman, appeared to envelop him, and for a few seconds the two men seemed to be a tangle of whirling arms. Suddenly Armstrong sprang towards them, shouting, "Foul blow!" At the same moment the farmer reeled, and the foreigner, following up his advantage, dealt him a furious body-blow that dropped him flat as a turbot. Angry cries broke from the crowd, but, before the slower-witted rustics could act, Armstrong dashed between Jensen and the prostrate man.

"You hound!" he cried. "You'll deal with me now."

One arm was already out of its sleeve, but before he could fling off his blazer the foreigner charged upon him like an infuriated bull. Armstrong sidestepped, threw his blazer on the ground, and stood firmly, ready to meet the next onrush.

[image]

"THE FOREIGNER CHARGED UPON HIM LIKE AN INFURIATED BULL."

The big man topped him by a couple of inches, and bore down as if to smother him by sheer weight. He shot out a long arm; Armstrong ducked, and

quick as lightning got in a counter-hit that took the foreigner by surprise and caused him to draw back an inch or two. Armstrong said afterwards that he ought to be shot for mis-timing the blow, which he had expected to crack the man's wind-box. Already breathing fast, the foreigner perceived that his only chance of winning was to strike at once. He lowered his head and swung out his left arm in a lusty drive at Armstrong's ribs. It was an opening not to be missed by a skilled boxer. With left foot well forward and body thrown slightly back, Armstrong dealt him a smashing right upper-cut on the point of the chin. The man collapsed like a nine-pin, and measured his six feet two on the ground.

"Jolly good biff, old man!" cried Pratt. "Won't somebody cheer?"

The rustics were smiling broadly, but their satisfaction at the close of the battle found no more adequate mode of expression than a prolonged sigh and a cry: "Sarve en right!" The farmer, however, a little pale about the gills, had risen to his feet, and, approaching Armstrong, said–

"Thank 'ee, sir. 'Twas a rare good smite as ever I see, and I take it kind as a young gentleman should have—-"

"Oh, that's all right," Armstrong interrupted, slipping on his blazer. "He should have fought fair."

"True. A smite in the stummick don't give a man a chance. I feel queerish-like, and I'll get Joe Rogers to give me a thimbleful, and then shail home-along. That's my barton, on the hill yonder, and if so be you're stopping hereabout, I'll be main glad to supply you and your friends with milk *and* cream."

Assisted by two of his cronies, the farmer walked into the inn, the rest of the crowd hanging about and casting sheepish glances of admiration at Armstrong.

"You'll come in and take a drop of summat, sir?" inquired the landlord.

"No, thanks," replied Armstrong. "You might have a look at that fellow, will you?"

"And can you give us beds to-night?" asked Warrender.

"Ay sure, the missus will see to that."

"Very well; we'll just go on to the village and get a thing or two, and come back before closing time. You'll give an eye to our boat?"

The innkeeper having promised to set the ferryman in charge of the boat, the three struck into the road.

CHAPTER III

PRATTLE

The one street of the village contained only two shops. One of these, the forepart of a simple cottage, was post office and general store, whose window displayed groceries, sweetstuffs, stockings, reels of cotton, and other articles of a miscellaneous stock. A few yards beyond it stood a larger, newer, and uglier building, the lower storey of which was a double-fronted shop, exhibiting on the one side a heterogeneous heap of old iron, on the other a few agricultural implements, a ramshackle bicycle, a mangle, tin tea-pots, a can of petrol, a concertina, and various oddments. Above the door, in crude letters painted yellow, ran the description: "Samuel Blevins, General Dealer."

"We must try the post office," said Warrender. "But I don't expect we'll find anything up to much. Still, there'll be some local views."

They entered the little shop, filling the space in front of the counter, and began to examine picture-postcards. The shopkeeper, a middle-aged woman in a widow's cap, was in the act of handing packets of baking-powder to a customer–a small man who turned quickly about as the boys went in, showing a plump, brown face decorated with a tiny, black moustache and dark, vivacious eyes.

"And how be your missus?" the woman was saying.

"She is ver' vell," said the man, swinging round again. "Zat is, not bad–not bad. She have a cold–yes, shust a leetle cold."

"I be main glad 'tis nothing worse," said the shopkeeper, drily. "Rogers did say only this morning as he hadn't seed or heard anything of her for a week or more–and her his own sister, too, and not that breadth between 'em. She might as well be in foreign parts. 'Twas never thoughted when she married you, Mr. Rod; my meaning is, Rogers believed her'd always be in and out, being so near; whereas the truth is he sees no more of her than if she lived at t'other end of the kingdom."

"And now ze isinglass," said the man, with the obvious intention of turning the conversation. "Vat! No isinglass? Zis is terrible country. Vell, zat is all, madame. You put every'ing in ze book?"

"Trust me for that, Mr. Rod. Remember me to Mary, and I hope she'll soon be rid of her cold."

The man gathered up his purchases, and left the shop, darting a glance at each of the boys as he passed them.

They bought a few postcards and some postage stamps, and issued forth into the street. Blevins, the general dealer, standing at his shop-door with his hands under his coat-tails, gave them a hard look.

"These country folk are as inquisitive as moths," remarked Armstrong.

"Take us for strolling minstrels, I dare say," rejoined Pratt. "Lucky I didn't bring my banjo."

"Our blazers make us a trifle conspicuous," said Warrender. "I say, as we've

plenty of time before dark, and I don't want to run into that crowd at the inn again, suppose we stroll on."

They passed the general dealer's, soon left the last of the cottages behind them, and rambled along the grassy bank of the road, which wound across a wide and barren heath land. About half a mile from the village they came to narrower cross-roads, leading apparently to the few scattered farmsteads of the neighbourhood. A few yards beyond this they saw, rounding a bend, a girl on a bicycle coasting down a slight hill towards them.

"The fair maid in white!" said Pratt. "I think my banjo ought to have been a guitar, or a lute, whatever that is."

A loud report startled them all. The bicycle wobbled, stopped, and the girl sprang lightly from her saddle, and bent down to examine the front tyre. She rose just before the boys reached her, gave them a fleeting glance, and started to wheel the machine down the road.

After a brief hesitation Warrender turned towards her, lifting his cap.

"Can I be of any assistance?" he asked.

"Oh, please don't trouble," replied the girl. "It's a frightfully bad puncture, and I haven't very far to go."

"Some distance across the ferry?"

"Well, yes; but this will take a long time, and I really couldn't think of—-"

"It's no trouble–if you have an outfit."

"Yes, I have, but—-"

"He's a dab at mending tyres, I assure you," Pratt broke in. "Also at all sorts of tinkering old jobs. Our engine broke down the other day–that's our motor-boat, down at the ferry, you know–I dare say you saw it when you passed an hour ago–or was it two? It seems a jolly long time. Do let him try his hand; he'll be heartbroken if you don't. Besides, wheeling a bicycle is no joke; I know from experience; and for a lady–why, there's a smudge on your dress already. Really—-"

Like many loquacious persons, Pratt was apt to let his tongue run away with him. The girl had shown more and more amusement with every sentence that bubbled from his glib lips, and here she broke into a frank laugh, and surrendered the bicycle to Warrender, who laid it down on the grass bordering the road, opened the tool pouch and set to work.

"He may be nervous, and fumble a bit, you know," said Pratt, "if we look at him. I used to be like that myself, when I was young. Don't you think we'd better walk on? Perhaps you'd like to be shown over our boat?"

"I think I'd prefer to wait for my bicycle," said the girl, demurely.

"Warrender's quite to be trusted," rejoined Pratt. "He isn't just an ordinary tramp or tinker. We've none of us chosen our professions yet. We *have* been

called 'The Three Musketeers' in some quarters."

"At school, I suppose," the girl put in.

"Because we're always together, you know," Pratt continued. "We came up the river to-day–on a holiday cruise–all the joys of nautical adventure without any of the discomforts. Of course, there are disappointments; bound to be. We thought of camping on the banks–one of the banks, I mean–but, as Armstrong said, it might be the Congo, it's so frightfully overgrown, and as we didn't bring axes or dynamite, or any of the old things that explorers use, we had to reconcile ourselves to the shattering of our dreams.... Whew! That was a near thing!"

At the cross-roads just below, a motor-car, carrying two men, had emerged suddenly from the right, and run into a country cart which had been lumbering along the high road from the direction of the village. The chauffeur had clapped his brakes on in time to avoid a serious collision, but two spokes of the cart's near wheel had been smashed, and the wing of the car crumpled. Springing out of the car, the chauffeur, a dark-skinned little man, rushed up to the carter, who had been trudging on the off-side at the horse's head, and began to berate him excitedly, with much play of hands.

"Vy you not have care?" he shouted, so rapidly that the monosyllables seemed to form one word. "You take up all ze road; you sink all ze road belong to you; you not look round ze corner; no, you blind fool, you crash bang into my car, viss I not know how many pounds of damage."

"Bain't my fault," said the carter, stoutly. "Can *you* see round the corner? Then why didn't you blow your horn?"

The chauffeur retorted with a torrent of abuse, in which broken English and expletives in some foreign tongue seemed equally mingled, the carter keeping up a monotonous chant of "Bain't my fault, I tell 'ee."

The former appealed to his passenger, a tall man of fair complexion and straw-coloured moustache and beard. A lull in the altercation between the other two enabled him to declare that the carter was in the wrong, and his clear measured words rang with a distinctly foreign intonation in the ears of the four spectators above. The squabble revived, and was ended only when the passenger got out of the car, laid a soothing hand on the chauffeur, and persuaded the carter to give his name, which he wrote down in a pocket-book. A few seconds later the car snorted away into the cross-road on the left-hand side.

Warrender had looked up from his task only for a moment, but the other three had watched the whole scene in silent amusement.

"Can you tell us," said Pratt to the girl, "whether the Tower of Babel is anywhere in this neighbourhood? We've seen four foreigners since we landed at the ferry an hour or two ago, and, if accent is any guide, they all hail from different parts."

”It is funny, isn’t it?” said the girl. ”And the explanation is funny, too. They are all servants of a strange old gentleman who lives in a big house near the river. Some people say he is mad, but I think he’s only very bad-tempered.”

”Very likely the old buffer we saw. But go on, please.”

”His English servants went to him one day in a body and asked him to raise their wages. It was quite reasonable, don’t you think, with all the labourers and people earning twice as much as they did before the war? But they say he stormed at them, using the most dreadful language, dismissed them all, and vowed he would never have an English servant again. Frightfully, silly of him, but my father says that there’s no telling what extremes a hot-tempered lunatic like Mr. Pratt will—-”

”Who?” ejaculated Pratt.

”That’s his name–Mr. Ambrose Pratt. Perhaps you have heard of him? He was a great traveller–quite famous, I believe.”

”My aunt! I mean–I’m rather taken by surprise, you know; but–well, the fact is,” stammered Pratt, ”he’s–he’s my uncle.”

”Mr. Pratt is! Oh, I’m so sorry!”

”So am I!”

”For calling him such names, I mean.”

”Nothing to what I’ve called him, I assure you. He gave me an awful licking once. Not that that matters, of course; we men don’t think anything of a licking; no–what I meant was I’m sorry an uncle of mine is bringing the ancient and honourable name of Pratt into disrepute. Why, he must be a regular laughing-stock. Fancy having a menagerie of foreigners!”

”But didn’t you know? Aren’t you staying with him, then?”

”Rather not. We’re not on speaking terms.”

”I remember–you said you were thinking of camping out.”

”Yes; and our dream was shattered. We’ve had to take beds at the inn. It’s terrible to lose your illusions, isn’t it? We all thought nobly of our fellow-men till this afternoon, and now our hearts are seared, and we’ll be frightful cynics till the end of the chapter. I don’t suppose you know him, but there’s a bullet-headed brute of a fellow in a red choker and a velveteen coat who sits on a tree-stump down the river—-”

”Oh, yes,” said the girl. ”That’s Rush. Every one knows him. I believe he has been in prison for poaching.”

”Well, it seems to be his business in life now to delude unhappy mariners; a regular siren luring them to their doom. We asked him to direct us to a camping-place. At first he protested there was no suitable spot, but his malignant spirit prompted him to tell us of a glade where the sward was like velvet, under a charming canopy of umbrageous foliage. We had just got our tent up, and I

was boiling the kettle for tea, when there broke upon our solitude a man and a dog–detestable, unnatural creatures both; the dog hadn't a bark in him–it was all transferred to the man. The old buffer barked and bellowed and bullied and brow-beat and bundled us off."

A ripple of laughter from the girl's lips brought Pratt up short. He looked at her reproachfully.

"Do forgive me," she said, "but do you know, I'm sure that–old buffer–was my father!"

Even the ebullient Pratt was rendered speechless; as Armstrong afterwards put it, in boxing parlance, "he was fairly fibbed in the wind."

"Father is a little hasty, but quite a dear, really," the girl continued. "He has been frightfully annoyed by trespassers–that man Rush, for one, and some of Mr. Pratt's servants. But don't you think perhaps we had better say no more about our relations?"

"Certainly," said Armstrong, with a solemn air of conviction. It was the first word he had spoken, and the girl gave him a quick, amused glance.

"Umpire gives us both out!" remarked Pratt, his equanimity quite restored. "We are now back in the *status quo*, Miss Crawshay, with this difference: that we know each other's name. The Bard of Avon wouldn't have asked 'What's in a name?' if he had been here five minutes ago. If you had known my name, and I had known that you were the daughter of—-"

"That's forbidden ground, Mr. Pratt."

"Well, is there any ground that isn't forbidden?" Pratt rejoined. "For our camp, I mean?"

"Why not try No Man's Island?"

"Siren Rush told us it's a mere wilderness, 'long heath, brown furze,' and so on."

"Oh! That's quite wrong; he must know better than that. There's an excellent camping place on the narrower channel. We often picnicked there before my father quarrelled with Mr. P—-"

Smiling, she caught herself up.

"Call 'em X and Y," suggested Pratt. "It is a sort of simultaneous equation, isn't it? But the island can't belong to Y unless Y is generally recognised in the neighbourhood as no man at all."

"Nobody knows whose it is. The owner died years ago; his cottage there is falling to ruin; they say it belongs now to a distant relative in the colonies."

"Then there's no one to chevy us away, as soon as we've got things shipshape?"

"Unless you're afraid of ghosts. There are all sorts of queer tales; the country folk shake their heads when the island is mentioned; not one of them will

have the courage to set foot on it."

"A haunted island! How jolly! I've always wanted to meet a spook. That's an additional attraction, I assure you. Perhaps I can soothe the perturbed spirits with my banjo. I admit it has the opposite effect on Armstrong, but—-"

The girl turned suddenly away towards Warrender, who had finished his job and was pumping up the tyre.

"You frightful ass!" muttered Armstrong in a savage undertone, heard by Pratt alone. "You've done nothing but drivel for the last half-hour."

"All right, old mule," retorted Pratt, grinning.

"Yes, it will carry you home," Warrender was saying, "but I'm afraid you'll have to get a new tyre."

"Thanks so much. It is really awfully good of you," replied the girl.

"I'm sorry I've been such a time."

"I've been very well entertained. It hasn't seemed long at all. Thank you again. Good-bye."

She mounted the bicycle, beamed an impartial smile upon the three, and sped away down the road.

CHAPTER IV

THE FACE IN THE THICKET

When the three friends arrived at the inn it was full to the door. Rogers, wigless again, caught sight of Warrender over the heads of the crowd, and came from behind the counter, edging his way outwards through the press of villagers.

"Missus have got the rooms shipshape, sir," he said. "She's a rare woman for making a man comfortable."

"I'm sure she is," returned Warrender, "and I'm only sorry we shan't know it by personal experience. The fact is, we're going to camp on No Man's Island; there's plenty of time before sunset to fix ourselves up."

"She'll be main sorry, that she will," said the innkeeper, pocketing the two half-crowns Warrender handed him. "No Man's Island, did 'ee say? Maybe you haven't heard what folk do tell?"

"We have heard something, but I dare say it's just talk, you know. Anyhow, we're going to try it, and we'll let you know in the morning how we get on."

"Now, Rogers–drat the man!" cried his wife's voice from behind. She came

out into the porch, flourishing his wig. ”How many times have I told ’ee I won’t have ’ee showing yourself without your hair? If you do be a great baby, there’s no need for ’ee to look like one.”

Rogers meekly allowed her to adjust the wig, explaining meanwhile the intention of the expected guests. She received the news with disappointment and concern.

”I hope nothing ill will come o’t,” she said. ”Fists bain’t no mortal use against spirits; ’twould be like hitting the wind. Howsomever, the young will always go their own gait. ’Tis the way o’ the world.” She went back into the inn.

”That furriner chap was hurt more in his temper than his framework,” said Rogers. ”And knowing what furriners be, I’d keep my weather eye open. There’s too many of ’em in these parts.”

”I understand they’re servants of Mr. Pratt; they should be fairly respectable.”

”Ay, that’s where ’tis. A gentleman must do as he likes, and we haven’t got nothing to say to’t. But we think the more. And I own I was fair cut up when my sister Molly married the cook; a little Swiss feller he is.”

”We saw him up at the post office a while ago; the shopwoman inquired after your sister, I remember.”

”And well she might. I never see the girl nowadays; girl, I say, but she’s gone thirty, old enough to know better. By all accounts Rod’s uncommon clever at the vittles, and the crew down yonder be living on the fat of the land, while the skipper’s a-dandering round in furren parts.”

”Mr. Pratt’s away from home, then?”

”Ay sure. He haven’t been seen a good while, and ’tis just like him to go off sudden-like. You’d expect he’d be tired of it at his time o’ life, but ’tis once a wanderer, always a wanderer. Well, the evening’s getting on, so I won’t keep ’ee. Good luck, sir.”

Warrender rejoined his companions, who had taken over the boat from the ferryman, and they were soon floating down on the current. They took the narrow channel on the left of the island which they had avoided on the way up, and found it less difficult to navigate than it had appeared at the other end. The dusk was deepening beneath the trees, but in a few minutes they discovered a wide open space that offered more accommodation than they needed. Running the boat close to the shore, they sprang to land, moored to a tree overhanging the stream, and set to work with a will to make their preparations for the night.

The clearing was carpeted with long grass, damp from yesterday’s rain, and encircled by dense undergrowth, thicket, and bramble. They pitched the tent in the centre, beat down a stretch of grass in front of it on which to place the stove and the bulk of their impedimenta, and by the time that darkness enwrapped

them had everything in order. The moon, almost at full circle, had risen early, and soon, peering over the tree-tops on the mainland, flung her silver sheen into the enclosure, whitening the tent to a snowy brilliance and throwing into strong relief the massed foliage beyond. A light breeze set the leaves quivering with a murmurous rustle. The hour and the scene made an appeal to Pratt's sentimental soul too strong to be resisted. Opening one of the folding chairs, he lay back in it with crossed legs, gazed up into the serene, star-flecked heavens, and began with gentle touches of his strings to serenade the moon.

Warrender, having slipped on his overalls, kindled a lamp and went down to tinker with his engine. Unmusical Armstrong, always accused by Pratt of being "fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils," sauntered, hands in pockets, across the clearing. Elbowing his way through the undergrowth he found, after some fifty or sixty yards, that the vegetation thinned. The lesser shrubs gave way to trees, which grew close together, but with a regularity that suggested planting on a definite plan. Pursuing his way, he came by and by to a more spacious clearing than the one he had quitted; and on the left, in the midst of what had evidently been at one time a small garden, he saw the shell of a two-storeyed cottage. The walls were covered with creepers growing in rank disorder; the windows gaped, empty of glass; the doorless entrance shaped a rectangle of blackness; and bare rafters, shaggy with unpruned ivy, drew parallel lines upon the inky gloom of half the upper storey. Ruins, in daylight merely picturesque, take a new beauty in the cold radiance of the moon, but present at the same time an image of all that is desolate and forlorn. Practical, unemotional as Armstrong was, he thrilled to the impression of vacuity and abandonment, and stood for a while at gaze, as though unwilling to disturb the loneliness.

Presently, however, he stepped lightly across the unmown lawn, and the moss-grown path beyond, and, entering the doorway, struck a match and looked around. From the narrow hall–strewn with fragments of brick and mortar, broken tiles, heaps of plaster, and here and there spotted with fungi–sprang the staircase, whole as to the stairs, but showing gaps in the banisters. Curling strips of torn discoloured paper hung from the walls. The match went out; through the open roof the stars glimmered. Deciding to defer exploration till daylight, lest a tile or brick should fall on his head, or the staircase give way under him, Armstrong turned to go out. As he did so he was aware of a low moaning sound, such as a person inside a house may hear when a high wind soughs under the eaves. It rose and fell in cadences eerily mournful, as though the spirit of solitude itself were lonely and in pain. Armstrong shivered and sought the doorway, and as he felt how gentle was the breeze he met, he wondered at its having power enough to produce such sounds. The moaning ceased; he listened for a moment or two; it did not recur, though the zephyr had not sensibly dropped. Puzzled, he started

to retrace his way to the camp. At the farther side of the clearing the melancholy sound once more broke upon his car. Almost involuntarily he wheeled round to look back at the cottage; then, impatient with himself, turned again to quit the scene.

His feeling, which was neither awe nor timorousness, but rather a vague discomfort, left him as soon as his active faculties were again in play. Pushing his way through the undergrowth, he was inclined to deride his unwonted susceptibility. All at once, however, without sound or any other physical fact to account for it, he was seized with the fancy that some one was behind him. Does every human being move in the midst of an invisible, intangible aura, that acts as a sixth sense? Whatever the truth may be, certain it is that we have all, at one time or another, been conscious of the proximity of some bodily presence, which neither sight nor sound nor touch has revealed.

Armstrong swung quickly round, and started, for there in the thicket, within a dozen yards of him, a shaft of moonlight struck upon a face, pallid amidst the green. It disappeared in a flash.

"Who's there?" called Armstrong, sharply; then impulsively started forward, parting the foliage.

There was no answer, nobody to be seen. Indeed, within a yard of him the thicket was so dense, so closely overarched by loftier trees, that no ray of moonshine percolated into its pitchy blackness.

Holding the branches apart, peering into the gloom, he listened. Overhead the leaves softly rustled; within the thicket there was not a murmur. He let the branches swing back; stood for a few moments irresolute; then, with an impatient jerk of the shoulders, strode away towards the camp.

Armstrong was not what the pathologist would call a nervous subject. His physical courage had never been questioned; in his healthy life of work and play his moral courage had never been called upon; his lack of imagination had saved him from the tremors and terrors that prey upon the more highly strung.

To find himself mentally disturbed was a novel experience; it filled him with a sense of humiliation and self-contempt; it enraged him. Thoughts of Pratt's mocking glee when the tale should be told made him squirm. "I say, the old bean's seen a spook"–he could hear the light, ringing tones of Pratt's voice, see the bubbling merriment in his large, round eyes. "I swear it *was* a face!" he angrily told himself. "Dashed if I don't come in daylight and hunt for the fellow–some tramp, I expect, who finds a lodging gratis in the ruins."

By the time he reached the camp he had made up his mind to say nothing about the incident. Emerging into the silent clearing, he saw Pratt and Warrender side by side on their chairs, fast asleep, the latter with folded arms and head on breast, the former holding his banjo across his knees, his face, the image

of placid happiness, upturned to the sky. Apparently the swish of Armstrong's boots through the long grass penetrated to the slumbering consciousness of the sleepers. Warrender lifted his head, unclosed his eyes for a moment, muttered "Hallo!" and slept again. Pratt, without moving, looked lazily through half-shut eyelids.

"'O moon of my delight, who know'st no wane!'" he murmured. "Well, old bean, seen the spook?"

"Rot!" growled Armstrong.

"I believe you have!" cried Pratt, starting up, his face kindling. "What's she like?"

"Ass!"

"Well, what *did* you see? You don't, as a rule, snap for nothing. I'll say that for you. Only cats will scratch you for love. What's upset the apple-cart?"

"I saw the ruined cottage, if you want to know–a ghastly rotten hole. I'm dead tired–I'm going to turn in."

"All right, old chap; you shall have a lullaby." He struck an arpeggio.

"Sing me to sleep, the shadows fall;
Let me forget the world and all;
Lone is my heart, the day is long;
Would it were come to evensong!
Sing me to sleep, your hand in mine—-"

Armstrong had fled into the tent.

"I say, Warrender," murmured Pratt, nudging the somnolent form at his side, "something's put the old sport in a regular bait."

"Eh?" returned Warrender, drowsily.

"Armstrong's got the pip. Never knew him like this. Something's curdled the milk."

"Well, it's time to turn in," said Warrender, rising and stretching himself. "He'll be all right in the morning. Good-night."

"Same to you. I suppose I must follow you, but it's so jolly under this heavenly moon."

And Warrender, undressing within the tent, smiled as he heard the lingerer's pleasant voice.

"Dark is life's shore, love, life is so deep:

Leave me no more, but sing me to sleep."

CHAPTER V
THE GAME BEGINS

For all his loquacity, his gamesomeness of temper, Pratt was not without a modicum of discretion. Next morning, when they had taken their swim and were preparing breakfast, he did not revive the subject of spooks, or make any allusion to Armstrong's ill-humour. Armstrong, for his part, always at his best in the freshness of the early hours, had thrown off the oppression of the night, and appeared his cheerful, vigorous, rather silent self.

"You fellows," said Warrender, as they devoured cold sausages and a stale loaf, "after I've overhauled the engine, I think of pulling up stream in the dinghy and getting some new bread at the village—-"

"Rolls, if you can," Pratt interpolated.

"And some butter and cheese, etcetera. Now we're on this island, we may as well explore it. You can do that while I'm away."

"And hand you a neatly written report of our discoveries. All right, Mr. President."

"I shan't be gone more than about a couple of hours."

"Unless you get another tinkering job. By the way, why not call at old Crawshay's, and ask if she got home safe? I think that would be a very proper thing to do, and the old buffer would appreciate it. Good for evil, you know; coals of fire; turning the other cheek, and all that."

"You can turn your own cheek, Percy. You've got enough of it."

"Do you allude to my facial rotundity, which is Nature's gift, or to my urbanity of manner, my—-"

"Dry up, man. It's too early in the morning for fireworks. So long."

Pratt gave a further proof of his tact when he started with Armstrong on their tour of exploration. Instead of striking southward, in the direction of the ruins, he set off to the north-west. "The island's so small," he reflected, "that we are bound to work round to that cottage, and then—-"

Daylight showed the undergrowth dense indeed, but not so impenetrable as it had seemed overnight. At the cost of a few scratches from bramble bushes laden with ripening blackberries, they pushed their way through to the western

shore, overlooking the broader channel and the right bank of the river; then they turned south, zigzagging to find the easiest route.

Hitherto, except for the whirr of a bird, or the scurry of some small animal, they had neither seen nor heard anything betokening that the island had any other visitors than themselves. But not long after their change of course they came to a spot where the grass had recently been trampled.

"Oh, poor Robinson Crusoe!" hummed Pratt.

"Here's a wire snare," exclaimed Armstrong. "Some one's rabbiting."

"Very likely Siren Rush," Pratt returned. "It wasn't original malice that prompted him to warn us against the island, but a sophisticated fear of competition. I dare say he made tons of money out of rabbits in the lean time during the war; skinned them and the shop people too!"

Armstrong let this pass; the face he had seen for a brief moment overnight had not recalled the leering countenance of the poacher.

They went on, skirted the southern shore, and turned northward. Presently Pratt caught a glimpse through the trees of the roof of the ruined cottage. He did not mention it, but struck to the right towards the narrow channel, and led the way as close as possible to its brink. A minute or two later, in a shallow indentation of the shore, they discovered the remains of a small pier or landing-stage. The planks had rotted or broken away; only a few moss-covered piles and cross-stretchers were left, still, after what must have been many years, defying the destructive energy of the stream that swirled around them. Through the channel, at this spot contracted to half its average width, the swollen river poured with the force of a millrace.

"The old chap kept a boat, evidently," said Pratt. "There ought to be a path from here to the house, but there's no sign of one. Let's strike inland, and see if we can trace it somewhere."

They pushed through the thicket, here as closely tangled as anywhere else, and emerging suddenly into the wilderness garden, in which perennial plants were stifling one another, they saw the ruined cottage before them.

"Jolly picturesque," said Pratt, halting. "I dare say distance lends enchantment to the view; no doubt it's a pretty dismal place inside; but the sunlight makes a gorgeous effect with those old walls. The creepers running over warm red bricks–it's a harmony of colour, old man. I'd like to make a sketch of it."

"Houses were built to be lived in," grunted Armstrong.

Pratt made no reply at once. For the moment the schoolboy was sunk in the artist. He let his eyes linger on the spectacle–the broken roof; the one gable that here survived; the creepers straggling round it and over the glassless window of the room beneath; the heap of shattered brick-work at the base, half-clothed with greenery and gay with flowers.

”Of course, it looked very different by moonlight,” he said at last. ”You’d lose all the colour. Still—-”

”I saw it from the other side,” said Armstrong. ”That won’t please you so much–it’s not so much ruined.”

”Well, let’s go and see.”

He was leading through the riot of untended flowers, Armstrong close behind him, when he stopped suddenly, and in a tone of voice involuntarily subdued, asked–

”Did you see that?”

[image]

”’DID YOU SEE THAT?’”

”What?” said Armstrong, starting in spite of himself.

”A figure–something–I don’t know; at the back of the room.”

The sunlight, slanting from the south-east, shone full upon the cottage, but left the back of one of the rooms on the ground floor shadowed by the screen of creepers falling over the gaping window.

”Well, suppose there was, why the mysterious whisper?” said Armstrong, his own doubts and remembered tremors disposing him to ridicule Pratt’s excitement. ”Why shouldn’t there be some one there? *We* are here–why not others?”

”Yes, but–well, I didn’t expect it. Perhaps you did.”

”It may have been only the shadow of the creeper on the wall.”

”It may have been your grandmother! Let’s get into the place and have a look round. The window’s too high to climb; is the door open?”

”There’s no door.”

”So much the better. Come on.”

They hastened to the front, and through the doorway into the hall. The house was silent as a tomb. On either side opened a doorless room. They entered the one on the right–that in which Pratt had believed he saw a moving figure. It was pervaded by a subdued greenish sunlight, becoming misty by reason of the dust their footsteps had stirred up. It held neither person nor thing. They crossed to the opposite room, which, being out of the sunshine, was in deep gloom. This, too, was empty. Passing the staircase they arrived at the back premises, a stone-flagged kitchen and scullery. Both were bare; even the grate had been removed.

”Now for upstairs,” said Pratt. ”They’ve made a clean sweep down here.”

They mounted the staircase, at first treading carefully, then with confident steps as they found that the creaking stairs were sound. There were four rooms

on the upper storey, two of them exposed to the sky. Of these the floors were thick with blown leaves, twigs, birds' feathers, fragments of tiles and bricks, broken rafters, and the debris of the ceiling. The other two, roofed and whole, were as bare as the rooms below. Through the empty casement of one they caught sight of the tower in the grounds of Mr. Ambrose Pratt's house, and the upper windows and roof of the house itself. Pratt's appreciative eye was instantly seized by the prospect–the foreground of low thicket; the glistening stream; the noble trees beyond, springing out of a waving sea of sun-dappled bracken; the gentle slope on whose summit stood the buildings, and in the far background the rolling expanse of purple moorland. For the moment he forgot the shadowy figure he had seen, and lingered as if unwilling to miss one detail of the enchanting landscape.

"There's no one here," said Armstrong, matter-of-fact as ever.

"I dare say it was an illusion. Look how the sunlight catches the ripples, Jack. And did you see that kingfisher flash between the banks?"

"I'll go and have another look downstairs," Armstrong responded. "I'll give you a call if I find anything."

He felt, as he went down, that perhaps he would have done better to be candid with Pratt. Why make any bones about an incident capable, no doubt, of a simple explanation? The tramp, if tramp he was, had, of course, the objection of his kind to being found on enclosed premises, even though they were a ruin. Yet it was strange that he had left no tracks–had he not? Armstrong was suddenly aware of something that had hitherto escaped him. There was no dust, no litter on the stairs. Singular phenomenon in a long-deserted house! And surely the floor of the room in which Pratt now stood, unlike the other floors, was clear. It, and the staircase, must have been swept. Why? Not for tidiness–no tramp would bother about that. For what, then? Secrecy? Dusty floors would leave tell-tale marks–and with the thought Armstrong hurried down to the room in which the figure had been seen, and examined the floor. Yes! besides the footprints of himself and Pratt between door and window, there were others along the wall at the back of the room. The fellow must have slipped out with the speed of a hare. Armstrong perceived at once the clumsiness of the attempt at secrecy, for the very fact that some of the floors were swept gave the game away. At the same time, he was puzzled to account for the man's motive. The island was deserted; it was no longer the scene of picnics; the villagers avoided it; why then should a casual visitor–for there was no evidence of continuous occupation–be at the pains even to try to cover up his movements? The strange oppression of the previous night returned upon Armstrong's mind, and he roamed about the lower floor in a mood of curious expectancy.

He came once more to the kitchen, and noticed that between it and the scullery was a closed door–the only door that remained in the house. Instinc-

tively bracing himself, he turned the handle; the door opened, disclosing a dark hole and a downward flight of stone steps. He went down into the darkness, at the foot of the steps struck a match, and found himself in a low, spacious cellar, empty except for a strewing of coal dust. As the match flickered out he caught sight of something white in a corner. Striking another, he crossed the floor and picked up a jagged scrap of paper, slightly brown along one edge. At the same moment he observed a little heap of paper ashes.

Throwing down the match he trod upon it, and turned, intending to examine the paper in the daylight above. Pratt's voice shouting, and a sound of some one leaping down the staircase to the hall, caused him to spring up the steps two at a time.

"What's up?" he shouted back, unable to distinguish Pratt's words.

He reached the hall just in time to see Pratt dash through the doorway and sprint at headlong pace towards the river. Stuffing the paper into his pocket, Armstrong doubled after him. Pratt was already plunging into the thicket, and, when Armstrong came within sight of the channel, the other had flung off his cap and blazer, and was diving into the stream.

[image]

"THE OTHER WAS DIVING INTO THE STREAM."

"What mad trick—-"

He cut short his exclamation, for his long strides had brought him to the pier, and he saw the cause of Pratt's desperate haste. The motor-boat, broadside to the stream, was drifting down the channel. Already it was some thirty yards beyond the spot where Pratt had taken the water, and Pratt was swimming after it with the ease of a water-rat.

Feeling that there was no reason why himself should get soaked too, Armstrong forged his way through the vegetation at the brink of the channel, but made slow progress compared with the swimmer. Pratt was rapidly overhauling the boat. Watching him, instead of his own steps, Armstrong tripped over a creeper, and fell headlong. By the time he had picked himself up, Pratt had disappeared. Armstrong's momentary anxiety was banished by the sight of the boat moving slowly in towards the shore of the island.

"Good man," he shouted. "You headed it off splendidly."

Pushing and swimming, Pratt was evidently making strenuous efforts to drive the boat into the bank before the current swept it past the island. If he failed, Armstrong saw that he would have to change his tactics and run it ashore

on the left bank–his uncle's property. It would then be necessary for Armstrong to swim across, for Pratt had never taken the trouble to learn the working of the engine.

"Stick it, old man," he called.

In a few moments more Pratt contrived to edge the boat among the low branches of an overhanging tree. Its downward progress thus partly checked, he was able to exert more force in the shoreward direction. When Armstrong, after a rough scramble, arrived at the spot, he had just rammed the boat's nose securely into a tangled network of branches, and was clambering, a dripping, bedraggled object, up the bank.

A prolonged "Coo-ee!" sounded from far up the river.

"There's old Warrender, shrieking like a bereaved hen," said Pratt, shaking himself. "And it's all through his not tying the thing up properly! Armstrong, water is very wet."

"I say, did you ever know Warrender not tie it up properly?"

"How else would it break away?"

"You didn't see it break away?"

"No, you can't see our camping-place from the ruins. It was a good way down before I caught sight of it."

"Well, they've kicked off; the game's begun!"

"What on earth do you mean?"

"Wring yourself dry, and we'll talk."

CHAPTER VI

A SCRAP OF PAPER

Pratt had just stripped off his clothes, and spread them to dry, when Warrender arrived in the dinghy.

"What's the game, you chaps?" he inquired. "Why a second bath, Pratt?"

"Eyes left!" responded Pratt. "The sight of my habiliments basking in the sunlight will inform you that I have just been performing a cinema stunt–plunging fully clothed into the boiling torrent to rescue the heroine, whom the villain—-"

"Dry up!" said Armstrong.

"Just what I am trying to do. But you are bursting with information, old

chap. Expound. I am all ears."

"You tied up the boat as usual, Warrender?" Armstrong asked.

"Of course. Why?"

"Pratt saw her drifting down the stream, that's all, and had to dive in to prevent her getting right past the island."

"That's rum," said Warrender. "The knot couldn't have worked loose. Who's been monkeying with her?"

"That's the point," said Armstrong. "There's some one else on the island, and whoever it is, wants the place to himself. Setting the boat adrift seemed to him a first step to driving us away, which shows he is a juggins."

"Q.E.D.," said Pratt. "Now the corollary, if you please."

"Wait a bit," Warrender interposed. "It may be only a stupid practical joke–the sort of thing the intelligence of that poacher fellow might rise to."

"It may be, of course," returned Armstrong, "but I think it's more. You remember what Miss Crawshay and the people at the inn told us about the island being haunted, you know? Well, rumours of that sort are just what might be set going by some one who has reasons of his own for keeping people away. It may be Rush; we found a rabbit-snare this morning; but if it is, there's some one else in the game. Last night, as I was returning to camp, I saw a face in the thicket, just for a moment; it was gone in a flash; but it wasn't Rush's face; it was a different type altogether."

"Why on earth didn't you tell us?" asked Warrender.

"Well, I might have been mistaken; moonlight plays all sorts of tricks; besides—-"

"Just so, old man," said Pratt. "Are there visions abroad? The witching hour of night—-"

"Let's keep to cold fact," Warrender put in. "You saw a face, and it wasn't Rush's; but Rush lied to us about the island to keep us off it; therefore Rush and some unknown person are in league. What next?"

"Pratt saw some one in one of the rooms of the ruined cottage as we approached it an hour or so ago. We hunted through the place, but couldn't find any one. I noticed one strange fact: that while some of the rooms are thick with dust, the staircase and one of the rooms upstairs are pretty clear, although there's no sign whatever of anybody living there. There's not a stick of furniture. What is the cottage used for?"

"Is there anything particular about the upstairs room?" Warrender asked.

"Nothing that I could see," replied Armstrong.

"Except that it gives a magnificent view," Pratt added. "You can see my uncle's grounds, and up and down the river. It was when I was looking out of the window that I saw the boat adrift."

”Well, I think I’ll have a look at the place,” said Warrender, ”and if you’ll take my advice, Percy, you’ll go up in the dinghy, get into dry togs, and give an eye to the camp.”

”Righto! There ought to be some one at home to receive callers. You’ll be back to lunch, I suppose?”

Warrender nodded, and strode off with Armstrong towards the ruins. Together they explored the house from roof to cellar, seeking, not for an inhabitant, but for some clue to the puzzle suggested by the partly cleared floors. No discovery rewarded them. It was not until they were inspecting the cellar that Armstrong remembered the scrap of paper he had picked up there. Taking it out of his pocket when they returned to daylight, he handed it to Warrender.

”Is it Greek?” he asked.

”No,” replied Warrender. ”I fancy it’s Russian; a scrap torn from a Russian newspaper, by the look of it. Pretty old, too, judging by the colour.”

”I don’t know. It’s brown at the edge, but that’s due to the scorching it got when the other papers were burned. It’s fairly clean everywhere else. You can’t read it, then?”

”Not a word; how should I? Russian’s a modern language; belongs more to your side than mine. Besides, what if I could? A newspaper wouldn’t tell us anything.”

”Very likely not. But a Russian newspaper would hardly be in the possession of anybody but a Russian, and what was a Russian ever doing here?”

”Ah! I think I see daylight. What if it belonged to one of what Pratt calls his uncle’s menagerie of foreigners? They might come here in their off times. There’s nothing very wonderful about it after all; but as there’s nothing valuable in the ruins, they can’t have any object in trying to keep us out. My belief is that that fellow Rush set the boat drifting out of sheer mischief, and we’d better keep our eye on him.”

On leaving the ruins it occurred to Armstrong to examine the surroundings more narrowly than he had yet done. The flower-beds and the moss-grown path in the direction of the jetty showed the impress of his own and Pratt’s feet, but another path, which they had not trodden, also bore slight marks of use. Following it up with Warrender, he found that it led to a narrow track through the undergrowth, leading southward almost in a straight line. In single file they made their way along this, and came presently to a shallow indentation in the western shore, near its southern end.

”Pratt and I must have crossed this track a while ago,” said Armstrong; ”but I didn’t notice it, and I’m sure he didn’t.”

”Look here,” said Warrender, who had bent down to examine the grass and shrubs growing on the low bank. ”Wouldn’t you say that a boat had been run in?

In fact, it's been drawn up on to the bank. Here's a distinct mark of the keel–a small rowing-boat, I should think."

"Not very recent, is it?"

"But certainly not very ancient, or it wouldn't be so distinct. It's on Crawshay's arm of the river, though. D'you know, Armstrong, I shouldn't be surprised if it turns out we're a set of jackasses. I dare say the place teems with rabbits, and there are plenty of fellows besides Rush who'd be glad of getting their dinner for nothing, and would want to keep other people out of their preserves. Let's be getting back."

On arriving at their encampment they took the precaution of drawing the bow of the motorboat well on to the bank, and securing it firmly to a stout sapling. The dinghy, which Pratt had tied to a projecting root, they carried ashore, and placed behind the tent.

Pratt was sitting on his chair, tuning his banjo.

"You perceive I have not been idle," he said. "You couldn't have carried the dinghy with such agile ease if I hadn't emptied her first. Your marketing was a success, Warrender?"

"Yes, I got everything we wanted except petrol. By the way, Pratt, there's a rival troubadour in the village."

"I say! Surely not a banjo?"

"A banjo it is, and the player is no other than that general dealer fellow–what's his name? Blevins. I went up to the shop to get a can of petrol, and heard the tum-ti-tum and a tenor voice as good as your own—-"

"Don't crush me quite!"

"Warbling one of your own songs out of the open window above the shop–'Love me and the world is mine.' Really it might have been you, only the fellow has a little more of what you call the tremolo, don't you?"

"Vibrato–if you want to know. But hang it! The glory is departed. Another banjo, another tenor–and singing my songs! Pity we're not in Spain."

"Why on earth?" asked Armstrong.

"Because then we'd meet on some delicious moonlit night under the window of some fair senorita, and after trying to sing each other down like a couple of cats, we'd have a bit of a turn-up, and I'd have a chance to show I'm the better man. But how do you know it was the general dealer? It might have been some fair swain as comely as myself."

"I'll tell you. I went into the shop, and asked the sheepish young fellow there for one of the cans of petrol I saw against the wall. He declared they were all for Mr. Pratt at the Red House. There were at least half a dozen, and I protested that Mr. Pratt couldn't possibly want them all at once, and insisted on his fetching his employer. The singing had been going on all the time. It stopped a couple of

seconds after the fellow had gone into the house, and the man Blevins came into the shop. It's a fair deduction that he and the singer were one."

"It is, it is," murmured Pratt, mournfully, throwing a glance across the river.

"What *are* you squinting at?" asked Armstrong. "I've noticed you several times; what's there to look at?"

"There's me," replied Pratt, quickly. "Look at me, old chap, or at any rate, don't look that way; tell you why presently. Well, what about old Blevins, Warrender? My hat! what a name for a light tenor!"

"I asked him for one can to go on with. He was very polite–oily, in fact;–regretted extremely that he couldn't oblige me; the whole supply had been ordered for Mr. Pratt, and he daren't offend so good a customer."

"But I thought my uncle was away from home."

"Of course. Why didn't I remember that? Anyhow, while he was talking, in came that little foreign chauffeur we saw yesterday–an Italian, I fancy: he talked just like those Italian waiters at Gatti's. He had come to order a car; said that Mr. Pratt's car had broken down, and he had had to tow it to Dartmouth for repairs. He'd keep Blevins's car until the repairs were done. Blevins was a bit offhand with me after that. I suppose it was the regular tradesman's attitude to a less important customer. Anyhow, he told me rather bluntly that I couldn't have any petrol till to-morrow, and I came away."

"Quite right. You couldn't argue with a fellow who sucks up to my uncle, and sings my songs. I say, I think I shall go in for diplomacy. Don't you think I'd make a first-class attaché, or whatever they call 'em?"

Astonished at the sudden change of subject, they looked at him. He winked.

"You know," he went on–"one of those fellows in foreign capitals whose job it is to see and hear everything, and look innocent, while inside they're as wily as the cunningest old serpent. Your chronicle of Blevins is very small beer, Warrender; and while you've been yarning on about your old petrol, I've been corking myself up with something vastly more interesting, and you hadn't the least notion of it. That's why I'm sure I'd make no end of a hit in the diplomatic corps. Just keep your eyes fixed on my goodly countenance, will you? and I'll enlighten your understanding."

He took up his banjo, which he had laid across his knees, struck a note or two, then proceeded–

"After I'd changed, and carried up your purchases, I sat me down to beguile the tedium of waiting for you with my unfailing resource. Happening to glance across the river, I caught sight of some one watching me from the thick of a shrub, and my lively imagination conjured up the goose-flesh sensations of old Armstrong last night. With that presence of mind which will serve me well in my climb up the diplomatic ladder to a peerage, I hummed a stave of 'Somewhere a

voice is calling,' and turned my head away with the grace of a peacefully browsing gazelle; but the fellow's been watching me for the last half-hour, and I bet he doesn't know he's been spotted. Armstrong, you've got the best eyes. While I go on gassing, just look round as if you were jolly well bored stiff–no, I've a better idea; go into the tent, and take a squint through that small tear on the side facing the river, and fix your eyes on the shrub–I fancy it's a lilac past its prime–that fills the space between two beeches in the background. I don't flatter myself that the fellow was attracted by my dulcet strains, and if he's watching me, you may be sure he's watching all of us."

Armstrong got up, thrust his hands into his trousers pockets, and strolled nonchalantly into the tent. In a couple of minutes he returned in the same unconcerned way.

"You're right," he said, drawing up his chair beside Pratt's. "I saw a slight movement among the leaves, and a face. I'm not quite sure, but I believe it's that poacher fellow. It's certainly not the face I saw last night."

"Well, now, what interest do you suppose Siren Rush takes in us? And what's he doing in my uncle's grounds? D'you think my uncle's a bit potty, and sets Rush to keep watch like a warder on a tower? Is he afraid of some one squatting on his land in his absence? I don't suppose we're far wrong in accusing Rush of setting the boat adrift, but what's his motive in watching us? It's not mere curiosity; but if not curiosity, what is it?"

"We must wait and see," said Warrender.

"That's very prudent, but it promises poor sport," Pratt rejoined. "By the way, I suppose you didn't find anything fresh in the ruins?"

"Nothing. But Armstrong picked up a scrap of paper in the cellar this morning–a bit of a Russian newspaper. Hand it over, Armstrong."

"No," said Pratt, quickly. "Don't show it. I don't suppose Siren Rush can read Russian any more than I can; the paper can't be his, but he'd better not see us examining anything. Where did you find it, Armstrong?"

"In the cellar, by a heap of paper ash."

"Incriminating documents, as they say in the police courts. But why Russian? Look here, I know a man in London who reads Russian; he seems to like it. Give me the paper presently. We'll go into the village this afternoon and post it to him. I can't see how it will throw any light on things here, but we can at least

get it translated. And now, let's have lunch."

CHAPTER VII
TIN-TACKS

That night, Warrender was unusually wakeful. As a rule he slept as soundly as his companions; but now and then, when he had anything on his mind, he wooed sleep in vain. The strange incidents of the past two days had affected him more, psychologically, than either of the others. Armstrong, as soon as his doubts were removed, would suffer no more mental disturbance until something fresh, outside his experience, again upset his balance; while Pratt was one of those happy souls to whom life itself is a perpetual joy, and events only the changing patterns of a kaleidoscope.

Envying the two placid forms stretched on either side of him, Warrender was trying to grope his way through the labyrinth of mystery in which they seemed to have been caught, when he was surprised by a sudden slight rattling sound upon the tent, like the patter of small hailstones; it ceased in a second or two. The night had been fine, without any warning of a change of weather; the air was still; it seemed strange that a storm could have risen so rapidly, without a premonitory wind. His companions had evidently not been awakened. Moving carefully, so as not to disturb them, he crept across to the flap of the tent, and looked out. The stars glittered in a vault of unbroken blue; the tree-tops were silvered by the sinking moon; not a wisp of cloud streaked the firmament.

There was no repetition of the sound, and Warrender, thinking that he must, after all, have been dreaming, returned to his sleeping-bag. As often happens in cases of insomnia, the slight exertion of walking had the effect of inducing sleep, and he woke no more until morning.

Armstrong, as usual the first to rise, clutched his towel, and sallied forth barefoot for his dip. He had no sooner passed into the open, however, than he uttered what, with some exaggeration Pratt called a fiendish yell. Hurrying out to learn the cause of it, the others saw him standing on one foot and rubbing the sole of the other.

"Which of you blighters dropped a tin-tack here?" he asked.

"Got a puncture, old man?" said Pratt, sympathetically. "Your skin's pretty tough, luckily. Now, if it had been me–ough!"

[image]

"'GOT A PUNCTURE, OLD MAN?'"

He, too, hopped on one foot, and crooked the other leg, his face contorted for a moment out of its wonted cherubic calm.

"Told you so," he cried, picking a blue tack from between his toes. "I'm a very sensitive plant, I can tell you. I see blood. Warrender, I'd have yours if you weren't such a thundering big lout."

"Not guilty," said Warrender, who had prudently stood still. "You had better both come and put your boots on. We haven't any tacks in our outfit, so–I say!"

"What do you say?" said Pratt.

"Last night I heard a sound like a sharp shower of rain or hail on the tent. Just wait till I pull my boots on."

In half a minute he was out again, shod, and began to examine the grass around the tent.

"As I thought," he said. "There's a regular battalion of the beastly things; another trick of that blackguard Rush, no doubt. He's trying frightfulness."

"I'll wring his neck if I catch him," cried Armstrong.

"No, you don't, my son," said Pratt. "The law would say 'neck for neck,' I'm afraid. I shouldn't object to your blacking his eyes. But when you come to think of it, perhaps Rush isn't the culprit after all. We've never seen him on this side of the channel. It may have been the other fellow."

"What's clear is that some one is making a dead set at us," said Warrender, "and I don't like it. It will mean our moving camp."

"You surely won't let this sort of thing drive you away?" said Armstrong.

"What's to be done, then? They first monkey with the boat–by Jove! they may have cut her loose again."

"No, I spy her nose," said Pratt. "They believe in variety, evidently. But I quite agree with you. We shall always have to leave one on guard, and that will spoil the trio. Two's company, three's fun. All the same, the position is so jolly interesting that I shouldn't like to go right away and leave the mystery unsolved–I mean their objection to our company. We haven't had the cold shoulder anywhere else; and here, first old Crawshay, then these unknown–look here, you fellows, I vote we take the job up in earnest, and get to the bottom of it. It will alter the Arcadian simplicity of our holiday, but for my part I'd risk any amount of brain fag over a good jigsaw puzzle like this."

"We'll think it over," said Warrender. "The principal thing is not to lose my

boat, and the hundred odd pounds she cost."

On their way down to the river, Pratt espied a greyish object sticking in a bush. Shaking it down, he picked up a broken cardboard box on which was printed a description of "Best quality tin-tacks: British made."

"A clue!" he cried. "Sherlock Holmes would have built a whole theory on this. I don't think I was cut out for diplomacy after all. Criminal investigation is my forte. I'll go down to remote posterity as the most brilliant detective of this Pratt lost no time in taking a first step in his new career. At breakfast Warrender suggested that the tent had better be removed from its surrounding of tacks, which were too numerous to be easily collected.

"Very well," said Pratt. "You and Armstrong are the hefty men. You won't want my help, so I'll scull the dinghy up to the ferry, and start my investigations."

"Don't talk too much," said Armstrong.

"My dear chap, speech was given us to conceal thought. There's an art, some ancient said, in concealing art, and I bet I'd say more and tell less than any old Prime Minister that ever lived."

Leaving the dinghy in charge of the ferryman, he smiled a greeting to Rogers, the innkeeper, whose jolly face he caught sight of at the window, walked on to the village, and entered the general dealer's shop.

"Fine morning," he said to the aproned youth in attendance. "D'you happen to have any tenpenny nails?"

"We've got some nails three a penny, sir."

"No good at all. You couldn't hang a pirate on one of those, I'm sure. I suppose the tenpenny nail has gone out of fashion, but perhaps you have some tin-tacks. I dare say they'll do as well."

"Ay, we've got some tin-tacks–two sorts, white and blue."

"Not red?"

"No; I don't know as ever I seed 'em red."

"Well, I particularly wanted red; they don't show their blushes, you know. If you haven't, you haven't. I'll try blue; they won't look any bluer however hard you hit 'em." The assistant, staring at him like an amazed ox, handed him a box. "Yes," he went on, "now I look at them, I couldn't wish for better. They're a most admirable shade of blue, and exactly match my Sunday socks. I don't suppose there's much demand for 'em; my hosier assured me my socks were a very special line, so, of course, there couldn't be many people wanting tacks of that colour. I dare say you haven't sold a box of these since last season."

"Ah, but we have," said the simple youth, catching at something at last within his comprehension. "Only yesterday one of they furriners up at Red House bought three boxes."

"You don't say so! What an appetite he must have! I suppose it was that

big fellow who talks through his nose? He wears a red waistcoat, so I dare say he has blue socks."

"It warn't him. He's the groom. 'Twas the gardener chap."

"Of course. What was I thinking of? He wanted them to tack up his vines. They wouldn't be any good for horse-shoes, and there's no question of socks at all. You needn't wrap it up, the box won't catch cold in my pocket. Sixpence ha'penny? Dirt cheap. I think they're worth quite a guinea a box, but you daren't charge that, of course, or they would haul you up as profiteers. Thanks so much."

He had noticed that the full box exactly matched the broken one taken from the bush.

Elated at the success of his first move, Pratt returned at once to the camp.

"You're soon back," said Warrender. "Changed your mind again?"

"Not a bit. I'm inclined to think diplomats and detectives are of one kidney. I've been magnificently diplomatic, and I've made a discovery."

"Well?"

"My old uncle's as mad as a hatter!"

"A family failing," Armstrong remarked. "But what's that to do with it?"

"Why, this, old tomato. He employs a lot of foreigners; that's mad, to begin with. He goes away, and leaves them in the house with instructions to sow tin-tacks on No Man's Island. If that isn't stark madness, I'd like to know what is."

"Hadn't you better tell us plainly what you've been about?" said Warrender.

"In words of one syllable. I bought a box of tin-tacks. Here it is, and here's the one we found in the bush. You see, they're twins. They were bought at the same shop, to wit, the one owned by Samuel Blevins, general dealer and banjoist, I understand. My uncle's gardener bought three yesterday. Now, I ask you, would any man's gardener sprinkle inoffensive campers with tin-tacks unless instructed to? It's all as plain as a pikestaff. My mad uncle has a morbid horror of trespassers. He leaves word that they are to be chevied away by means fair or foul—-"

"But No Man's Island isn't his," Warrender interrupted.

"Certainly. That proves his madness. He thinks anybody who gets a footing here has designs on his property. It's a sort of Heligoland. He employs an ex-poacher to guard his own domains, and the foreigners to clear his outpost. Nothing could be plainer."

"Rot!" exclaimed Armstrong.

"Have it your own way. The facts are undeniable. Rush and the foreigners are in league to get rid of us, and they can't have any motive except their master's interest."

"We don't know that," said Warrender. "Your imagination runs too fast, young man. We don't even know for certain that Rush and the foreigners are

working together. All we really know is that some one wants to make the place too uncomfortable for us. The question is, what shall we do?"

"Stick it," said Armstrong. "It means keeping watch by night; we can take turns at that. We'll soon find out if—-"

"Ahoy, there!" cried a voice from the river.

Unperceived, a skiff had run in under the bank, and its occupant, a stout old gentleman in flannels, was stepping ashore.

"Old Crawshay!" murmured Pratt.

They got up to meet their visitor.

"Good-morning, my lads," said he, genially. "Surprised to see me, I dare say. We didn't part on the best of terms, but–well, let's shake hands and forget all about that. My daughter told me that you very kindly came to her assistance the other day. I'm obliged to you. I'm only sorry it didn't happen before we–but there, that's wiped up, isn't it? If you knew how I'd been pestered! By the way, one of you is related to my neighbour across the river, I understand."

"Yes, sir, that's me," said Pratt. "We're not on calling terms, though."

"Neither am I," rejoined Mr. Crawshay, with a smile. "We don't hit it together. He's a little—-"

"Potty, sir," said Pratt, as the old gentleman caught himself up. "It's a sore trial to the rest of the family. We were only talking about his distressing affliction just before you came. He really ought to be shut up."

"Indeed! I wasn't aware that it was as bad as that. That is certainly very distressing."

"A most unusual form of mania, too. I never heard anything like it before. Of course, there are people who crab their own country and countrymen, but it's more talk than anything else. My poor uncle, however, goes so far as to employ foreigners, who stick tin-tacks into people."

"Bless my soul!"

"Pratt draws the long bow, sir," said Warrender, thinking it time to intervene.

"And hits the bull's-eye every time," Pratt rejoined. "You can't deny that twenty yards away the grass is simply bristling with tin-tacks."

"The fact is, sir," said Warrender, "that some one is trying to annoy us. Yesterday morning our motor-boat was set adrift, and in the night some one showered a lot of tin-tacks round our tent. The motive seems to be the wish to drive us away. And Pratt thinks that his uncle gave instructions to the men at the house to prevent camping either on his ground or on the island. They've chosen a very annoying way of going about it."

"Outrageous! Scandalous!" cried Mr. Crawshay. "He has no rights on the island. It's criminal. I'm a magistrate, and I'll issue you a warrant against the

ruffians."

"The difficulty is that we haven't caught any one in the act," Warrender pursued. "I believe that warrants can't be anonymous. We've seen a fellow named Rush hanging about—-"

"A notorious gaol-bird. I've had my eye on him."

"But the tacks were bought at Blevins's shop by my uncle's gardener," said Pratt. "I pumped that out this morning. I dare say we could find out the man's name."

"But it's no crime to buy tin-tacks," said Warrender. "We don't know who actually scattered them. Indeed, we've no evidence at all; only inferences."

"Nothing to act on, certainly," said Mr. Crawshay. "It seems to me you had better cross the river, and camp on my ground after all; or, better still, come to the house; I've plenty of room."

"It's jolly good of you, sir," said Warrender, "but it goes against the grain to knuckle under. We'd like to catch the fellows, and find out, if we can, what their game really is. I don't think even Pratt believes his uncle is responsible, even indirectly."

"Not responsible for his actions, unfit to plead, to be detained during His Majesty's pleasure," said Pratt. "We talked it over, and decided to stick it, sir. It's a matter of pride with me. I'm thinking of taking up criminal investigation as a profession."

"Indeed!"

"He's just cackling, sir," said Armstrong, impelled to utterance at last.

"I suspected as much. Well, you've made up your minds, I see. I understand. At your age I should have done the same. If you want any help, you've only to row across the river. My house is about half a mile through the woods and across a field. You must come up one day in any case, and have lunch or dinner with me, and discuss the situation. And, by the way, if you're fond of shooting, my coverts are positively overstocked. I can provide guns, and you're welcome to 'em."

"Many thanks indeed, sir," said Warrender.

"And you'll keep me informed? I'll take action the moment you have evidence. It's atrocious."

They escorted him to his boat, gave him a shove off, and watched him until he was out of sight. Returning to the tent, Pratt remarked–

”D. Crawshay seems to be a dashed good sort after all.”

CHAPTER VIII
PIN-PRICKS

Late that afternoon, Warrender and Pratt started for a spin in the dinghy to the mouth of the river, intending to return on the tide. In accordance with their newly formed plan, Armstrong remained on guard in the camp.

Just before the scullers gained the river mouth they overtook a weather-beaten old fisherman leisurely rowing his heavy tub out to sea. Pratt gave him a cheery hail as they came abreast of him, and learning, in answer to a question, that he was proceeding to inspect his lobster pots nearly a mile out, they asked if they might accompany him.

”Ay sure, I’ve nothing against it,” said the old man.

”Nor against us, I hope,” rejoined Pratt, smiling.

”Not as I knows on.”

”Then we’re friends already. I always make friends in two seconds and a half, and being, like Cæsar, constant as the northern star, I stick like a limpet. You can’t shake me off.”

”Same as a lobster when he gets a grip.”

”Ah! you know more about lobsters than I do. Is that a lobster pot on the beach there?”

He indicated a low wooden hut, standing a little above high-water mark, on the shore curving away to the east.

”You be a joker, sir,” said the fisher, his native taciturnity thawed. ”That be a fisherman’s hut. Fisherman, says I, but ’tis little fishing as goes on hereabouts nowadays. I mind the time when there was a tidy little fleet in these waters, but that was long ago. There was good harbourage in those days, but the sea have cast up a bar across the mouth of the river; we’re going over it now; and it makes the passage dangerous for a boat of any draught. One or two old gaffers like me goes out now and again, but ’tis not what it was in my young days.”

”That hut looks a bit dilapidated–is it yours?”

”No, it belongs to Mr. Pratt, up along at the house.”

”You don’t say so! I dare say you’ll be surprised to hear it, but it wouldn’t be fair to you to keep it a secret; Mr. Pratt is my uncle.”

”Do ’ee tell me that, now?”

”But I hope you won’t think any the worse of me. It’s not my fault–I’m sure you’ll admit that.”

”Think the worse of ’ee! I reckon ’tis t’other way about. He be my landlord, and a rare good ’un; never raised my rent all the thirty years I’ve knowed ’un. We thinks a rare lot of ’un in village.”

”I say, do you mean that?”

”What for not? He never gives us no trouble, and if you can say that of the landlord as owns best part o’ the village, you may reckon there ain’t much wrong with ’un. Not but what he’ve a bit of a temper, and can’t abide being put upon; but treat him fair, and he’ll treat you fair. Ay, and more. That there hut, now. It do belong to him, but I doubt he’s never been richer for any rent paid him for’t.”

”Who rents it, then?”

”Uses it, I’d say. Nick Rush never paid no rent, that I’d swear.”

”Siren Rush again, Phil,” said Pratt, in an undertone, to Warrender. ”I thought Rush was a poacher,” he added, to the fisherman.

The old man made no reply. Pratt guessed that for some reason or other he was unwilling to commit himself.

”My uncle, as you say, can’t stand being put upon,” he went on. ”Which makes it the more surprising that he should allow a rascal like Rush to use his hut rent free. I wonder he doesn’t turn him out.”

”He did, a year or two back,” said the fisherman, tersely.

”That was when Rush went to gaol for poaching, of course?” said Pratt, with the air of one who was well acquainted with the circumstances. ”I should have done the same myself. No one would be hard on a poor fellow who kept straight, but when Mr. Crawshay had to sentence him for poaching, that was the last straw. But how is it that he has been allowed to come back? Has he turned over a new leaf?”

”The hut was empty for a year or two, and was falling to pieces,” answered the fisherman. ”When Rush came back to these parts he mended it a bit, and Mr. Pratt having gone to furrin parts again, I reckon his secretary didn’t think it worth while to bother about the feller.”

”I dare say that was it. In these days it’s not easy to get rid of an unsatisfactory tenant, I understand. But my uncle won’t be pleased when he comes home, I’m sure. The secretary ought to know that.”

”Ay, and so he would if ’twas an Englishman, but with these furriners, there’s no accountin’ for them. The village do have a grudge against Mr. Pratt on that score; the folk don’t like ’em. I feel a bit strong about it myself. There’s my son Henery, as owns a dairy farm up yonder, was courting Molly Rogers, sister of Joe at the inn, afore the war; terrible sweet on she, he was; and everybody

thought, give her time, they'd make a match of it. But bless 'ee, afore he was demobbed, as they call it, these furriners come along, and daze me if the smallest of 'em weren't Molly's husband inside of a month. And to make matters worse, it do seem as she've cast off all her old friends, becas nobody sees nothing of her these days. But there 'tis; you can't never understand a woman."

The greater part of this conversation took place while the old man was lifting his lobster pots–the others lying by. He went on to give them information about the coast–where good line-fishing could be had, rocks where crabs could be picked up at low tide. Having bought a couple of lobsters, Warrender turned the dinghy's head for home.

The sun was going down as they approached the island. Near its southern point they met Rush, slowly pulling a tubby boat down stream. He did not look at them as they passed; his square countenance was expressionless.

Rowing straight along the narrow channel to their camping-place, they lifted the dinghy ashore, and carried it towards the tent. Armstrong was not to be seen.

"The sentry has deserted his post," remarked Pratt. "But I dare say he's not far."

He gave a shrill whistle. An answer came distantly from the woods, and presently Armstrong appeared, pushing his way through the thickets on the western side of the clearing.

"All quiet, old man?" asked Warrender.

"Until a little while ago," Armstrong replied. "I heard a rustling and crackling in the thicket yonder. I couldn't see anything, and for a time I simply kept on the watch; but it went on so long that I got sick of doing nothing, and started off quietly to investigate, and nab the fellow if I could. But though I couldn't see him, it's clear he could see me. What his game was, I don't know; I only know that I could always hear him moving some little distance ahead of me, and before I realised how far I had got, I found myself pretty near the farther shore. I just caught a glimpse of a back among the bushes, but when I got to the place there was nothing to be seen or heard either. It occurred to me then that I'd been decoyed away while some one played hanky-panky here, and I cursed myself for an ass and hurried back, but things look undisturbed."

They glanced around the camp and inspected the interior of the tent. Their various properties appeared to be exactly as they had been left; nothing was obviously missing.

"I suppose it was another little freak of Siren Rush," remarked Pratt. "We met him rowing down as we came up. No doubt he was going to visit his hut on the beach."

He retailed the bits of information derived from the fisherman, dwelling

particularly on the surprising fact that, ”potty” though he might be, Mr. Ambrose Pratt was respected, and even liked, by the country folk.

It was not until they began to make preparations for their evening meal that a new light was cast on the mysterious movements in the thicket. Armstrong took their kettle and bucket down to the river. Neither would hold water. Examining them, he found a hole in the bottom of each, clean cut as if made by a bradawl. Meanwhile Pratt had discovered that their tea was afloat in the caddy, and the wick had been removed from their stove.

”More pin-pricks,” he said. ”Any one would think the blighters had learnt ragging at a public school.”

”Pin-pricks be hanged!” cried Armstrong, wrathfully. ”They’re much worse than a jolly good set-to–much more difficult to deal with. If they’d come out into the open, we’d jolly well settle their hash.”

The others guessed that Armstrong’s anger was largely due to his own failure as a watchman.

”One thing is clear,” said Warrender, considerately. ”Whoever played these tricks, it was not Rush. He couldn’t possibly have drawn you to the shore, cut round here and done the damage, and then got back to his boat and dropped down stream to where we met him, while you were coming straight across. On the other hand, if he had got into his boat directly after he disappeared, he could just have done it. If he was the decoy, who was the confederate?”

”’Time’s glory is to calm contending kings,’” quoted Pratt, ”and among other stupendous feats, ’to wrong the wronger till he render right.’ But I’m not disposed to leave old Time to his own unaided resources. These island Pucks are decidedly annoying, but they’re also uncommonly interesting. ’Life is a war,’ some one said. Well, it’s to be a war of wits, by the look of it, and I’ll back our wits in the end against sirens or sorcerers, or any old scaramouch. Only I’m bound to confess that up to the present the enemy is several points up.”

CHAPTER IX
REPRISALS

”What about dividing the night into watches?” asked Armstrong, when they had cleared away their evening meal.

”Dark to dawn is about eight hours,” responded Warrender. ”By summer-

time, nine to five."

"And three into eight will go with a recurring decimal," added Pratt. "I don't mind being the recurring decimal, which as a matter of practicality I take to mean that I'll come on every tenth hour; that is to say, I'll have ten hours' sleep unbroken, and turn up, fresh as a lark, at seven in the morning."

"Very ingenious," said Warrender, "but I prefer my fractions vulgar. Two-thirds of an hour is forty minutes, and you'll do your two hours forty minutes like us two. We'll start alphabetically, shall we? Armstrong first–then the vulgar fraction, then me."

"I always thought the middleman got the best of it in life," said Pratt. "Here's an exception, any way. The first and last men will each have five hours twenty minutes' sleep on end; the middleman won't get any, because he won't fall asleep at all in the first watch, from over-anxiety, or in the third, because it won't seem worth while. Still, if we permutate–APW, PAW and so on–we'll all suffer in turn. I warn you, when I'm middleman I shan't be able to keep awake without the solace of my banjo."

"I bar that," said Armstrong. "It'd give me nightmare."

"Well, I've warned you. If the Assyrian comes down like a wolf on the fold, somewhere about midnight, don't blame me."

But when, about seven o'clock in the morning, they compared notes, they found that none of them had been disturbed, and Pratt had a good deal to say on the advantages of the midnight hours for the refreshment of the inner man. Two empty ginger-beer bottles beside his chair approved his sentiments.

"It's only a respite, of course," he said. "They wouldn't have started their tricks without a reason; they won't give them up until they find them useless; and they'll make that discovery all the sooner if we open a defensive offensive. I propose to go into the village after breakfast; an idea's occurred to me; and I'll call at the post office and see if any answer has come from the fellow I sent that Russian newspaper to. You had better come with me, Jack; it's Phil's turn to be house-dog."

So it was arranged. Pratt and Armstrong rowed the dinghy to the ferry. Joe Rogers was standing at his inn door.

"Morning to 'ee, young gentlemen," he said. "You be Mr. Pratt's nephew, sir," he added to Pratt.

"How do you know that?" asked Pratt.

"Old Gaffer Drew telled me when he came home along last night. He said as 'twas the young feller whose tongue went like a clapper, so I knowed 'ee at once."

"Well, I'd rather be known by my tongue than by my finger-prints, wouldn't you?"

”Ay, we’ve all got our weaknesses. Mine is baldness, come of a fever I took aboardship when we was off Gallapagos. My old woman *will* make me wear a wig, though I could do without it this hot weather. And how do ’ee find No Man’s Island, sir?”

”A place of enchantment, equal to Prospero’s island. We know there’s a Puck, and we suspect there’s a Caliban, but more of that anon.”

”You do talk like a book, sir. Well, I’m glad you be comfortable. Good day to ’ee.”

They called at the village post office. There was no letter from Pratt’s friend.

”Let’s go on and have a look at my uncle’s house,” said Pratt, when they came out. ”It’s about a mile beyond the village, on that by-road we saw the other day. The road winds a good deal, and though I don’t propose to leave my card at the house, I’d like to take a peep at it once more, closer than we can get from the river.”

They went on, turned into the by-road, and after about three-quarters of a mile came to a brick wall on the right, in which there was a massive gate, and within it a small lodge. The gate was padlocked, the lodge closed and shuttered. A few hundred yards beyond was a second gate and lodge. The latter also was evidently unoccupied, but the gate was open.

”It’s the shortest way from the house to Dartmouth,” said Pratt. ”We can’t see the house for the trees, but if I remember rightly the ground’s more open a little farther along.”

In a minute or so they came to a spot where, by mounting the wall, they were able to obtain a clear view of the building. It stood above a terraced garden some three hundred yards from the road. Fine though the day was, they were both struck by a sense of gloom. The windows were all closed; those on the ground floor were shuttered; and but for a thin wisp of smoke rising from one of the chimneys the house might have been supposed to be untenanted.

”The servants’ quarters are at the back,” said Pratt. ”The foreigners at any rate don’t play high jinks in the front rooms while my uncle is away. But it looks pretty dreary, doesn’t it, old man? Makes me think of Mariana in the moated grange.”

”Don’t know the lady,” said Armstrong. ”But look! there’s a car coming out of the garage at the side.”

”That used to be the stables,” said Pratt, as the doors were flung wide, and an open four-seated touring car emerged. ”That’s not the car we saw the other day, though the chauffeur’s the same.”

Perched on the wall they remained watching. The chauffeur stopped the car, got out, and shut the doors of the garage. Meanwhile the big fellow whom Armstrong had felled came round the other side of the house carrying a small

leather trunk. Behind him walked a short, dapper little man, wearing a grey Homburg hat and a light overcoat. From his gestures it appeared that he ordered the big man to strap the trunk on to the luggage-carrier at the rear of the car. When this was done, the small man got into one of the back seats, and the chauffeur, already at the wheel, started the car along the right-hand fork in the drive leading to the open gate.

"Down! They mustn't see us," said Pratt.

They dropped from the wall into the grounds, and shinned up a small tree whose thick-laden branches overhung the edge of the road. Half a minute later the car ran past, swung to the right outside the gate, and dashed rather noisily in the direction of Dartmouth.

[image]

"THEY SHINNED UP A SMALL TREE."

[image]

"HALF A MINUTE LATER THE CAR RAN PAST."

"The passenger is my uncle's secretary, I suppose," said Pratt. "I wonder which of the many nations of the world claims him? He might pass for an Englishman, but you can't tell from a fugitive glance when a man's clean-shaven."

"I thought he looked a decent sort of chap," said Armstrong, as they returned to the road; "not the kind of fellow to consort with a man like Rush."

"No. I dare say Rush is playing some game of his own with one of the underlings. I'll tell you my idea, by the way. Leaving us alone last night struck me as rather suspicious. They've probably got something in hand for to-night. Well, it occurred to me that if Rush comes prowling around our tent, with more tin-tacks or who knows what, it would be rather a good dodge to trip him up and collar him before he can hook it."

"He'll guess we're on the watch. No man would be such an ass as to suppose we'd let him do the tin-tack trick a second time."

"That may be. Very likely he kept off last night just for that reason. As you say, he'd guess we'd be on the watch, and probably thinks we're all jolly sick to-day because nothing happened, and won't be inclined to keep vigil again.

Anyhow, if he does come again, he won't expect any danger until he gets near to the tent, and I propose to nab him before then."

"How?"

"Stretch a cord two or three inches above the ground just where the thicket ends at the edge of the clearing. He wouldn't see it, even by moonlight, because it would be pretty well hidden by the grass. But he'd be bound to catch one of his hoofs in it, and a lumbering lout like that couldn't pick himself up before any one of us three would be down on him."

"But how d'you know which way he'd come?"

"He wouldn't come across the clearing, that's certain. Well, the tent is about six yards from the thicket behind, and the edge of the thicket makes a sort of rough half-circle. A cord of fifty or sixty yards would be plenty long enough. I dare say we'll get one at old Blevins's shop. We'll pay him a call on the way back."

The shop was unattended when they entered it, but a rap on the counter brought Blevins himself, wearing the polite tradesman's smile.

"Good-morning, Mr. Blevins," said Pratt. "You've a motor-car for hire, I believe?"

"Well, yes, sir, I do have as a rule, but 'tis out to-day. In fact, I don't know when it will be back. 'Tis hired for the Red House, Mr. Pratt's being under repair."

"Ah! that's a pity. We'll have to put off our joy-ride. Well, it can't be helped. Perhaps you could let us have a skipping-rope instead?"

"A skipping-rope, sir?"

"Yes. Didn't you know? Skipping is one of the most beneficial exercises any one could indulge in. It brings into play I forget exactly how many muscles, develops a perfect co-ordination between the brain, the eye, the hands and feet; and if you ever go to Oxford, I dare say you'll see on any college lawn all the brainiest men of the rising generation skipping about under the eyes of their revered tutors. If the mountains could skip like rams, as we're told they did, there's nothing surprising in a future Prime Minister skipping like a giddy goat, is there? And there are hundreds of future Prime Ministers imbibing the milk of academic instruction at Oxford to-day."

Blevins had listened with a stare of puzzlement. The short, chubby youth appeared to be serious; his companion's face showed no flicker of a smile; yet the general dealer, remembering what his assistant had told him, had a dim suspicion that he was dealing either with a joker or with a lunatic. To get rid of his dilemma he confined himself to the severely practical.

"Well, sir," he said, "I don't keep skipping-ropes as such, but I've a cord which the neighbours do make clothes-line of."

"The very thing!" cried Pratt. "We haven't made any arrangements about

our washing, and, as laundry prices have gone up beyond all bearing, we may have to do our own. Of course we shall want a clothes-line for hanging out our shirts and things on, and as my friends are regular nuts, and possess a very extensive wardrobe, we shall want a long line–quite fifty yards. Add ten yards for a skipping-rope, that makes sixty; we'll take sixty yards, Mr. Blevins; and as you can't possibly make a neat parcel of that, you'd better twist 'em round the hefty frame of my friend here; sort of bandolier, you know."

The man proceeded to measure out the cord from a bale which he rolled from his back premises.

"You be camping on No Man's Island, 'tis said," he remarked.

"We are," replied Pratt. "We're followers of the simple life; fresh air, cold water, and plain fare. We drink nothing stronger than ginger-beer, and eat nothing more luxurious than macaroons, and I suppose we can't get even them in a place like this? What's the consequence? We never have bad dreams, like people who stuff themselves and sleep in stuffy rooms."

"And you haven't been troubled by the sounds, sir?"

"What sounds?"

"Well–some folks do talk of terrible groans they've heard if so be they've rowed past the island by night, and 'tis said the place is haunted by the spirit of the old gentleman as used to live there."

"He hasn't disturbed our rest, I assure you. I dare say he's been soothed by my banjo; I usually tune up a little before I go to bed. You play the banjo yourself, I hear; you know how grateful and comforting it is–sweet and low, not like the squeaking scrape of the violin, or the ear-splitting blast of the cornet. I think you're a man of taste, Mr. Blevins, and as a fellow-musician I congratulate you.... That's sixty yards? Now, Armstrong, stick out your chest, and Mr. Blevins and I between us will rig up your bandolier."

When they had left the shop, Pratt asked: "I say, what's he mean by those old groans?"

"I heard a sort of moaning the night I first saw the cottage," Armstrong replied; "but I put it down to the wind, of course."

"There's been no wind to speak of since we settled on the island. I'd like to hear those sounds. Strikes me they're an acoustical phenomenon. Sure it wasn't an owl?"

"Nothing like it; the note was deeper and more prolonged."

"Well, if it's the wind in the eaves the sound will be heard by day as well as by night, and I'll trot over to the cottage the first breezy morning and listen."

Warrender had nothing to report when they regained the camp. He thought well of Pratt's idea of a trap, and they spent the greater part of the day in cutting a number of stout pegs from saplings in the woods. These they drove into the

ground, at intervals of a few feet, in a long semi-circle at the edge of the clearing, and stretched the clothes-line upon them about six inches from the ground. One or other of them kept a careful look-out while the work was in progress, and nothing was seen of Rush or any other human being. Before dusk the task was completed, and they had provided themselves in addition with stout cudgels.

It was Pratt's turn to take first watch that night. On the previous night each had sat out in the open, but it occurred to Pratt that a better place would be just within the tent. Accordingly, when the others encased themselves in their sleeping-bags, he posted himself on his chair at the entrance, shaded from the moonlight by the projecting flap.

More than two hours had passed; he was growing sleepy, frequently glancing at his watch to see when it would be time to awaken Warrender. Just before half-past eleven he heard a slight sound from the thicket on his right. Seizing his cudgel, he looked in the direction of the sound. The edge of the clearing on that side was deep in shadow. He stood up; it might be a false alarm; he would not awaken his companions.

Suddenly there was a heavy thud, followed by smothered curses. Pratt dashed out of the tent and across the clearing. At the edge of the thicket a man was struggling to his feet. Even at that moment Pratt was too much of a sportsman to use his cudgel. He closed with the man, gripped him by the collar, and hauled him into the moonlight, crying, "What are you doing here?" The man attempted to wriggle loose. Pratt dropped his cudgel, got a firm grip with both hands, and with a dexterous use of his knee threw the intruder heavily to the ground. Next moment he was struck violently on the left side of his head, and fell half-stunned.

[image]

"PRATT THREW THE INTRUDER HEAVILY TO THE GROUND."

Meanwhile the sounds had wakened Armstrong and Warrender. Heaving themselves out of their sleeping-bags they rushed in their pyjamas across the clearing. Pratt was sitting up, dazedly rubbing his head.

"What's the row?" asked Armstrong.

"Diamond cut diamond," murmured Pratt. "Help me up, you fellows. Everything's whirling round."

They helped him back into the tent and sponged his head. Presently he was able to tell them what had happened.

"Was it Rush you collared?" asked Warrender.

”No, a bigger man, with a broad face, high cheekbones, and a bent-in nose.”

”The face I saw in the thicket!” exclaimed Armstrong. ”Who was the other chap?”

”I don’t know. I didn’t see him, confound the fellow! Just my luck! And it was my scheme!”

CHAPTER X
A SOFT ANSWER

There was no more sleep that night for any of the party. When Pratt’s bruised head had been bathed and bandaged the three placed their chairs at the tent entrance, and sat in the still, warm air, discussing the situation more seriously than they had yet done. They had learnt definitely from the recent incident that at least two men were concerned in the campaign of petty annoyance. One of these–the man whose face Armstrong had seen in the thicket–looked like a foreigner, and apparently either lived somewhere on the island or had means of reaching it from the mainland. What more probable than that the second man was Rush, and that his boat was placed at the foreigner’s disposal?

”The more I think of it,” said Warrender, ”the more likely it seems that Rush and one of the foreigners are playing some private game of their own. I haven’t a notion what the game is, but I can’t believe that Pratt’s uncle left instructions to worry trespassers on an island that isn’t his, or that any decent fellow in his secretary’s position would encourage it.”

”That assumes the secretary is a decent fellow,” remarked Armstrong.

”Well, why not?” asked Pratt. ”A man may be mad without being a fool, and my old uncle, though he’s mad enough to hate English servants, wouldn’t be such a fool as to engage foreigners without inquiring about their characters.”

”That fellow Armstrong knocked down wasn’t an attractive specimen,” said Warrender.

”He was drunk,” said Pratt. ”Some of the most estimable characters–the most respectable of English butlers, for instance–may now and then take a drop too much.”

”That fellow is a sot,” said Armstrong. ”It’s marked all over him.”

”Well, I tell you what I think we had better do,” said Warrender. ”Go up to the house, see the secretary, and put the case to him. If he’s a decent fellow, and

the man you tripped, Pratt, is one of his crew, he'll put a stop to this foolery. Will you go up with me to-morrow?"

"Better take Armstrong," Pratt replied. "If my uncle were at home I'd go and beard him, and jolly well tell him a few things for his good. But I'd rather not show up in his absence. Besides, I shall have a head to-morrow, and a swelling the size of a turnip. I feel the growing pains; I'll be fit for nothing."

"Rough luck!" said Warrender, commiseratingly. "Very well. Jack and I will go, and I dare say that'll be the end of our troubles."

At nine o'clock next morning Armstrong and Warrender rowed off in the dinghy; at a quarter to ten they entered the grounds of the Red House. The paths were weedy, the grass untrimmed, the flower-beds untidy.

"The foreigners don't overwork," remarked Armstrong, as they walked along the drive towards the house. "The place is a disgrace to the neighbourhood."

"It certainly looks very much neglected," said Warrender. "The house might be uninhabited but for that smoke from one of the chimneys, and the car waiting at the door."

"The same car Pratt and I saw yesterday. It belongs to old Blevins. I wonder whether they use it for joy-riding, or what? The secretary may be away, by the bye; yesterday he went off with a trunk."

"A nuisance if he is. But we'll see."

The front of the house faced south-east, and the drive wound from the gate in a wide arc to the left. The lower windows were shuttered; at some of those on the upper storey the blinds were drawn; but as the visitors approached there appeared at a small upper casement on the side of the house facing them the form of a woman, At first it seemed that she had not seen them; she stood looking out in an attitude of idle immobility. They could not distinguish her features through the small square panes of the casement; she was stout in build, and dressed in the print of a domestic servant.

Suddenly, as her eyes fell on them, she gave a perceptible start. She turned her head quickly from the window, as if to see whether any one was behind her; then raised her hands, apparently to undo the catch. Next moment she dropped them with a gesture of impatience or despair. The boys saw her shake her head, and, lifting an arm, make a sweeping movement with it towards the rear of the house. A moment later she left the window hurriedly, as a servant might do in answering a call.

"Rummy!" said Warrender. "That's Rogers's sister, I suppose; wife of the chef, you remember. What did she mean?"

"It looked as if she wanted to open the window and couldn't," returned Armstrong. "She wanted to speak to us."

”That movement of her arm–was it a warning to us to go away?”

”Too late in any case. That’s the secretary coming out; he’s seen us.”

The dapper little man whom Armstrong had seen on the day before, dressed as he was then, was hurrying down the steps from the front entrance when he caught sight of the boys. He stopped short, gave a swift glance behind him, then descended the remaining steps and came towards them. His movements were quick, his step was light, and as he drew nearer they were aware of a very vivid personality, accentuated by dark eyes of great brilliance, set rather closely together.

”Yes, gentlemen,” he said, smiling, ”what can I do for you?”

His voice was low and smooth; the intonation, rather than the accent, alone suggested a foreign origin.

”Can you give us a few minutes alone?” said Warrender.

The chauffeur had just come down the steps, carrying a box, and stood with it still in his arms, beside the car, looking on with an air of startled curiosity.

”Certainly,” replied the man, ”if it is only a question of minutes. As you see, I am about to drive out, and my time is short. Henrico”–he addressed the chauffeur–”put the box down and go into the house. Now, gentlemen.”

”You are Mr. Pratt’s secretary, I believe,” said Warrender, feeling a little awkwardness in the situation, and wishing that the voluble banjoist were in the office of spokesman instead of himself.

”Yes. My name is Gradoff–Paul Gradoff.”

”Well, Mr. Gradoff, I’m sorry to trouble you, but you may be able to throw some light on a puzzle that’s rather annoying to us.”

”Anything I can do—-”

”We are camping on the island over there, and ever since our arrival have been the object of annoying and–I’m afraid I must say–malicious attacks. We have reason to believe that one of the aggressors is not an Englishman, and knowing that your staff here is largely foreign, we have come up to–to—-”

”Complain?” suggested Gradoff, as Warrender hesitated.

”Well, rather to ask if you can help us,” Warrender went on. ”I should explain that we fell foul of one of your men on the evening of our arrival, and it occurs to me that he, or one of his mates, may be retaliating.”

”Ah yes; I had heard of that little matter from my man, Jensen,” said Gradoff, suavely. ”You could hardly expect him to be amiable, could you? He was insulted by a yokel, very properly chastised him, and was then suddenly set upon by one of you young men, and before he could defend himself was seriously hurt.”

”That’s nonsense, Mr. Gradoff!” exclaimed Armstrong. ”The man dealt a foul blow, and I stepped in.”

”It was you?” rejoined Gradoff, in his suave, smooth tones. ”The version

is different: *tot homines tot sententiæ*–being students you will recognise the allusion. It is so very difficult to reconcile conflicting stories, especially in common brawls. But, come; it is not like Englishmen to make a fuss about trifles, and Olof Jensen is not the man to bear malice. If that is the sum of your complaint—-"

"But it is not," Warrender broke in, nettled by the Russian's suavity and his Latin. "We hadn't been twelve hours on the island when our motor-boat was set adrift—-"

"My dear young man, *quandoque dormitat Homerus*–you will correct me if I do not quote accurately; my schooldays, alas! are a distant past. Even the most experienced sailors–and I am far from saying I do not include you among them–may tie a careless knot; make a slip, as you English say. And the current is strong when swollen by the rain. Really, my dear sir—-"

"At any rate tin-tacks don't rain from heaven. We had a shower of them over our tent one night, and in the morning—-"

"*Latet anguis in herbâ*! Come, come; you were dreaming. I am told that in the past the island was a favourite resort of trippers, a class of people who reprehensibly leave behind them much rubbish–paper bags, bottles, tin cans; why not tin-tacks?"

Warrender was fuming, irritated by his lack of evidence as well as by the secretary's manner. He wished that he had ignored the minor incidents, and confined his statement to the latest.

"We'd no proof–I know that–till last night," he said. "A fellow tripped over a rope snare we had rigged up. One of us caught him, and knocked him out; he was clearly a foreigner—-"

"And you have him in custody? Ah, now we are getting to something substantial! He was a foreigner; on the principle *ex pede Herculem*–you recognise the proverb?–you infer that he belongs to my staff. And you did not bring him with you for confrontation?"

"He was rescued by—-"

"By another foreigner?"

"We don't know who by; he gave my friend a blow from behind."

"That is more serious, truly. But what do you tell me? You are camping on the island–with permission? No, of course not; is it not No Man's Island? Well, what is no man's is all men's. What more likely than that others are camping there also? One of them falls over your rope, and is knocked out by your friend; your friend is, in turn, knocked out by a friend of the tripper. It is the *lex talionis*–the term is familiar to you? That, of course, is only a theory, but I commend it to your consideration. And now, I take it, I have the sum of your complaints. I put it to you, do they make a case against my staff?"

"I wasn't making a case against your staff," said Warrender. "I merely stated

the facts."

"But with a bias; yes, with a bias, natural enough to youth and hot blood. I do not blame you; but you will agree that I am somewhat concerned for the good name of the men under my charge. Lest you should still harbour doubts about them, I will summon them. You shall see them. They number four. There is Jensen, the Swede, whom you, sir"–turning to Armstrong–"so unhappily misjudged. But you shall see them all. There is a woman, too, the wife of the chef, an amiable countrywoman of yours. It is perhaps not necessary to summon her? You do not suspect her of sowing tin-tacks or falling over your rope?"

He smiled, and without waiting for an answer went to the open house-door and called his chauffeur, to whom he gave instructions. Meanwhile, the two boys, chafing under his politeness with its touch of irony, exchanged looks of silent sympathy.

"The men will be here immediately," said Gradoff, rejoining them. "What a delightful summer we are having! *Per æstivam liquidam*–you remember the line? How I envy you your daily browsing on the Classics! Ah, here come the four suspects! Two, you perceive, are tall; two are short. I will align them in order of their heights, as they do in your army, I believe. Halt, men! Stand in line: Jensen at one end, then Radewski, then Prutti, last of all, Rod. Now, my dear sirs, inspect the company."

"There's no need," said Warrender. "We've seen them all in or about the village. None of these is the man you saw, Jack?"

"No," replied Armstrong, shortly.

"But darkness, even moonlight, is deceptive," said Gradoff, in his suavest manner. "Really, I am concerned to convince you thoroughly; I should regret your going away harbouring the least particle of suspicion. I will interrogate them in turn. Jensen, you do not amuse yourself by sowing tin-tacks on No Man's Island?–Jensen, I may explain, is Mr. Pratt's horsekeeper, in particular, and handy-man in general. Well, Jensen?"

"Nope," replied the man, gruffly, eyeing Armstrong with a scowl.

"And you, Radewski?–Radewski is the gardener." The boys recognised him as the passenger in the car that had collided with the farm-wagon.

"No, of course not," answered the Pole, smiling.

"And now you, Prutti?–the chauffeur, as you see."

"It is silly, stupid; I say ze question—-" began the Italian, volubly.

"Yes, yes; but I want no comments. Just say yes or no," Gradoff interrupted.

"No, zen; I say no. I say ze question—-"

"He comes from the south, gentlemen," said Gradoff, deprecatingly. "Now, Rod, what have you to say?"

"Sacré nom d'un—-"

”Now, now. Maximilien Rod is the chef, gentlemen, accustomed to the use of the diction of the menu. Plain English, Rod, if you please.”

”Zen I say zat ze man vat accuse me of so imbecile, so–so–so—-”

”Contain yourself, Rod. Yes or no?”

”No, no; not at all–no!”

”Four negatives do not make an affirmative,” said Gradoff, turning to the boys, and smiling with the persistent urbanity they were beginning to detest. ”These are all my staff–with the exception of the excellent woman, Rod’s wife. Would you like to pursue your inquiries?”

”Thank you, it is unnecessary,” replied Warrender, in as even and polite a tone as he was master of.

”Then the men may return to their duties, and I may begin my journey. May I give you a lift as far as the cross-roads? Or, stay! You are here very near the river. You may prefer to take a short cut through the grounds, and avoid the long walk on the dusty road.”

”Thank you,” said Warrender, ready to accept any suggestion that would remove him quickly from the presence of Mr. Gradoff; ”if some one will show us the way.”

”Certainly. Quite a happy thought,” said the Russian. He called to the chef, the rearmost of the party filing away. ”Rod, show these gentlemen the shortest way to the river; bring them opposite to the island. Good-morning, gentlemen. I am sorry you have found me a broken reed. But I do hope your holiday will not be spoilt; I have such keen memories of my own happy holidays–*liberatio et vacuitas omnis molestiæ*: you remember your Cicero? *Good*-morning.”

He sprang into the car, in which the chauffeur was already seated, and with a smile and a wave of the hand was driven away.

CHAPTER XI

INFORMATION RECEIVED

”Sarcastic swine!” muttered Armstrong, savagely, as he set off with Warrender behind the rotund little chef.

”So confoundedly polite I could have kicked him,” returned Warrender, in the same undertone. ”His beastly Latin, too! What did he take us for?”

”What we are–a couple of mugs. And Pratt’s worse, with his absurd theo-

ries. Of course these chaps aren't in it. Rush is at the bottom of it, and the other fellow, though he looked like a foreigner, is very likely only some ugly freak of a Devonian after all."

"Well, I'll be hanged if I stand any more of Rush's nonsense. Next time anything happens, I'll get old Crawshay to set that bobby moving we saw the other day. I'm sick of it."

Ill-humour had for the moment got the upper hand, and they were conscious only of their soreness as they followed their guide through the unkempt grounds. Their attention was attracted presently by the tower that reared itself out of a thicket some little distance on their left. It was a square much-dilapidated building of stone, encrusted with moss and ivy, reaching a height of some fifty or sixty feet. The window openings were boarded up with deal planks that were evidently new.

"Is the tower used for anything now?" Warrender asked the Swiss.

"Ze tower? No, it is ruin, fall to pieces," replied the man.

[image]

"'ZE TOWER? NO, IT IS RUIN, FALL TO PIECES.'"

"I say, we *are* a couple of lunatics!" cried Armstrong. "We've left the dinghy at the ferry. What's the good of the short cut? Pratt can't work the motor."

"Hang it! I'd clean forgotten."

"Zen ve go back?" said the guide, eagerly. He had come to the end of the open grounds; the rest of the way lay through a wilderness of shrubs that promised laborious walking.

"No, I'm hanged if we do," said Warrender. "Now we've come so far we'll not go back."

"Zen how you cross ze river?"

"Swim it. You needn't come. We'll forge straight ahead. Thanks."

He tipped the man, and plunged with Armstrong into the thicket. Ten minutes' battling with the intricately woven mass of greenery brought them to the brink of the stream almost exactly opposite to their camping-place. They stripped, bundled their clothes upon their heads, and made short work of the thirty-foot channel.

"My aunt! In native garb!" cried Pratt, as they walked up still unclothed. "'Here be we poor mariners.' Shipwrecked? Lost the dinghy?"

"No, only our tempers," replied Armstrong. "The dinghy's still at the ferry."

"I say, my uncle hasn't got back, has he?" asked Pratt.

”No. Why?”

”I thought perhaps you had met him, and got a taste of *his* temper, that’s all. ’Tell me not in mournful numbers’–but tell me anyhow you like the cause of this Ulyssean exhibition.”

Warrender began the narrative as he towelled himself, continued it through his dressing, and concluded it when he had dropped into his chair by Pratt’s side. Pratt listened with ever-growing merriment.

”You priceless old fatheads!” he exclaimed. ”When the beggar chucked Latin at you why didn’t you pelt him with Greek, Phil?–or with sines and hypotenuses, and all that, Jack? Don’t you remember how some Cambridge josser floored a heathen bargee by calling him an isosceles triangle? I wish I’d gone.”

”I wish you had!” echoed Warrender. ”But when a fellow’s so dashed polite—-”

”Polite! I tell you what it is: you’re both too serious for this flighty world. When you consider that it’s gyrating at the rate of I don’t know how many thousand miles a minute, it’s unnatural, positively indecent, for any one to be so stuggy. The art of life is to effervesce. But, you know, the important feature of your morning’s entertainment seems not to have sufficiently impressed you.”

”What’s that?” asked Armstrong.

”Rod’s wife. *Cherchez la femme*! You oughtn’t to have come away without having had a word with her.”

”How on earth could we?” said Warrender. ”We weren’t asked into the house, and if we had been—-”

”My dear chap, if a fair lady beckoned to me out of her casement window I’d find some means of receiving her behests. Rod’s wife, *née* Molly Rogers, didn’t make signs to you for nothing, and I foresee that I shall have to turn our skipping-rope into a rope ladder, and—-”

”Oh, don’t go on gassing,” Armstrong interposed, irascibly. ”Can’t you be serious?”

”Solemnity itself. We’ve got to fetch that dinghy. I want to go to the post office. Very well, after lunch Phil shall run me up in the motorboat. I’ll have a word with Rogers on the way, and I bet my boots I won’t come back without some little addition to our dossier.”

Pratt’s programme was carried out. Warrender and he found Joe Rogers pulling spring onions in his garden behind the inn. The man had placed his wig on a pea-stick, and his bald pate glowed in the sunlight like a pink turnip.

”Good-afternoon, Joe,” said Pratt, genially. ”I wonder how it is that you sailormen so often take to gardening when your sea days are over?”

”I can’t tell ’ee, sir, ’cept it be as we loves the look o’ vegetables, being without ’em so long at a time. The old woman do say it keeps me out o’ mischief.”

”Now, Rogers,” called his better half from an upper window, ”put on your hair this minute. Drat the man! Do ’ee want to catch your death of sunstroke?”

Rogers gave a sly look at his visitors as he donned his wig.

”It do make my skull itch terrible,” he said. ”But she’s a good woman.”

”I jolly well hope I shall be looked after as well when my time comes,” said Pratt. ”But I’m not thinking of matrimony yet. What age did you marry at, Joe?”

”Thirty-one, just the same age as my sister Molly, but not in such a hurry. My missus took a deal o’ courting; ’twas five years’ hard labour; whereas Molly give in in less than a month.”

”He came, he saw–he conquered. Must be something fascinating about him. Has she lost her cold, by the way? My friends happened to see her this morning.”

”Well now, if that ain’t too bad. She haven’t been nigh me for a good fortnight, and she didn’t ought to go about the village without looking in.”

”They saw her at the house. She seemed to be catching flies or something at the window. I gather you don’t like her husband.”

”I’ve nothing against him, ’cept his name and furren nature. My missus told her she was cutting a rod for her own back.”

”Surely he doesn’t beat her?”

”That wasn’t her meaning. Rod’s his name, and the missus do have a way of taking up a word and twisting of it about, you may say. ’A rod in pickle,’ says she. ’Tis just a clappering tongue; there’s no sense in it. But it do seem as Molly have turned her back on all her old friends. ’Tis like this: they furriners bain’t favourites in the parish, and Molly sticks to her husband, as ’tis her duty. That’s what I make of it.”

”Well, I dare say she chose the pick of the bunch. How many are there of them, by the bye?”

”Four, leaving out the secretary. They don’t go about in the village much. None of ’em comes here ’cept that feller you saw t’other day, and he don’t come often. *I* don’t get no good of ’em. ’Twas different in the old days.”

”Things will take a turn,” said Pratt, consolingly. ”When my–when Mr. Pratt returns I dare say he’ll quarrel with the foreigners, and get English servants again.”

”And be ye all right on the island, sir?”

”Having a ripping time. We’re always on the look-out for the ghost, but he seems rather shy. I can sympathise with him, being so bashful myself.”

”You do seem to have a bit of a bump one side of the head, sir. No inseck have been poisoning ’ee, I hope.”

”No. Insects love me too well to disfigure me. I’m inclined to think it was a worm, or something like a leech, perhaps. It’s a trifle; a molehill, not a mountain.

To-morrow both sides will be equal, and the angles subtended at the base as right as ever. Good-bye; keep your hair on."

"Well, old man, we've spent a profitable quarter of an hour," said Pratt, as he went on with Warrender to the village. "The number of Gradoff s staff is confirmed; therefore the chap I collared is not one of them. As to Rod's wife, there's no mystery about her. She's disgusted, as any sensible person would be, at the petty narrow-mindedness of the natives who dislike her husband simply because he's of another breed, and so she cuts 'em dead."

"But what did her movements at the window mean?" asked Warrender. "It certainly looked as if she wanted help or something."

"Nothing of the sort, depend upon it. She was waving you off; she's as careful of Rod as Rogers's missus is of him; she was afraid Armstrong would go for Rod as he went for the Swede. I'm always ready to own up when I'm wrong. My old theories won't hold water. I think I'll give up detecting and go in for the Bar. You only have to stick to your brief; needn't have an idea of your own."

"Well, it seems to me we're not much for'arder."

"Quite a mistake. The issue is narrowed down. Clear our minds of the foreign menagerie and all that, and concentrate on Rush. That's the ticket."

Calling at the post office, he was handed a letter from his London friend, who reported that the scrap of paper was torn from a copy of the *Pravda.* Only part of the date of issue was visible–the word June; and the incomplete paragraph of text appeared to relate to the high prices of perambulators.

"There you are," said Pratt. "Much cry and little wool. It proves nothing except that some one, some time or other, had a Russian newspaper, which was partly burnt along with other papers, no doubt equally uninteresting and unimportant. What we have to do is simply to weave a spider's web for Rush."

"You change your mind twice a day, and are cock-sure every time," Warrender remarked.

"A clear proof that I ought to go in for politics, after all. I'm glad it's settled at last. Percy Pratt, M.P.–reverse 'em, you get P.M., Prime Minister; then Sir Percy, Bart.; Baron Pratt, Viscount, Earl–why not Duke while I'm about it? But do dukes play the banjo, I wonder?"

"You're better qualified for the part of Mad Hatter, I fancy. Come, let's step it out."

The evening of that day turned out rather cool and overcast. A breeze sprang up in the south-west, refreshing after the still heat. After early supper, Armstrong, declaring that he was getting flabby for want of exercise, set off in the dinghy for a pull down the river. Pratt thought it a good opportunity for testing Armstrong's report of the sounds he had heard in the cottage, and went off alone, leaving Warrender on guard at the camp.

He had not yet come within sight of the ruins when, above the rustle of the stirred leaves, a strange moaning broke upon his ear. He stopped to listen. While far more impressionable than Armstrong, he had solid musical knowledge which his schoolfellow lacked, and he was struck at once by an unusual quality in the sound he heard.

"That's not the wind in the eaves," he thought. "It's more like the whining of an organ pipe when a lazy blower is letting the wind out."

He hurried on. The sound rose and fell. For some moments it maintained a steady, pure organ note; then with rising pitch it became almost a shriek.

"I don't wonder the rustics are a bit scared," he thought, "but no ghost could produce a tone like that–unless he'd been a cathedral alto in his lifetime. It's due, I expect, to some metal chimney-pot that's got displaced and partly closed. Wonder if I can find it?"

He entered the ruins, and ran up the staircase. A roseate twilight suffused the western sky. Led by the persistent sound, he came to the unroofed room facing the west. The moaning proceeded from some spot above his head. He tried to clamber up the mass of broken masonry that littered the floor, but found that he could not gain the level of the roof except by climbing the jagged brickwork of the broken wall, a feat too perilous in the half light.

"That's the worst of being fat," he said to himself. "I believe Armstrong could do it."

Leaving the room presently, he went idly, without definite motive, into the second room, facing east and overlooking the river and his uncle's grounds. In this direction dusk was already deepening into night; the nearer trees were still distinguishable, but beyond the river all individual objects were blurred by the darkness.

He sat on the paneless window-sill, listening to the strange sound from above, looking out towards the Red House, wondering whereabouts in the wide world his uncle was travelling. All at once, far away, almost on a level with his eyes, he thought he saw a faint red glow. It disappeared in a moment–so quickly that it seemed an illusion. But there it was again, indubitably some small luminous body. "Some one with a lamp in one of the top rooms of the Red House," he thought. Again it disappeared, only to show again after an interval–a third time–a fourth.

To Pratt these phenomena were at first merely sensations of sight, not perceptions of intelligence. But by and by he was struck by the fact that the glow always appeared at the same spot, not here and there, like a lamp carried by a person moving about a room. Then he found himself mentally measuring the intervals between its appearances, expecting their occurrence as regularly as the beats of a striking clock. It was with surprise and a sort of disappointment that

he discovered that the intervals were irregular, and with curiosity, after a while, that they were regular and irregular both, as it seemed, fitfully; the glow appeared two or three times at equal intervals, then the intervals became shorter or longer. ”Signals, of course,” he thought, when the impression of order and purpose became fixed in him. ”Who is it? Where is it? What’s the game?”

The alternations continued for several minutes, then finally ceased. Pratt got up, left the ruins, and made his way with some difficulty back to camp.

”Armstrong back?” he asked.

”Not yet,” replied Warrender. ”Time he was. This is the darkest evening we’ve had. See any one?”

”Not a soul. All quiet here?”

”Absolute peace. *You* weren’t here.”

”Thanks. Glad you missed me. Will the sweet, melodious strains of my gentle banjo disturb your serenity?”

”Not a bit. Strum away. But hadn’t you better turn in? It’s past nine. Old Jack won’t get much sleep before second watch if he isn’t here soon; no reason why you shouldn’t have your full whack, especially after last night’s affair.”

”I’ll stay up till he comes.”

Pratt softly thrummed his strings, musing on his discoveries. Half-past nine came; ten o’clock.

”I say, what’s happened to Armstrong?” said Warrender. ”Surely he hasn’t been carried out to sea? Come and help me shove off; I’ll run down and see if I can find him. You won’t turn in, so you won’t mind taking part of my watch.”

”Righto! But I dare say Jack’s enjoying himself.”

They were just about to launch the motor-boat when they caught the dull sound of oars in the distance. They waited. The rising moon struggled through the rack, and cast a faint light on the stream. Presently the dinghy appeared from among the overarching foliage. Armstrong was sculling very quietly.

”Thought you were lost,” said Warrender. ”It’s past ten; your watch starts at eleven-forty.”

”All right. Pratt, tie up, will you? Come with me, Warrender.”

Armstrong led the way at a long, rapid stride across the clearing and into the thicket. He said nothing, and did not pause until he came to the shore of the western channel.

”Keep well behind this tree,” he said, in a whisper, placing himself in shadow.

In a few minutes they heard the splash of oars. A boat emerged from the shades down stream, lit up fitfully by the transient moonbeams. It passed close beneath their hiding-place. It held a single oarsman, whose thickset frame would have been unmistakable even if the moonlight had not touched his face. He pulled

out of sight.

"What's he been up to?" said Warrender.

"Let's get back," replied Armstrong. "I wanted a second witness. Pratt will wish to start a new career now, I expect."

CHAPTER XII
QUEER FISH

When Armstrong had started in the dinghy for a pull down the river his intention was to scull easily on the current to the mouth, then to turn westward, and exercise his muscles more strenuously in a contest with the wind. On reaching the coastline, however, he found that there was much more force in the breeze than had appeared inland, and a considerable swell on the sea, and he contented himself with hugging the shore, protected in some measure by the cliffs that swept round to a promontory in the distance.

After a stiff pull for half an hour or so he turned. The last faint radiance of sunset was behind him, and as he approached the river mouth, being himself shadowed by the cliffs, he noticed signs of activity about the fisher's hut on the beach beyond the farther bank. Two men were carrying what appeared to be fishing gear down to a boat at the water's edge. The weather seemed scarcely to promise good fishing, and, knowing from his friends that the hut was in the occupation, if not the possession, of Rush, he was sufficiently interested to decide upon watching the men's proceedings. He pulled a little more closely inshore, shipped his oars, and lay to under cover of a mass of rock.

In a few minutes the men got aboard the boat, and pulled out to sea in the direction of a small tramp steamer which was just visible on the eastern horizon, and, as the trail of smoke from its funnel showed, was coming down channel. It seemed to Armstrong a good opportunity for examining the hut; possibly he might find there some clue to Rush's mysterious activities. Assured that under the shadow of the cliffs he would be invisible to the boatmen, he pulled across to the opposite beach, and ran the dinghy ashore in a small, sheltered cove two or three hundred yards from the hut. Leaving the boat high and dry, he made his way back along the beach at the foot of the cliffs, and approached the hut, which stood on a rocky platform above high-water mark. As he neared it he was careful to keep it between himself and the boat at sea; Rush, if he were one of the two,

was probably long-sighted.

By the time he reached the hut the boat was nearly a mile out, and the men appeared to be letting down a net. He slipped in through the open door, and threw a glance round the interior, seizing the last moments of twilight for his rapid scrutiny. He saw, as might have been expected, the usual fisherman's gear: old nets, lobster pots, cork floats, a broken oar, part of a rudder, an old sou'wester, baskets, ropes–nothing that had any particular interest or significance. But, just as he was about to leave, he noticed in the darkest corner half a dozen tins strung by the handles upon a length of trailing rope. Their shape suggested paraffin or petrol rather than any material useful to fishers; yet they were not the common petrol cans; they were larger and wider-necked than those that held the ordinary motor-spirit. He lifted one; it was empty, but very firmly corked, as likewise were the others.

Armstrong took one of the cans, stretching the rope, towards the door, to examine it more closely in what was left of the twilight. On the shoulder, enclosed in a panel, was an embossed description, the characters reminding Armstrong of the printed letters of the Russian newspaper.

"Rummy," he thought. "Gradoff, judging by his name, is a Russian, and the only Russian hereabouts. Yet we find a Russian newspaper in the cellar, and Russian petrol tins in Rush's hut. Queer!"

He replaced the cans, and left the hut. As he did so he saw, out at sea, the steamer he had noticed as a distant smudge some twenty minutes before. No smoke was now pouring from her funnel; apparently she had stopped or slowed down some distance beyond the small boat. While he was watching, the vessel went ahead. The small boat rowed farther out; then appeared to beat about for a time; finally stopped, and from the movements of the figures Armstrong saw aboard, they were lifting something from the water. The steamer, meanwhile, was proceeding steadily on her course down channel.

The growing dusk had rendered it impossible for the watcher to discern anything clearly; steamer, boat, and men were merely indistinct shapes. But the boat, without doubt, was the one that he had seen leave the beach; its movements were strange, and Armstrong decided to await its return. Who were its occupants? What was their errand? What were they bringing back with them?

The enlarging boat was evidently coming ashore. Armstrong looked rapidly around, and spied, close to the hut, and, between that and his own boat, a ridge of rock that would give him cover. Posting himself there, he waited. The dusk deepened. Presently he heard the faint, slow, regular thuds of oars in the rowlocks, then low voices. He could now discern the boat as a dark patch on the white crests of the rollers. It came steadily in, grounded; the two men sprang into the surf. The tide was going out. They did not haul the boat up, but lifted

from it the bundles of gear and carried them into the hut. But there was no fish. They passed Armstrong's hiding-place near enough for him to recognise them. The first of them was Rush; the second–even in the dusk Armstrong knew again that broad, flat face. It was the face he had seen in the thicket–the face of the mysterious assailant Pratt had described.

[image]

"THEY LIFTED THE BUNDLES OF GEAR AND CARRIED THEM INTO THE HUT."

After disposing of their gear in the hut, they returned to the boat. The stranger, a big man, came up again alone, bent under a bulky package, to which a string of petrol tins was attached. "Smugglers, by jiminy!" thought Armstrong. The package appeared to be encased in tarpaulin. The man halted at the door of the hut, let down his load, detached the cans, and waited. In a few seconds Rush joined him, helped him to hoist the package to his back, and bade him a gruff "Good-night." The man marched heavily up the beach to the east, towards a narrow rift in the cliff. Rush took the cans into the hut, shut and locked the door, and, with his hands in his pockets, moved slowly down towards his boat. Fearing that as he rowed back he might discover the dinghy in the cove, Armstrong hurried quietly away, shoved off, and had turned into the river when he heard the splash of Rush's oars. Pulling quickly but steadily, he was out of sight by the time Rush reached the mouth, and when he arrived at the camping-place guessed that he and Warrender could cross to the western shore of the island before Rush rowed past.

Such was the story Armstrong quietly told his companions as they sat on their chairs before the tent.

"Smugglers!" ejaculated Pratt, lowering his voice as if instinctively. "I thought the smuggling days were over long ago. D'you think Rush does a roaring trade in Dutch tobacco, and finds the foreign gang at the house good customers? Tobacco weighs light for its bulk. How big was the bundle, Jack?"

"Two or three feet square, I think," replied Armstrong. "But tobacco is light, as you say. I fancy this was something else, for Rush had to help the other fellow lift it."

"And he took it eastward up the cliff?"

"Yes, in the direction that would lead to your uncle's house, unless I'm out

in my bearings."

"Well, I'm hanged! Won't my old uncle rave when he hears what his pet foreign domestics are up to in his absence! He's a terrible stickler for law and order, not the kind of man to wink at smuggling, as the county folk used to do in days of yore. That explains the light I saw."

"What light?" asked the others.

"I wended my way to the ruins to hear the spooks groan. They groan jolly well–a mellow note, mostly on B flat, I fancy, though it sometimes shrieks up a chromatic scale to what you may call vanishing point. Of course, it's caused by the wind, but what surprises me is how the wind can fetch such a musical tone out of a chimney-pot. It must be a tube of some sort, and what else could it be but a chimney-pot? I tried to find it, but that required an acrobatic feat too difficult for a man of my avoirdupois."

"But the light?" asked Warrender.

"Oh yes, I was forgetting! I was looking over towards my uncle's place when I saw a reddish sort of glow, just about the level of the tree-tops. It came and went, and presently it dawned upon my usually alert intelligence that it stood a good deal upon the order of its comings and goings; in fact, that it was a signal. It must have been just about the time that tramp steamer came in sight."

"But why on earth should anybody at the house, even if they are customers of Rush's, signal to the smuggling steamer?" asked Armstrong. "There aren't any revenue officers about here, and if there were any about the coast the people at the house wouldn't know anything about them."

"My dear chap, there are wheels within wheels," said Pratt, oracularly. "You have two contemporaneous phenomena–jolly good phrase, that!–the signal light, and the accosting of a tramp steamer by a poacher and a burglar. That's circumstantial evidence good enough for me."

"Well, drop theories, and come to practice," said Warrender. "Whatever the game is, we're going to find it out. It's time for us to take the offensive. These fellows have stalked us; it's now for us to stalk them. I vote we leave the island, and accept old Crawshay's offer. The enemy will chortle at having succeeded in driving us away, and will very likely be off his guard. Then we'll chip in."

"Just so; we'll *reculer pour mieux sauter*–you recognise the phrase, as your Gradoff would say? Your suggestion smiles to me, Phil. We carry it unanimously, and we'll strike camp the morn's morn. I say, listen!"

The wind had increased in force, and there came from the direction of the ruins the musical moan which Warrender, alone of the three, had not yet heard.

"'The horns of Elfland faintly blowing,'" quoted Pratt. "Really, it seems a pity, after all, to leave a spot which one can imagine the haunt of fairies, the seat of an enchanted palace, the—-"

”Don’t start the sentimental strain!” Armstrong interposed. ”Suppose your horns of Elfland are a signal, too?”

”Jehoshaphat! What a synthetic mind you have, old bird! I shouldn’t be surprised if—- But no! it won’t wash. A signal that depended on the wind wouldn’t be any good. Leave me some of my illusions, Jack. Let me revel in my romantic imaginings. Call it Roland’s horn, appealing vainly for succour when the paladin was fighting fearful odds in the pass of Roncesvaux.”

”I think you’d better turn in, old man,” said Warrender. ”It’s your last watch to-night. We none of us got much sleep last night, and that crack on the head—-”

”I’m cracked. All right–wake me at two-twenty.”

He withdrew into the tent. His companions, tired though they were, resolved to keep each other company, and patrol the neighbourhood of the camp till it was time to awaken Pratt. Hour after hour passed. Nothing disturbed them. The wind increased to the force of half a gale, and the sound from the ruins persisted with scarcely a variation of pitch. When two-twenty came they agreed to let Pratt sleep on, and kept vigil until the eastern sky was streaked with dawn.

”D’you hear the sound?” asked Warrender, suddenly.

”No; it’s stopped. But the wind is higher than ever,” Armstrong replied.

”That’s queer. The wind is in the same direction, too. Darkness and light oughtn’t to make any difference.”

”Perhaps it has blown the old chimney-pot clean off the roof. I’ll go down and have a look presently. I’m dog-tired. We might take a couple of hours’ sleep now, don’t you think?”

CHAPTER XIII

FIRE!

About eleven o’clock next morning Warrender and Pratt landed from the motorboat at the ferry, and, inquiring of the ferryman the way to Mr. Crawshay’s house, struck up the hilly road that ran westward from the right bank of the river. Mr. Crawshay, it was true, had invited them to make straight for the house across the fields; but they had decided that it would be more becoming, on this first visit, to observe the customary forms.

The house stood amid well-kept grounds, about as far west of the river as Mr. Pratt’s was in the opposite direction.

The apple-cheeked maid-servant who answered their ring announced that her master was out, and would not return till the afternoon. Disappointed, they were leaving when Lilian Crawshay, who had recognised Warrender's voice as she descended the stairs, called to them.

"You wanted to see my father, Mr. Warrender?" she asked, as they turned back.

"Yes; I'm sorry he's out, but we'll call again this afternoon."

"What a pity, when you have so far to go! Can't I give him a message? Won't you come in and see Mother?"

"It's very good of you, but we have some shopping to do in the village, or Armstrong will get no lunch. It will be no trouble to come again. We get up and down very quickly in the motor-boat."

"Well, then come up in time for tea. Father will be home then; he has only gone on some stupid business of quarter-sessions. And bring Mr. Armstrong with you. Mother was greatly interested in the 'Three Musketeers.'"

"Thank you very much."

"Good-bye, then, for the present. Tea is at half-past four."

"Why didn't you tell her we can't all come?" said Pratt, as they walked away.

"Because it's clear that the old man hasn't said anything about our affairs, and I couldn't anticipate him with explanations. We'll toss for the odd man."

On returning to the ferry Pratt went on to the village to make some necessary purchases, leaving Warrender to forestall gossip by informing Rogers of their change of plan. Warrender rapped on the door.

"Bain't opening time yet," called a voice from above. Mrs. Rogers's head appeared at an open window. "Oh, beg pardon; 'tis you, sir. We have to be that careful; Constable Hardstone be always on the prowl. You'll find Rogers in the garden, sir–through that little gate. And if so be you find he haven't got his hair on, I beseech 'ee to mind him of it; he's that careless of his brains, and I know they'll be broiled some day."

The innkeeper, with his wig awry, was pinching out his tomatoes. He smiled when Warrender told him of the projected removal of the camp.

"'Tis what I expected–ay, and all the village likewise," he said.

"We find the island a trifle inconvenient, you know," said Warrender, in pursuance of the understanding he had come to with his companions that their real reason should not at present be disclosed.

"Ay sure, that's what we all said. The neighbours wondered how long you'd stand it."

"Stand what?" asked Warrender, wondering whether any whispers of the truth had got abroad.

”Why, them sperits. Flesh and blood you can deal with, but when it comes to sperits they’re bound to get the better of you, give ’em time. You can’t get hold of ’em no way. Smite ’em, you might as well smite the wind. I’ve been here and there about the world in my time, and I tell ’ee I wouldn’t spend a night on that island not if you doubled my pension.”

”Well, we did hear some very queer sounds last night. Of course, it was very windy. I expected rain to-day, but it has cleared up. By the way, are there any coastguards about here?”

”There’s Lloyd’s signal station away at the point yonder. I go over now and again for a crack and a smoke with an old messmate of mine.”

”How far is it?”

”Four mile or so. You go past Mr. Crawshay’s, then sheer off to the left and get into the old coastguard track over the cliffs.”

”I’ll take a walk out there some day. We haven’t seen much of the neighbourhood yet. There’s no signal station in the village, of course.”

”No; we’re too far from the sea. Have ’ee heard what they’re saying about Mr. Pratt, sir?”

”What’s that?”

”Ah, poor gentleman. ’Tis feared he’ve gone a-lost, or been swallered by lions, or summat. ’Tis the end of many a poor traveller.”

”Why do they fear that? Is there any news?”

”No; that’s where ’tis; there be no news at all. ’Tis five weeks since he went off, not a soul knowing, as his way is; and Susan Barter up at post office was saying only yesterday that there’s not been a single line from him to any o’ they people at the house. ’Tis never been knowed afore. As a rule there’s a letter from Paris, or Marseilles, or Brindisi–ay, from places farther away; but this time not a line. He’ll be missed in the parish, sir, if so be he’ve gone aloft, like poor Tom Bowling.”

Rogers proceeded to relate anecdotes of his landlord–instances of his peppery outbursts and splenetic quarrels with his county neighbours, but more of kindly deeds and unobtrusive generosity among his poorer tenants.

”And your friend be his nephew, to be sure!” he added. ”Well, don’t worrit the poor young gent yet awhile. No news is good news; maybe there’ll be word of him one of these days. Susan Barter is sure to tell us.”

Presently Pratt returned, laden with sundry parcels. The boys took leave of Rogers, and by half-past twelve were back in camp. Armstrong had nothing to report. He declined at first to make one of the tea-party, but when the spin of a coin elected him against Pratt, he yielded to Warrender’s argument that it would appear discourteous if only one of them accepted the invitation. Promptly at half-past four the two, wearing grey flannels for the occasion, entered the grounds of

Mr. Crawshay's house, and were met on the drive by the owner himself.

"Glad to see you, my lads," he said, heartily. "You've something to tell me? I guessed it. Now, not a word before the ladies. I haven't told them anything of your troubles; best not to disturb them, you know. We'll have a talk in private, after tea."

The consequence was that presently Armstrong found himself left in the company of Mrs. Crawshay and her daughter, while Warrender was taken by Mr. Crawshay to his study.

It had been decided that nothing should be said to the old gentleman about the visit to the Red House, the mysterious doings of Rush at sea, or the strange light Pratt had seen among the trees. Determined as the lads were to probe the mystery to the bottom, they felt that their purpose might be defeated by any premature activity on the part of the county magistrate. Accordingly, when Mr. Crawshay and Warrender were seated in deep armchairs facing each other, and the former said, "Now, my lad, what is the latest news?" Warrender simply related the incident of the midnight visit to the camp, concluding–

"And so, sir, we have decided to accept your offer of a camping-place on your land, not merely to escape these annoyances–we should rather like to hold our ground in regard to them–but because we think we should stand a better chance of discovering what really is going on."

"Ah, what does that mean? There's more in it than appears?"

"If you don't mind, sir, I won't tell you details now; but we have found out one or two facts that have given rise to certain suspicions. By removing from the island we feel that we shall be better able to put them to the test, and when our information is complete we will lay it before you."

"Well, I won't press you. Many a rogue has escaped justice because the case against him has been badly prepared. Tell me all in your own time. Now as to your camp. There's a little natural dock in my bank of the river. I'll put on my gardener and odd man to make a small clearing for you. It's too late to-day; the men knock off at five–eight hours' day, you know. But you can bring your boat up the river, and put up for the night with me."

"Thank you, sir; but we have a little errand at the signal station before we go back–it might be rather late before we could get everything packed up. I think we had better wait till the morning."

"Very well. You may have fresh light on the matter then. I shall expect all three to lunch to-morrow. On my land you won't need to guard your camp."

Taking leave a little later, the boys walked across the cliffs to the signal station. On inquiry from the man in charge they learnt that the steamer seen late on the previous evening was the *Katarina*, from Helsingfors for New York.

"Did you notice a small boat pull out to her?" asked Armstrong.

”Rush’s boat,” replied the man. ”It didn’t pull out to her; ’twas out before she came in sight. Rush has some lobster pots out there. He’s a well-known character in these parts.”

They thanked their informant, and retraced their steps.

”She was a Russian boat,” remarked Armstrong. ”No secret about her name or course. All the same–a Russian newspaper, a Russian secretary at the Red House, Russian petrol cans, a Russian steamer. Queer coincidences, at the least.”

It was nearly eight o’clock when they regained the camp. Pratt was humming ”I dreamt that I dwelt in marble halls” to the accompaniment of his banjo.

”And how is the fair lady of the punctured tyre?” he asked. ”Did she deplore my absence?”

”She did say something about ’that amusing Mr. Pratt,’” Armstrong replied. ”I like her mother.”

”We’re all going up to lunch to-morrow,” said Warrender, and explained the arrangements made.

”Then, as it’s our last night on this island of spooks, I vote that Armstrong and I go to the ruins and track that weird sound,” said Pratt. ”The wind is high; we’ll have time before dark.”

Armstrong and he set off. The breeze was blowing in the same direction, and almost as strongly, as on the night before, but no moaning met their ears. Arriving at the cottage, they heard the characteristic whistle and hiss of wind playing about the eaves, but not the tuneful, mellow note that had reminded Pratt of an organ pipe. They searched around the base of the walls for a recently fallen chimney-pot. There was none.

”Extraordinary!” said Pratt. ”No wonder the rustics are jumpy. Of course, there must be some simple explanation–some slight change of direction in the wind, I expect. If you’ve ever tried to play the penny whistle you’ll know that you can’t always get a note, when you’re a beginner. We’ve had our walk for nothing.”

They were half-way back to the camp; dusk was just merging into darkness, when the organ-note, riding, as it were, upon the rustle of the leaves, struck upon their ears.

”By George!” exclaimed Pratt. ”One would think the spook was just waiting for the dark. Come back. This is an acoustical phenomenon worth writing about to some scientific rag.”

They hurried back to the ruins, and sprang up the staircase. Pratt tracked the sound, as before, to the partially unroofed room on the west side. Armstrong tried to climb up the jagged brickwork of the outer wall, but found the footing too insecure to persevere. Baffled, they stood for a while listening.

”It’s no good,” said Armstrong at last. ”It’s a job for daylight. Besides, it’s

of no importance; we've got more interesting mysteries to fathom."

"True, old matter-of-fact. You haven't a disinterested passion for science. Well, I'll show you where I saw the light from last night."

They went into the other room, and looked across the river into the darkness, faintly patterned by the nearer trees. Suddenly, high up, a glow appeared, shone for a second, disappeared, recurred. They watched in silence. Presently Armstrong spoke.

"They're certainly signals. Keep your eye on them; count them."

There was a period of complete darkness; it seemed that the signalling had ceased. Then the glow peered over the tree-tops again; it was repeated at regular intervals, at first short, then longer, then short again.

"It's like Morse," said Armstrong. "Did you count?"

"Nine times."

"In groups of three?"

"Four, three, and two, I thought."

"So did I. Well, if it's Morse, that spells VGI. What on earth does that mean?"

"Goodness knows. It's stopped. Wonder if it'll start again?"

A minute or two passed. Again the glow appeared, at intervals as before. Again they counted its appearances.

"Nine times. Three groups of three–longs and shorts. I make that ROD."

"Well, that's a word, at any rate; and the chef's name, by gum! But what about VGI?"

"Perhaps I was mistaken. We'll wait for the next."

But though they remained some ten minutes at the window the glow appeared no more.

"A dashed fruitless expedition!" exclaimed Pratt, as they descended the stairs. "They used to divide science into sound, light, and heat. We're flummoxed by sound and light; it only wants heat to biff us altogether."

Before many hours had passed they had reason to remember that almost prophetic utterance of Pratt's. It was his turn again to take the middle watch, and at eleven-forty Armstrong wakened him.

"Hang you, Jack!" he cried. "I was dreaming I was blowing fire-balloons out of an organ pipe, and I wanted to see the end of it. All serene?"

"Not a mouse stirring."

"Well, the air doesn't bite shrewdly. I cap your quotation, you see. It's a warm sou'wester. Can you hear that sound?"

"Just faintly. I say, I believe I understand that signal. I've been thinking it over. I've had no particular practice in reading signals; perhaps the fellow signalling is a novice, too. In that case one or other of us might easily make a mistake. It's clear he made three letters each time; I fancy they weren't either

VGI or ROD."

"What then?"

"S.O.S."

"What-ho! The signal of distress at sea. But, I say, this is on land, old man."

"Yes; but I take it that it's a signal for help that any one knowing Morse might make."

"But who wants help? In my uncle's grounds? Wait a jiff. It was in the direction of the house. I have it! What a pudding-head I am! Of course, Rod's wife. You remember she tried to signal to you and Phil. She's in trouble. She's being ill-treated, or something. She's calling for help. We're to be knights-errant–Perseus rescuing Andromeda—-"

"Oh, shut up! Is it likely that an innkeeper's sister would know Morse?"

"Mark my words, I'm right. A woman knows everything she wants to. Turn in, old chap. I wanted something to keep me awake, and I'll cogitate a plan for rescuing Molly Andromeda from the jaws of the Minotaur."

Pratt, however, found that cogitation was an ineffectual preventive against drowsiness. Three disturbed nights in succession was an experience unknown to him heretofore. He paced about for a little, sat down and lit a cigarette, dozed over it, started up and walked again. Once more he sat down, ruminated, nodded–and presently awoke, sniffing. What was that smell of burning? He looked on the ground, where the half-smoked cigarette lay. It was dead. He got up. The smell was in the air. He took a few steps, looking around. His eye caught a flicker of flame to windward–two, three flickers some yards apart. For a moment his drowsy intelligence failed to respond to his senses; for a moment only. Then he shouted–

"Hi, you fellows! Fire! Fire!"

Already the flickers had been whipped by the wind into a wall of flame, advancing with a hiss and low roar from the thicket across the little clearing. The heat of the last few days had dried the grass, which, though much trampled around the tent, was still long. The fire swept over it like a ruddy tide. Smoke surged across the open space; twigs and leaves crackled in the surrounding thicket. When Armstrong and Warrender, awakened by the shouts, the reck, the roar and crackle, tumbled out in their pyjamas, they choked and spluttered and fell back before the intolerable heat and smother.

It was only too clear that the camp was doomed. There was not time to lower the tent. They rescued what they could. Armstrong dashed into the tent, and returned dragging the three Gladstones that held their clothes. Pratt caught up a petrol can and his banjo; Warrender secured his razor-case and sponge-bag. Driven by the remorseless flames, they retreated hurriedly towards the river, working round to the right until they arrived at a spot on the bank that lay out

of the course of the wind. There they stood, coughing, watching the scene, fascinated. Springing from the south-west, the fire raced across the island, like a giant cutting with blazing scythe a path through the tough undergrowth. There was nothing to stay its advance. The low flames danced beneath the trees, red goblins in a dust of smoke, twigs and branches crackling, the sappy wood adding rather to the smother than to the blaze.

"Sound, light, and heat!" murmured Pratt. "What a magnificent spectacle!"

"We've paid pretty dearly for our tickets!" said Armstrong, morosely.

"And some one shall pay pretty dearly before I've done with them!" cried Warrender. "We're homeless. We'd better run up to the Ferry Inn, and get Rogers to bed us."

"We'll be the talk of the village for a hundred years," said Pratt. "We'll pass into legend; future ages will tell of the three magicians who exorcised the spooks of No Man's Island with fire."

"Come and help shove off the boat," said Warrender. "We've still got that, thank goodness!"

The fire had burnt itself out at the north-east of the island by the time the boat passed. At the ferry was assembled a crowd of the natives. Rogers was in the act of setting off in Fisherman Drew's boat, along with Blevins, Hardstone, the village constable, and one or two more.

"Praise be!" exclaimed the innkeeper, as the motor-boat ran alongside the stage. "I was afeared as you young gentlemen might be cinders."

"We're only smoked at present, dry-cured," said Pratt. "Saved our bacon, you see."

"I want to know summat about this," said the constable. "I'll have to make a report. If so be you set fire to that there island, with the terrible destruction of growing trees, I won't say but 'twill be brought in arson, and that's five years' penal. Which one of you was it chucked down the match?"

"My dear good man," said Pratt, blandly, "we're only too anxious to give every assistance to the officer of the law; but, as you see, we're in a great state of nervous agitation. D'you think Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were in a condition to answer questions after their experience of the fiery furnace? Abed we go, if Mr. Rogers will oblige us. Come up in the morning, constable; you're all losing your beauty sleep. In the morning we'll swear affidavits, or whatever

it is you want. To-night we're too tired even to swear. Good-night."

CHAPTER XIV
A CIRCULAR TOUR

Fatigued though they were, the boys lay long awake in the room Mrs. Rogers provided for them, discussing the situation into which they had been thrown by the fire, and their plans for the future. They had saved next to nothing but their clothes. If they were to start another camp a new tent–almost a complete new outfit–would be necessary. Pratt suggested that they should accept Mr. Crawshay's offer and take up their abode with him until the mystery of the island had been solved; but this idea was opposed by the others, Armstrong in particular pointing out that they would stand a better chance of success if they remained more closely in touch with their former encampment.

"We must do our best to throw the beggars off the scent," he said. "If we rig up barbed wire round our new camp, they'll imagine we're merely on the defensive, and the longer we keep up that illusion, the better."

"I agree," said Warrender. "There can't be the slightest doubt now that something is going on on the island that they'll stick at nothing to prevent our discovering. We've got to make them believe we can't see farther than the ends of our noses, so we must keep quiet, pretend we think the fire was caused by our cigarettes–anything to put them off their guard. But, of course, we must take the first opportunity of making another search in the ruins. It's as plain as a pikestaff that that moaning sound is artificial; that is to say, they've got some sort of an instrument rigged up that catches the wind just when they wish, and only then. And that signal must have something to do with their schemes; I'm inclined to think you're mistaken, Armstrong, and it's not S.O.S. at all."

"Perhaps," replied Armstrong.

"I stick to it that Molly Rogers or Rod is in distress," said Pratt. "Rogers was a seaman, and there's nothing unlikely in his sister knowing something of Morse. I had a passion for ciphers at one time, and my sister Joan was very keen on it, I can tell you. Anyway, we'll ask Rogers in the morning."

They got up to a late breakfast. Rogers brought them their bacon and eggs, and they were struck by a peculiarity in his appearance.

"I say, Rogers, what's happened to your beautiful auburn locks?" asked

Pratt.

The innkeeper looked profoundly depressed.

"I begged and prayed the missus, but 'twas no good," he answered. "She will have me wear a nightcap at night, and my hair by day, no matter how hot it be. I said as every one will laugh at me, and she said as health comes afore feelings."

"A very wise woman. Still, as a mere matter of scientific curiosity, we'd like to know how that brown became apple-green."

Rogers snatched off his wig and held it out with a gesture of indignation.

"'Tis a trick of some blessed young scug in the village, and if I catch him I'll give him all the colours of the rainbow. I did but set my hair on a pea-stick while I was digging yesterday, the missus being out for the day. I own I forgot it, and when, come night, I thought I'd better put it on, bless me if I could find it. Half an hour after I'd closed the door the missus came home. 'Here's a parcel on the doorstep,' says she, and then she undoes it, and gives a shriek. 'You wicked man!' says she: 'you've done it just to rile me.' As if the cussed thing warn't bad enough brown, for one to want it green! Of course I telled her as how I'd put it down and missed it, and she went on like one o'clock, said I'd have to wear it, green or blue, and I'd better stand out in the first shower of rain and see if it'd wash clean, and 'twould be a lesson to me. Don't you never go bald, young gentlemen: 'tis the way to break up a happy home."

"Hard luck, Rogers," said Pratt. "But the colour will soon wear off. You'll be piebald for a bit, I dare say–sort of mottled, you know; but nobody will think the worse of you. I say, you and your sister were great pals, weren't you?"

"Till the missus come along, sir."

"And no doubt you taught her how to splice ropes and reef sails, and make signals, and all that?"

"There you're wrong, sir. The lass don't know more than a babby about such things; and as for signals, I don't know nothing about 'em myself."

Pratt looked crestfallen.

"One theory exploded," remarked Armstrong.

"Did 'ee signal for help last night?" asked Rogers.

"Well, we—-" Pratt began, but Warrender interrupted him.

"No, we hadn't time," he said. "The fire came on us too suddenly. By the way, we shall have to buy some new things. I suppose Blevins can provide us with a tent?"

"Surely, sir; he've most everything somewhere about. I always thought no good 'ud come of camping on that island. There's a fate in it."

"How long has it had this ill name?" asked Armstrong.

"Not so long, sir. You see, nobody bothered much about it after the old man

died years ago. It didn't belong to no one, seemingly; there was nothing to take any of the folk there; and 'twasn't till a month or two ago that they began to talk of sperits. Nick Rush came in all of a tremble one night–he'd been away for a bit–and said he was setting a snare there when he heard most horrible groanings and moanings. He took some of the folk along, and they heard 'em too, and ever since then the village have give it a wide berth. You're well out of it, that's what I say. Not as ghosts carry matches, though; I reckon 'twas one of you young gentlemen a-smoking as did the mischief."

"A lesson to us, Rogers," said Pratt, gravely. "Smoking is a very bad habit, according to our masters at school–who all smoke like furnaces–they ought to know."

They had hardly finished breakfast when Mr. Crawshay drove down to the ferry in a light trap, crossing on foot.

"It's true, then," he said, as he entered the parlour. "I knew nothing about it until an hour ago. A lighted match, they say."

Pratt got up and closed the door.

"Let them say, sir. We were burnt out."

"You don't say so! Upon my word, it's time something was done. Have you lost much?"

"Almost everything but our clothes."

"Scandalous! Then you'll come up to the house?"

"We'd rather keep to our arrangement, sir," said Warrender. "It will give us a better chance of running the fellows to earth. We think of making a thorough search on the island. The difficulty is that we can't do it by daylight; we are sure to be watched, at any rate for a day or two. There's another difficulty. They're sure to keep their eye on our motor-boat and dinghy; it will be too risky to use them. Of course, we could swim the river, but it would be a bit of a nuisance."

"I can help you there. You had better not use my skiff, but I've an old Norwegian pram in one of my outhouses—-"

"A what, sir?" asked Pratt.

"A pram–a sort of abbreviated punt. At one time I used it for fishing on the river. It's small and very light; two of you could carry it. You had better fetch it yourselves; my men might talk in the village. I have set them clearing a camping-place for you, by the way. It's about half-way between here and the island. But I can't lend you a tent."

Warrender explained that he proposed to buy one of the general dealer.

"Very well," said Mr. Crawshay. "I shall expect you to lunch. We'll talk over things then more at leisure."

While Warrender went off to do the necessary shopping, Armstrong and Pratt, in the dinghy, set out for their new camping-place. It lay on the shore

of a little natural bay some fifteen yards deep and about half that width. Mr. Crawshay's gardeners had already mown the long grass and lopped some of the lower branches of overhanging trees. A ten minutes' walk through the wood and across fields brought the two boys to the house, where Mr. Crawshay had already arrived. Having seen that none of his men were about, the old gentleman led them to the outhouse in which he kept his pram; and by the time that Warrender, conveying his purchases in the motor-boat, reached the new encampment, the others had carried the odd little craft across the fields, and found a secure hiding-place for it in the wood a little distance from the bay, almost opposite to the north end of the island, near a spot convenient for landing under cover of the trees. With it Mr. Crawshay had lent them a couple of light oars.

After erecting their new tent–a sorry specimen compared with the one that had been destroyed–they went up to the house for lunch, discussed their plans with Mr. Crawshay privately in his study, and returned to fence the camp with barbed wire and get things in order. So far there had been no sign of the enemy; but in the course of the afternoon Armstrong climbed a tree from which, unobserved himself, he could obtain a view of the opposite bank of the river, and discovered without surprise that a spy was lurking among the bushes. No doubt all their ostensible proceedings had been watched, and they congratulated themselves on the illusion of mere defensiveness which their business-like activity must have created.

During the remainder of the day they were careful not to depart from their usual procedure. They had an early supper; when they had cleared away and washed up, they placed three oddly assorted and shabby deck-chairs, purchased from Blevins, in front of the tent, and while Armstrong and Warrender read newspapers, Pratt warbled sentimental ditties to the accompaniment of his banjo.

Just before dark Pratt and Armstrong went into the tent to go to bed, while Warrender perambulated the camp armed with a thick club. The spin of a coin had decided that he should remain on guard while the others paid a nocturnal visit to the island.

About midnight, when it was quite dark, the two raiders crept out of the tent, and striking inland for a little, made their roundabout way to the spot where the pram was hidden. Reconnoitring carefully, to assure themselves that their movements had not been followed, they lifted the pram, lowered it gently into the water, and pushed off, floating on the tide near the bank, and steering with one oar in the stern. They struck the shore of the island about midway, seized a projecting branch, and drawing their craft into the bank, pulled it up among the reeds at the edge. Then they started to cross the island.

It was pitch-dark in the thicket. Spreading roots and trailing brambles tripped their feet; their faces were lashed by the foliage as they pushed their

way through; thorns caught at their clothes. It was difficult to avoid noise. Twigs snapped underfoot, branches creaked and rustled, and every now and again there was a strident shriek of rent clothing as they tore themselves from the embrace of some clinging bramble. Heedless of the obstacles, hot and weary, they plodded doggedly on, and presently, after making unconscionably slow progress, they emerged upon the bank of the river. The stream looked much wider than they had expected.

"Whereabouts are we?" whispered Pratt.

"We've come too far south, I fancy," returned Armstrong.

They peered up and down, trying vainly to discover some landmark. They stood listening; there was breeze enough to cause the moaning, but they heard no sound except the rustle of the leaves and the gentle gurgle of the tide. They cast about, taking wary steps up stream and down; hoping in one direction or the other to come upon the wilderness garden.

Suddenly Pratt whispered: "I say, this isn't a tidal river, is it?"

"No; it always flows down," replied Armstrong. "Why?"

"Because—-"

And then he stopped.

"Look here," he murmured to Armstrong behind him.

Armstrong looked, and there, at Pratt's feet, was the dark shape of the pram, nestling in its bed of reeds.

"Hang!" exclaimed Armstrong. "We've been going in a circle."

"Just so. Everybody does it!" said Pratt, with a chuckle. "I suspected it when I noticed the way the stream was flowing."

"Nothing to chortle about," Armstrong growled. "We've had all our trouble for nothing. Absolutely waste time!"

"But look how we've enlarged our experience! I think I'd like to be a traveller, like my old uncle. I've read about these circular tours often enough, but never believed in 'em. Why can't one walk straight in the dark?"

"Ask your grandmother! I'm fed up; scratched all over, too. I'll not try this again without a luminous compass. Let's get back."

It was nearly two o'clock before they trudged wearily into camp.

"Any luck?" asked Warrender, still doing sentry-go.

Pratt related what had happened.

"Well, I'm glad for once I lost the toss," said Warrender, smiling. "We'll certainly get a luminous compass, and I fancy we'd be the better for a few lessons

from the Boy Scouts."

CHAPTER XV
UNDERGROUND

The change of camp had relieved the boys of one irksome tie. There was no longer any need for a constant guard. The barbed wire, and Warrender's patrolling of the camp, were merely ruses for the deception of the enemy. Next morning, therefore, for the first time since their arrival, all three went off together in the motor-boat, to make a trip down the river and along the coast westward. They threw a keen glance at Rush's hut as they turned the point. Its door was closed; nobody was about; and the only human being they saw in the course of their expedition was one solitary figure moving slowly along the top of the cliff–possibly a coastguard.

They lunched on the boat, and did not return until afternoon. Leaving the others to prepare tea, Warrender went on to the village, bought a small luminous compass, and an electric torch from Blevins's miscellaneous stock, and a few buns at the baker's. When he regained the camp, his companions reported that there was no sign of its still being kept under observation–by this time the enemy was probably persuaded that their only wish was to be left alone. While they were having tea, Rush rowed slowly past, going down stream. He did not turn his head towards them, but Pratt declared that he had given them a sly glance out of the tail of his eye.

To keep up appearances, they decided that one of them should remain on guard that night as before. The lot fell upon Pratt. At nightfall the others, equipped with the compass and torch and two short stout sticks, put off in the pram, and, landing on the island, without much difficulty struck their old clearing–now clearer than ever, and redolent of smoke and fire—and wound their way to the ruined cottage. The moaning sounded more eerie than they had yet heard it, rising and falling with the fitful gusts.

When they reached the old garden, they bent low, approached the ruins under cover of the tallest plants, and waited a while at the foot of the wall before venturing into the entrance. Warrender kept guard on the lower floor while Armstrong, who knew the place better, explored the upper storey thoroughly with the aid of the torch, which he kept carefully shaded from outside view. Above his

head, somewhere on the roof, the dismal note sounded continually. He went into the eastern room from which he had seen the signal light. No light was visible. Returning below stairs, he examined the whole of the premises with equal care. Everything was as it had been. There was nothing to indicate that any one had entered the place since his last visit.

"We shall have to make a night of it," said Warrender. "It was morning when Pratt saw some one in the lower room. It doesn't follow that he comes every morning, or, indeed, that he has ever come again; but we had better wait on the chance."

"Let us go upstairs, then, and sit against the wall where we can see the window. I don't believe that signal can be seen from the sea, and the fact that it can be seen from here seems to show that the signaller expects some one to be at the cottage. It won't be easy to keep awake, but we mustn't fall asleep together."

With backs against the wall, arms folded, and legs stretched on the floor, they sat watching. No light shone; there was no sound but those produced by the wind in the leaves and that monotonous, provoking, doleful wail from the roof. Hour after hour passed. Now and then each got up in turn to stretch his limbs. One or the other dozed at times. The still hours crept on; nothing happened; it seemed that their patience was to meet with no reward.

It was not until the faint grey tint of early dawn was stealing up the eastern horizon that a sound below caught Armstrong's attentive ear. He nudged Warrender dozing by his side. Grasping their sticks, they rose and tiptoed to the doorway. Some one was clumsily mounting the stairs. They peeped out. At the farther end of the landing a large, dark shape rose from the staircase, turned at the head, and went into the western room. Slipping off his boots, Warrender crept stealthily along the wall and looked in after the intruder. The room was dark, but, against the twilight framed by the window-opening, he saw the legs and feet of a man disappearing upwards outside. In a few moments there came scraping sounds from the roof; the moaning suddenly ceased, and after a little the man's feet reappeared; he was lowering himself into the room. Warrender stole back; at Armstrong's side he watched the man return across the landing to the staircase, and heard his heavy footsteps as he descended.

"Watch from this window; I'll go to the other," whispered Warrender.

From these posts of observation, commanding almost the whole of the surroundings of the cottage, they looked for the emergence of the visitor. He did not appear; nor, after his footsteps had ceased, did they hear a sound. Had he gone into one of the lower rooms? Leaving Armstrong to keep watch at his window, Warrender, in his stockinged feet, stole down the stairs, and peeped into each of the rooms and the kitchen and scullery in turn. The dawn was growing; but the man was not to be seen. All was silent. A slight whistle summoned Armstrong;

together the boys quietly and rapidly ranged the lower floor, taking advantage of the increasing light to search for some secret hiding-place, some recess or cranny in the wall. There was nothing. The walls were too thin to enclose space enough for a man to hide. Where had he gone? He had not left the place by doorway or window; he must be somewhere within.

”The cellar!” said Armstrong, remembering the scrap of paper he had found there.

Warrender ran upstairs, slipped on his boots, and returned. The door at the head of the cellar staircase was closed. They opened it gently, listening. There was no sound from below. Cautiously, step by step, they descended. At the foot of the staircase they held their breath for a moment. Then Warrender flashed the torch. The cellar was empty. They examined every inch of the walls up to the height of a man. The brick-work was whole; not a brick was displaced, not a seam of mortar missing. They tramped over the black, dusty floor; everywhere it was solid; there was no hollow ringing beneath their feet. Scraping away a little of the coal dust, they found that the floor also was of brick except at the foot of the steps, where there was a large flagstone. Something caught Armstrong’s eye. He stooped.

”Look here,” he said. The joint between the flagstone and the brickwork of the floor had a sharp, well-defined edge. The crevice was free from coal dust.

”A little suspicious, eh?” said Warrender. ”Stamp on the stone.”

”Hold hard! What if that fellow is underneath it?”

”We’ve got to the point where we must take risks. But it’s not credible that any one actually lives down below, even if there is a below. Try a kick or two.”

But there was no ringing sound when Armstrong stamped; the stone was either laid firmly on the earth, or it was so thick that, if there was a hollow beneath it, the fact would not be detected. Nor, when Armstrong trod heavily all over its surface, was there the slightest sign of movement.

”Feel along the edge,” Warrender suggested.

Armstrong went down on hands and knees and drew his finger along the base of the lowest step.

”A slight crack here, at the left end,” he said.

”Big enough to get your finger in?”

”No; it can’t be more than an eighth of an inch wide. It’s upright, between the step and the wall. Looks as if the stone has shifted.”

”Well, if you can’t get your finger in, try your knife blade.”

”Wait a bit, there’s another crack, smaller still, right along the edge of the step, between it and the upright slab.”

They had both lowered their voices to a whisper. Armstrong gave the upright a push, near the middle. It was firm, unyielding. But pushing leftwards,

he felt a slight movement, and at the extreme end, a very gentle pressure caused the slab to swing inwards easily, the right half of it at the same time moving outwards.

"By gum, it works on a pivot!" exclaimed Armstrong, under his breath. "We're on the track! But this opening's only about six inches wide; nobody but a baby could crawl through it."

For a few moments they held their breath, listening for sounds. All was silent. Then Warrender dropped on all fours and shone his torch into the dark gap. The space was empty. Armstrong thrust in his hand, and felt over the earthen floor, then along the edge of the flagstone, and finally beneath it.

"There's a hollow space here," he said. "And, I say, here's a metal hand-grip just below the flagstone."

He tugged it; there was no movement. He pushed it on each side in turn, still without result. Baffled, he sat on his haunches.

"What's the hand-grip for?" he said. "Obviously for moving something. Then why doesn't anything move?"

"Perhaps it can only be operated from below," Warrender suggested. "If this is an entrance to the cellar, it may be left open when any one comes this way."

"That's not likely. An entrance that can only be opened from one side isn't worth much. No, something sticks, and if that fellow went through a few minutes ago, it can't be for want of use. *Why* does it stick, then?"

Armstrong pondered for a few moments, then said suddenly, "Possibly it's my pressure on the stone. Let's try."

He moved back, so that the weight of his body bore upon the rear instead of the fore end of the stone. Then, however, he found that he could not reach the hand-grip.

"Why not try the other side?" said Warrender. "There may be another grip there."

The other side of the staircase was open to the cellar, and Armstrong was able to thrust his arm into the aperture below the step without treading on the flagstone.

"Got it!" he said, a moment later. "There's a grip here. It moves in a quarter-circle. Something–a disk of stone, I fancy–is revolving."

He pressed on the flagstone; still there was no distinct movement downwards, though it seemed to have yielded a trifle.

"Clearly it won't shift until the other grip is turned," he said. "But how to get at that?"

After a little consideration he had another idea. Going a few steps up the staircase, he turned, and crawled down head first until he was able to get his hand under the edge of the stone.

”All right, old man,” he said, cheerfully. ”I’ve moved the grip now. Keep clear of the other end of the stone.”

Lying full stretch on the staircase, he pressed on the stone beneath him. It sank gently; the other end moved upwards, and in a few seconds the stone stood upright in the middle of a dark gap. Warrender bent down, holding the electric torch just above the opening.

”The bottom’s only about five feet deep,” he said. ”It’s the end of some sort of passage. Come down, old man, and we’ll explore it together.”

[image]

”’THE BOTTOM’S ONLY ABOUT FIVE FEET DEEP.’”

They dropped lightly into the cavity. By the light of the torch they saw that on each side a flat circular wheel of stone, lacking one quadrant, moved on an iron axle in such a way that a half-turn of the hand-grip removed the support of the flagstone and allowed the corner to drop down. The flagstone was nicely balanced on a revolving iron rod let into a socket at each end. This contrivance formed the entrance to a narrow tunnel about four feet wide, and something over five feet high in the centre. Neither of the boys could stand upright in it. The floor was of hard-beaten earth; the walls and the arched roof were of ancient brick, covered with an incrustation of slimy moss.

”An old smugglers’ tunnel, I’ll be bound,” said Armstrong. ”It will be very odd if we have struck a lair of modern smugglers. Just look at your compass and see what direction it takes.”

The needle swung almost perpendicular to the course of the tunnel.

”Eastward,” said Warrender. ”That’s strange. I thought it probably ran south, to somewhere near that place at the end of the island where we saw the marks of a boat the other day.”

”It seems to shelve downward slightly. Looks as if it runs under the channel.”

”Towards Pratt’s uncle’s grounds. Let’s explore.”

”Better switch off your light, then. We can find our way in the dark by touching the sides.”

They went forward in single file, stepping gingerly, and bending their heads to avoid the roof. The air smelt musty and dank, and was unpleasant and oppressive. For a time the floor sloped gently downwards, but presently they were aware that it had taken an upward trend.

”We’ve crossed the channel,” said Armstrong in a whisper that the vaulted

walls made unnaturally loud.

A little later they noticed ahead of them a space dimly illuminated. Moving forward cautiously, they found themselves at the bottom of a circular shaft. Far above them they saw daylight in parallel streaks.

"A dry well," murmured Warrender, "roughly boarded over." Consulting his compass, he added, "Still eastwards. Rummy if the tunnel goes to the Red House."

Pursuing their way in utter darkness as before, the floor still rising very slightly, they became aware by and by that the tunnel had enlarged. From the centre they could not touch the wall on either side, and the greater lightness of the air gave them a sense of spaciousness. Suddenly Armstrong, who was leading, stumbled over something on the floor and fell forward. His hands, instinctively thrust out, were arrested by a bundle encased in tarpaulin. He straightened himself. For a moment or two they waited, straining their ears. There was no sound.

"A light," murmured Armstrong.

The light revealed that they had arrived at a small chamber about twelve feet square and seven or eight feet high. The farther end was broken by the tunnel. In each side wall, a foot below the roof, were let a couple of iron rings, deeply rusted.

"For holding torches," said Armstrong.

The chamber was empty except for three bundles on the floor. It was over one of these that Armstrong had stumbled. Two of them were completely covered with tarpaulin, and roped; the third was partly open at the top.

"They're like the bundles I saw Rush and the other fellow carry up from the boat," said Armstrong.

"Queer smuggling," said Warrender, bending over the open bale. "It seems to hold nothing but paper."

He took up the topmost sheet. It was a thin, semi-transparent paper, and crackled to the touch.

"This isn't newspaper," he said.

"Cigarette paper, perhaps," said Armstrong. "But where's the 'baccy?"

"Can't smell any. I wonder how much farther the tunnel goes?"

Entering it at the extreme end of the chamber, Warrender came within a yard to a contrivance similar to that which gave access from the cellar.

"Here's the end," he said. "Look, the grips are turned. Shall we risk lifting the stone?"

"Dangerous," said Armstrong. "Goodness knows where we'd find ourselves."

Scarcely had he spoken when from above came the dull sound of footsteps. Switching off the light, Warrender backed into the chamber and hastily crossed it

with Armstrong, both moving on tiptoe. They re-entered the tunnel, crept along for a few yards, then halted, listening breathlessly. They heard the footsteps of one man in the chamber they had just left. The footsteps ceased, and were followed by a rustling. It seemed clear that their presence was unsuspected, and they ventured to tiptoe back until, near the opening of the tunnel, they were able to peep into the chamber. By the dim light that came through the aperture left open by the revolved flagstone on the farther side, they saw a short, stout man drawing sheets of paper from the opened package. He counted them as he took them up, and presently turned, carried them through the opening, and let down the flagstone behind him. There was not light enough by which to identify him.

[image]

"THEY SAW A SHORT, STOUT MAN DRAWING SHEETS OF PAPER FROM THE OPENED PACKAGE."

The boys re-entered the chamber, and listened until the sound of his retreating footsteps above had died away. Then Warrender switched on the light, took a sheet of paper from the top of the bale, folded it, and put it into his breast pocket.

"Now for home," he whispered. "We've something for Percy to start a new theory on."

CHAPTER XVI
WATERMARKS

As they began to retrace their steps through the tunnel, Armstrong said–

"If we count our paces we shall have some sort of an idea where we've been to. We know the tunnel runs pretty nearly due east from the ruins, and there must be a building at the end. It seems to me it's a choice between the Red House and that old tower. There's no other."

"True. Well, we'll both count. Bet you we don't agree."

"People never do agree when the count is a long one. Besides, we can't keep step in the dark, unless we left-right all the way, and I'm hanged if I do that!"

They started. Suddenly Warrender stopped.

”I say, we shall look pretty green if some one has discovered that open trap in our absence–Rush, for example.”

”Frightful mugs, the two of us. We ought to have closed it. But it’s still very early in the morning. Let’s hope Rush isn’t up with the lark. Hang it. I’ve forgotten how many steps I’d counted. What do you make it?”

”Fifty-eight. Concentrate your mind, my son.”

”I’ll start at fifty-nine, then. Don’t you think we might venture on a light now?”

”Not for anything. The tunnel’s straight, and if you’ve ever been in a straight railway tunnel you’ll know a light can be seen for miles. Better be on the safe side.”

They completed the course in darkness.

”Well, what’s your total?” asked Warrender.

”Two hundred and eighty-three.”

”Mine’s two hundred and ninety-one. Not so bad.”

On emerging into the cellar, they replaced the flagstone and made sure that the hand-grips were turned as they had found them. Then they mounted to the upper floor of the cottage.

”I want to discover how that moaning is caused,” said Armstrong.

”But it means shinning up to the roof,” said Warrender. ”It’s broad daylight now. You might be seen.”

”So I might. Well, let’s take a look over Ambrose Pratt’s grounds.”

They went into the eastern room. The tower, a little south of the house, appeared to be slightly the nearer to them, but, ignorant as they were of the exact length of their paces, they agreed that the end of the tunnel might lie beneath either of the buildings.

Going then into the room facing south, they started back from the window. Rush was tramping along the weedy path leading to the southern end of the island.

”Lucky I didn’t climb!” murmured Armstrong.

They watched the man. He seemed to be a little suspicious, stopping every now and again to listen and look round. Presently he disappeared into the thicket.

”Safe to go now?” asked Armstrong.

”Let’s wait a bit.”

Warrender kept his eyes fixed on the stretch of river which was visible over the low trees southward. After a while he saw a small boat moving slowly down stream.

”All right now,” he remarked. ”I dare say he’s been spying out on our camp from the north end. Hope he hasn’t missed us.”

”Or found our pram! Come on, I want my breakfast.”

They stepped out of the cottage, regained the western shore, discovered the pram where they had concealed it, and, having crossed the river unobserved, so far as they knew, laid the craft in its former hiding-place, and returned to camp. Pratt was busy at the paraffin stove.

”What ho!” he exclaimed. ”One must feed, even when pain and anguish wring the brow. I made sure the spooks or some one had got you, and after fortifying myself with bacon and eggs I was going up to ask old Crawshay whether an inquest would be necessary. You look very much washed out. Been on the tiles?”

”I’ll wring your neck if you don’t hand over that frying-pan,” said Armstrong.

”Thy necessity is greater than mine. As you know, I’d lick Philip Sidney or any other old paladin in chivalry. Eat, drink, and be merry. There’s enough coffee brewed for us all. Make a fair division of the bacon and eggs between you, and I’ll fry some more in a brace of shakes. I say, I am jolly glad to see you! I’ve had the deuce of a time!”

”More pin-pricks?” asked Warrender.

”No. But I’m blessed–or cursed–with a very vivid imagination, as you are aware. I stayed up till daybreak, expecting you back every minute, and when you didn’t come I got in a regular stew, saw you tumble from the roof, and your members all disjected over the garden–horrid sight! Saw you knocked on the head, trussed and gagged in the cellar; boated off to France; growing white-haired in a dungeon like that fellow in the Bastille–you know, finger nails a yard long–mice and rats and toads. Toads were the last straw, I saw ’em hopping about, and—-”

”That bacon done?” said Armstrong. ”How many bottles of ginger-beer did you drink?”

”I am not drunk, most noble Festus. But I say, what *did* happen?”

”I’d have told you already,” said Warrender, ”only I couldn’t get a word in.”

”That’s the reward of patience! I only twaddled, you juggins, to give you a chance to feed. You did both look awfully done up. The hue of health is returning now. Fire away, then!”

Warrender, between the mouthfuls, related the experiences of the night, Pratt showing unusual self-restraint as a listener.

”My poor old uncle!” he exclaimed at the conclusion of the story. ”He can’t be convicted as an accessory, can he?”

”Of course not,” replied Warrender. ”No one could hold him responsible for what his foreign crew are doing in his absence. It’s a pity you don’t know where he’s gone. A cable or a Marconigram would bring him home post-haste.”

”I might, perhaps, ask Gradoff for his last address.”

”The less we have to do with Gradoff the better, until we have got to the bottom of the business. Just run down to the boat, will you, and bring up our map.”

The scale of the map was two inches to the mile. A moment’s examination proved that the tower, marked on the map, lay within a radius of one-eighth of a mile from the island.

”There isn’t much doubt that the far end of the tunnel is under the tower,” said Warrender. ”The house is a trifle beyond. Didn’t you ever hear of the smugglers’ passage, Percy?”

”Never. All I know about it is the tradition that some one was starved in the tower centuries ago. My sister and I used to play in it as kids; it was a mere ruin then; no roof, no boarding on the windows.”

”I wonder if a local guide-book would give any information?” said Armstrong.

”Good idea! We’ll see presently,” said Pratt.

”But we’re not studying antiquities,” Warrender remarked. ”The essential point is, what are those beggars using the place for now? What are they doing with those bales of paper? Come into the tent, and I’ll show you the specimen I bagged.”

Within the shelter of the tent he unfolded the sheet, and the others bent over it curiously, fingering it.

”It has a sort of parchmenty feel, and it’s much too thick for cigarette paper,” said Pratt. ”Is there a watermark?” He held it up to the sunlight.

”Jiminy!” he exclaimed. Whipping out his pocket-book he took a pound note, and held it beside the larger sheet. ”Look here! The watermark’s almost, but not quite, the same. A dashed clever imitation. Here are the words, ’One pound,’ crowns, diagonal hatchings–everything. The beggars are forging Bradburys.”

The sinister discovery almost robbed the others of breath. There could be little room for doubt. Such paper, so marked, could be used for only one purpose. A flood of light was poured on all the mysterious events of the past week. The paper was brought from abroad, and landed as a rule on the island in preference to the coast, to avoid the risk of interference by coastguards; also, no doubt, for greater ease of transport. Rush was employed because he was a well-known figure in the neighbourhood, and could go up and down the river in his boat without awakening suspicion. He might or might not know the contents of the bales; what was clear was that the printing of the notes must be done either in the tower or in Mr. Pratt’s house. The foreigners had entered his service with no other end in view than their criminal work. Gradoff, the head of the gang, had probably known in advance of Mr. Pratt’s intention to travel, and had astutely

seized the opportunity of carrying on his operations in this remote spot, on the premises of an eccentric gentleman who was something of a recluse, and prone to quarrel with his neighbours.

"They're clever blackguards," said Pratt. "No wonder the island is haunted! And I say, Molly Rod's peculiar actions the other day are explained. She has found out what's going on, and being a decent Englishwoman, wants to stop it, husband or no husband. You may say what you like, Jack; I'm certain it is she who makes those signals, and, of course, my poor old uncle is absolutely ignorant of everything. He'll be in a terrific bait when he knows."

"What's our next move to be?" asked Warrender. "Inform the police?"

"Certainly not that fellow who yarned about arson the other night," said Armstrong. "It's a matter for the Chief Constable."

"Or Mr. Crawshay? He's a magistrate," suggested Pratt.

"And an impetuous old hothead," rejoined Armstrong.

"Plenty of common sense, though," said Warrender. "You remember, he said a good case is often lost through being ill prepared? Well, we've still only suspicion to go on. There's no earthly doubt about it, of course; but wouldn't it be best to catch the forgers in the act before we call in the law?"

"It means loss of time," said Armstrong.

"That doesn't matter to us. You see, if we set the authorities at work now, they might send a bobby to the house to make inquiries, and give clever scoundrels like those a chance to get away. But if we can go to them and say definitely, 'An international gang of forgers is printing notes in the Red House, and here's one of the forgeries,' the matter becomes much more important, and they'd take steps to secure the whole crowd without the possibility of failure. To my mind we'd better keep everything a dead secret until we've got positive proof."

"I concur with my learned brother," said Pratt. "Besides, we've got so far with it that I own I should hate to see it taken out of our hands. Furthermore and finally, it's good sport, and a ripping holiday adventure."

"That's the best argument of the lot," said Armstrong. "The only sound one. I confess I'd like to get into the tower, and see them at it."

"We'll go through the tunnel again to-night," said Warrender. "If we can't find an entry that way, we'll try the outside."

"I make a third to-night," said Pratt.

"We must leave some one in camp, if only for appearance's sake," said Warrender. "I think Armstrong and I had better go again, as we know the course. Hope you don't mind. Your turn will come, Percy."

"Well, I'd like to feel myself a martyr, but unluckily I've got a certain amount of common sense, and I can't help admitting you're right. Hadn't you

better take a snooze, then?"

"I intend to," said Armstrong. "We'll sleep till lunch; this afternoon we'll go to the village and get a guide-book. We want some more bacon, too."

"And I'll start preparing our case," said Pratt. "We'd better have it in writing, so I'll draw up an account of our discoveries so far. Shouldn't wonder if it becomes a classic document in the archives of Scotland Yard."

After lunch Armstrong and Warrender set off up the river in the dinghy for the sake of exercise. They made various purchases in the village, and obtained a small guide-book at the post office. It contained a few lines about the tower, which Warrender read aloud as they returned to the ferry: "In the grounds of the Red House are the remains of a square tower, believed to date from the troublous times of King Stephen. There is a tradition that in the thirteenth century a certain baron was incarcerated there by an ancestor of the present owner, and starved to death. At one time open to the public, since tourists cut their initials in the oaken beams it has been closed to sightseers."

"Not a word about smugglers, you see," remarked Warrender. "The secret was evidently very well kept."

Rogers happened to be cleaning his windows as they passed, and they turned to have a chat with him. Warrender discreetly led the conversation to the subject of the tower.

"Ay, 'tis the only old ancient curiosity we've got in these parts," said the innkeeper. "I know the place, though I haven't been there since I was a nipper, thirty odd years ago. Us youngsters used to like to climb the winding stairs; 'twas open in those days. Had no roof then. Mr. Pratt a few years back did some restoring, as they call it; put on a flat roof. My friend Saunders, his old butler, told me the top room was used as a sort of museum; Mr. Pratt kept there a whole lot of curiosities he'd collected in his travels. I mind as how my neighbour Parsons, the builder, was affronted because the building job was done by a firm from Dartmouth, and so far as I know none of the village folk have been inside the place since. Mr. Pratt was very particular after he'd rigged up his museum; wouldn't let anybody in except his special cronies; and 'tis always locked up when he's away, so if you young gents had an idea of visiting it, I'm afeard you'll be disappointed."

"We should certainly have liked to see the museum," said Warrender. "There's nothing else very interesting, apparently. But no doubt the curiosities are valuable, and Mr. Pratt is quite right to lock up the place. Have you seen your sister, by the way?"

"Not a sign of her. She've deserted us quite. She won't even see Henery Drew's milkman, I suppose becos Henery fought her husband's friend, Jensen. I call it downright silly, but there, who'd be so bold as to say what a woman'll do

next? There's my missus—-"

"Now, Joe," called Mrs. Rogers from within, "get on with they winders, my man. There's all the pewters to shine afore opening time."

Rogers gave the boys his usual rueful smile, and they went on their way. Rowing with their faces up stream, they did not notice until they pulled in to the landing-place above the camp that the motor-boat no longer lay at her moorings.

"Have those beggars let her drift again?" said Warrender, angrily. "Pratt!" he called.

There was no answer. They looked down the river. The boat was not in sight. Hurrying to the tent, with the expectation of finding Pratt asleep there, they discovered that it was untenanted.

"What the dickens!" exclaimed Warrender. "Surely he hasn't gone larking with the boat? He always prided himself on knowing nothing about her working!"

"Seems to me they've run off with him and the boat too," said Armstrong. "Where's his banjo, by the way?"

It was neither in the tent nor on the chair outside, where Pratt sometimes left it.

They looked blankly at each other for a moment, then Warrender exclaimed–

"Come on! This is serious! I can't believe he's kidnapped. What's the use of that? Let us row down–perhaps he hasn't gone far."

They ran to the bank, sprang into the dinghy, and sculled rapidly down stream, every now and then turning their heads to scan the river, the banks, the island, for a sign of the motor-boat. They had almost reached the mouth when Armstrong suddenly cried–

"Listen! Isn't that a banjo?"

They shipped oars. Faintly on the breeze from seaward came the strains of "Three Blind Mice." A few strokes brought the rowers round the slight bend. Looking out to sea they descried, about half a mile away, the motor-boat, stationary, lapped by white-crested wavelets.

"By George! He's picked up some girls," exclaimed Armstrong.

There were certainly two parasols, a pink and a blue, at the stern of the boat.

"The young dog!" cried Warrender. "And got them stranded on a sandbank. But 'Three Blind Mice!' He's a rummy idea of entertaining girls."

The sound of the banjo ceased. "Ahoy!" came from the boat, and the two parasols were agitated. The scullers pulled on.

"Heavens! It's Mrs. Crawshay and her daughter," said Warrender, after glancing over his shoulder. Armstrong grinned.

”Twig?” he said. ”Master Percy has been showing off.”

”Silly young ass! Jolly lucky he hasn’t wrecked ’em! I shall have to talk to him.”

They rowed almost up to the boat, keeping clear of the sandbank.

”Hullo, old sports,” said Pratt. ”Really, Phil, you ought to carry a chart–an up-to-date one, you know, that would show all the coral reefs and other traps for the hapless navigator. The Admiralty ought to mark ’em with buoys or lightships or something, but you can never expect anything from the Government. There’s no danger, of course. I assured the ladies that they needn’t be the least bit nervous or frightened, but it’s annoying to be pulled up when you don’t want to be. I’m sure a ’bus conductor must get frightfully annoyed when the old ’bus is spanking along and somebody wants to get in or out. I dare say you’ve noticed it, Mrs. Crawshay; the conductor is so ratty at being interrupted that he simply won’t see the umbrella you’re waving at him from the kerb. Mrs. Crawshay and Miss Crawshay were kind enough to pay a call on us at the camp this afternoon. It was just after you had gone, and as it was far too early for tea, I thought it would be interesting–what they call a treat, you know”–Pratt’s impetuous tongue had fairly run away with his *savoir faire*–”to take the ladies for a spin, especially as they had never been in a motor-boat before. I promised faithfully to bring them back to tea; you got some meringues and things, of course–and I have a distinct grudge against fate for making me out to be not a man of my word. There’s no armour against—-”

”Oh, Mr. Pratt, please!” Lilian Crawshay implored. ”Mr. Warrender, can you get us off?”

”I have given up all hope of tea,” said Mrs. Crawshay, good-temperedly. ”We have friends coming to dinner, and Mr. Pratt tells me that we must wait till the tide turns. Will that be long?”

”Three hours or so, I’m afraid,” replied Warrender.

”Dear, dear! We shall be very late, Lilian,” said Mrs. Crawshay.

”Can’t you tug us off?” asked the girl.

”I’m sorry to say we haven’t a hawser. But I think we could pull the dinghy near enough for you to get into it, if Mrs. Crawshay would venture?”

”I’ll venture anything rather than wait here three hours,” said the lady, ”though Mr. Pratt has been most kind. I have really quite enjoyed it, but three hours more, you know—-”

”It would be rather awful!” said Warrender, with a glance at Pratt, who having succeeded in his object, to prevent certain disclosures, was mopping his brow in the background. Now, however, he came forward.

”That’s right, Phil,” he said. ”No nearer, or you’ll run aground too.”

He leapt overboard, and stood up to his knees in water. ”I’ll hold the boat’s

nose, Mrs. Crawshay. Or perhaps I might take you in my arms and—-" "Bless the boy! You're getting your feet wet. No, no! I don't think you shall take me in your arms."

"Or try pick-a-back? Or shall I make myself into a gangway for you to walk over? I'd stand perfectly firm."

"If you would give me a hand! Lilian, my dear, jump in first. Then you can each give me a hand, and I shall manage very nicely. Dear me! What an adventure for an old woman!"

"Not at all," said Pratt. "I mean—-"

"I am sure you do," said Mrs. Crawshay, interrupting. "Will you take my parasol?"

Pratt meekly relieved her of the parasol, then turned to help the girl into the dinghy. Lilian, however, sprang in without his aid, and between them the two boys assisted the mother, who gave a sigh of relief as she sank down upon the thwart.

[image]

"BETWEEN THEM THE TWO BOYS ASSISTED THE MOTHER"

"We'll come back for you presently, Pratt," said Warrender, stiffly. "Don't attempt to run up, mind."

"Good-bye, Mr. Pratt," said Mrs. Crawshay. "And thank you so much. When you come up to dinner, be sure to bring your banjo."

The two boys pulled off, Pratt climbing back into the motor-boat.

"What a clever, amusing person Mr. Pratt is," said Mrs. Crawshay to Armstrong, facing her. "So ready! And an excellent performer on the banjo! We could never be dull in his company. He talked most amusingly, then sang us song after song. Don't you think 'Two Eyes of Blue' very pretty, Mr.—-"

"Rather sentimental, isn't it?" said Armstrong, blushing.

"All his songs are sentimental. He was playing a very funny tune, though, when you came round the bend. I was sure his voice was getting tired, and asked him just to play. The tune was quite unknown to me, but I thought it very cheering."

Meanwhile, at the other end of the boat, Lilian had been giving explanations to Warrender.

"He intended just to bring us to the mouth of the river, but seemed to have some difficulty in turning round. I think he said he wanted more sea-room. At any rate, he ran out to sea, and then we stuck on that wretched sandbank. He

talked and sang to amuse us; he has quite a pleasant voice, but his songs are dreadfully sentimental, aren't they?"

"Frightful tosh!" returned Warrender.

"Well, it was very good of him, especially when he must have been much annoyed at the mishap, which, of course, wasn't his fault."

"No, of course not," said Warrender.

"You speak as if you thought it was."

"Oh, no. Any one might run on a hidden sandbank. But the fact is—-"

"Yes?"

"You see, he was in charge of the camp."

"You mean he oughtn't to have come at all?"

"Naturally he thought it would please you and Mrs. Crawshay, but—-"

"Oh!"

The girl said no more.

"She thought I was jealous, or huffy, or something," Warrender confided to Armstrong later. "I wonder what she'd have said if I'd told her that the idiot had never run a motor-boat before?"

CHAPTER XVII
THE TOPMOST ROOM

It was in the evening twilight that Armstrong and Warrender put off in the pram for their second expedition to the tunnel. On reaching the ruins, Warrender posted himself in one of the lower rooms, while Armstrong mounted to the upper floor, intent on discovering the source of the ghostly moans. Climbing out of the window opening, and pulling aside the ivy, he found that steps had been made in the brickwork of the crumbling wall, by means of which any one with a steady head might with ease ascend to the roof. And there, behind one of the gables, partly protected from the weather, he came upon a long metal organ pipe laid flat, and near it a large funnel-shaped object. A strong breeze was blowing from the south-west, but the organ pipe gave forth no sound.

Still puzzled as to the manner in which the sound was produced, and reflecting that Pratt would probably have jumped to it at once, Armstrong heard a low whistle from below. He scrambled hastily down, and had only just slipped into the eastern room when he heard lumbering footsteps upon the stairs. From

the doorway he watched the man whom he had seen in the morning. A minute or two after the new-comer had entered the western room, the moaning broke out. Armstrong waited until the man had descended and all was quiet again, then once more climbed upon the roof. The mystery was solved. The funnel had been so adjusted as to catch the wind, and direct it with some force into the mouth of the organ pipe. It turned like a weather-cock, so that the sound was independent of the veering of the wind.

Rejoining Warrender, Armstrong informed him of the discovery, and suggested that he should examine the contrivance for himself.

"I'll take your word for it," said Warrender, smiling. "I don't care about steeple-jack feats in half darkness. We'll wait a little before we follow that fellow through the tunnel. Let's go up and watch for the signal."

It was perhaps half an hour later when the light appeared above the treetops.

"Most certainly it's S.O.S.," said Armstrong, after counting the recurring glows.

"I shouldn't wonder if Pratt is right after all, and it's Molly Rod signalling. He was right about the organ pipe."

"Doesn't it occur to you that the light may come from the tower?"

"But if the forgers are at work there, why should any one signal?"

"Can't we discover whether it's from the tower or the house?"

"We can't take any bearings in the dark. Stay, though. If we move back from the window, and go to the side of the room, perhaps we'll find a spot where the light just becomes invisible. I'll mark that on the floor, and in daylight there'd be no difficulty."

Acting on this suggestion, they were not long in discovering the required spot. Warrender scratched a pencil mark on the floor; then they descended to the cellar, cautiously lifted the flagstone, and groped their way through the tunnel until they came to the chamber at the end. Nothing was altered there, except that the opened bale of paper had been removed. They had intended to enter the archway on the farther side, and lift the flagstone which, they suspected, closed the entrance to another cellar; but from above there came dully a succession of regular thuds which proved that somebody was about, and active.

"I dare say that's the press at work," said Warrender in a whisper, after they had listened for a few minutes.

"Doing overtime," said Armstrong. "I suppose, not knowing exactly when Mr. Pratt will return, they want to make the most of their opportunity. Who knows how many thousands of pounds of spurious money are getting into circulation? No doubt Gradoff had his trunk full of notes that morning we saw him driving off in the car."

They seated themselves on the unopened bales, hoping that work would presently cease, and the man would leave the tower. But the thuds continued with monotonous regularity.

"Every thud means a forged note," said Armstrong. "They may be going on all night. How long can you stick it?"

"We'll wait till eleven; then if they're still at it, we'll go back and reconnoitre the outside."

"Perhaps they have a sentry."

"Perhaps; but I fancy they'll feel pretty safe now that they've chevied us from the island."

At eleven o'clock the work was still going on. The boys retraced their course to the ruins, regained the pram, and allowed it to drift on the current down channel to the south of the island. There they lay to for a few minutes, listening, peering through the darkness. There was no moon; the starlight scarcely revealed the outlines of the trees. Presently, with careful, soundless movements of the sculls, they rowed across to the left bank, and, pulling the craft out of sight, landed a little below the island, and laboriously pushed their way through the thicket, guiding themselves by the compass. Some fifty yards from the bank the vegetation thinned, and they found themselves in a wood of taller trees. Here the going was easier, though once or twice they stumbled over trunks that had been felled and stripped ready for carting. Emerging from the wood into park-like ground, where there were large trees only at intervals, they progressed still more rapidly, and at last caught sight, on their left, of the dim, square shape of the tower. Behind a broad elm they stood for a minute or two, watching. There was no light in the tower. Its base was surrounded by a mass of low-growing shrubs. The doorway, no doubt, was on the farther side from them. The walls were covered with ivy, except at the window openings, where the recent boarding was visible as faint grey patches.

"Now for it," whispered Warrender.

They stole forward over the long grass. As they drew nearer to the tower they heard the dull regular thudding; there was no other sound. Armstrong posted himself at one corner, while Warrender gently pushed a way through the shrubs to the wall. He examined the boarded window, apparently an old embrasure much widened. The boards were on the inside; the outside was protected by cross bars of iron. He went round the building. There was only one other window opening on the ground floor. At the north-eastern angle he halted, looking out for a possible sentry, then crept along until he reached the entrance, a low iron-studded door flush with the wall. Putting his ear against the wood, he heard more clearly the metallic thuds, and men's voices. A footstep approached. He slipped back to the corner, and crouched in the shelter of a shrub. The door

opened outwards, creaking on its hinges, and letting out a stream of light. A short, stout figure emerged from the tower, carrying a number of cans which rattled as he walked.

"*Fermez la porte!*"

The words, in a savage, half-suppressed shout, sounded from some little distance away in the direction of the house. The man addressed hastily closed the door behind him, and went on. Warrender saw another man meet him. They stopped and exchanged a few words. Rod continued his way to the house, his progress faintly marked by the rattling cans. The other man came towards the tower. He opened the door quickly, slipped inside, and shut it. In the one second during which the light shone out, Warrender recognised the pale face of Paul Gradoff.

He hurried round to the spot where Armstrong had remained on guard.

"All right!" he whispered. "No sentry. Rod has just gone to the house; Gradoff has gone in."

"Well," returned Armstrong, "what can we do?"

"We'll try the door first of all. Come on!"

They moved with slow, careful steps round the tower, came to the door, and gently tried the handle. There was no yielding; the door was fastened. They went on to the western face of the tower. Here also there was a window opening on the ground floor, as securely boarded up as the other. At equal intervals above it were two other embrasures, similarly blocked.

"No way of getting in," murmured Armstrong.

The sound of the door creaking sent them scurrying to cover in the undergrowth. When all was silent again, Warrender whispered–

"Come among the trees. We can talk more freely there."

They crept over the ground, and took post under a tall, thick-leaved beech nearly a hundred yards away.

"I don't see any chance of getting in," said Warrender, "and that's a pity. I wanted to see them actually turning out their forged notes."

"I suppose it was Gradoff going out again we heard just now," said Armstrong. "If he and Rod are both away, there can't be more than four others in the tower, probably not so many. They'll take turns at night-work."

"That doesn't matter. Any forcible entry is quite out of the question, if that's what you're thinking of. I say, isn't that a light up the tower?"

More than half-way up the wall a faint streak of light was visible.

"Evidently there's some one in the top room," said Warrender. "Some one sleeps there, I suppose. The machine is on the ground floor. Where light gets out, we should be able to see in. You've done some climbing already to-night; are you game to clamber up the ivy? There's no other way."

”I weigh eleven stone,” said Armstrong, dubiously.

”But ivy’s pretty tough. It may support you. You may find foothold in the wall.”

”Hanged if I don’t try. You’ll stand underneath and break my fall if I tumble. I reckon it’s about thirty feet up; plenty high enough to break one’s neck or leg.”

They hastened to the foot of the tower. With Warrender’s help, Armstrong got a footing in the lower embrasure. Then, taking firm hold of the stout main stem of the ivy, he began to swarm up, seeking support for his feet in the thick, spreading tendrils and in notches of the stone-work. Warrender watched him hopefully. Slowly, inch by inch, he ascended. He gained the second embrasure, rested there a few moments, then climbed again, and was almost half-way to his goal, when he felt the ivy above him yield slightly. Digging his feet into the wall, he hung on, but at the first attempt to ascend he felt that the attenuated stem would no longer support his weight, and began slowly to lower himself.

At this moment Warrender heard the door creak, and threw up a warning whisper. Armstrong stopped, effacing himself as well as he could amongst the ivy, to which he clung with the disagreeable sensation that he was dragging it from its supports above. Voices were heard; heavy footsteps. After a few moments they ceased. Were the men turning to come back? Had they heard anything? Then came the scratching of a match. Warrender drew relieved breath; some one had halted, only, it appeared, to light his pipe or cigarette. The footsteps sounded again, gradually receding, and finally died away.

”All safe!” whispered Warrender.

Armstrong let himself down, and stood beside his friend.

”A quivery job,” he murmured. ”My arms ache frightfully. It’s not to be done, Phil. Another foot up and I should have dragged down the whole lot, possibly a stone or two as well. We’re fairly beaten.”

”The sound inside has stopped. They’ve apparently knocked off work; it’s past midnight. I wonder if any one’s left inside?”

”Why should there be?”

”Well, there was some one up above. Is the light showing still?”

They walked some distance away from the tower, and looked up. The thin streak of light, so faint that it might have escaped casual observation, still showed at the level of the topmost room. They went to the door and again gently tried it. It was shut fast.

”We had better get back,” said Warrender. ”There’s nothing to be done.”

”Unless we try the tunnel again, now that all is quiet inside.”

”If you like.”

They crossed the grounds with the guidance of the compass, and presently came among the medley of prostrate trunks.

”I’ve an idea,” said Armstrong. ”It’ll take a long time to get back through the tunnel. Why not shift one of these poles, and put it up against the tower? I could climb then, and take a look in at that upper window.”

”Good man! We must take care to get one long enough.”

They found a straight fir stem that appeared to be of the required length, carried it to the tower, and raised it silently until the top rested in the ivy, just above the left-hand corner of the window.

”Steady it while I climb,” said Armstrong. ”Don’t let it wobble over.”

He began to swarm up. For the first eighteen or twenty feet it was easy work; then with every inch upward his difficulties grew, for not only was there less and less room between the pole and the wall, but the pole itself showed more and more tendency to roll sideways, in spite of Warrender’s steadying hands below. Slowly, very slowly Armstrong mounted, maintaining equilibrium partly by clutching the ivy. At last, gaining the level of the window, he gripped one of the iron bars that stretched across it, rested one knee on the wide embrasure, and peeped through a narrow crack between two of the boards.

He was transfixed with amazement. The first object that caught his eye was the figure of an elderly man, bald, with thick grey moustache and beard, seated at a table, resting his head on his hands as he read by the light of a small paraffin lamp the book open before him. On one end of the table stood a couple of plates, one holding a half-loaf of bread, a knife, and a jug. Upon the walls beyond him hung animals’ horns, tusks, savage weapons, necklaces of metal and beads. The remainder of the room was out of the line of sight.

As Armstrong gazed, the inmate got up and paced to and fro. He was tall and lank; his clothes–an ordinary lounge suit–hung loosely upon his spare frame. There was a worn, harassed look in the eyes beneath a deeply furrowed brow. He strode up and down, his large bony hands clasped behind him; sighed, sat down again, and began to take off his clothes.

[image]

”HE STRODE UP AND DOWN, HIS LARGE BONY HANDS CLASPED BEHIND HIM.”

Puzzled as to the identity of this solitary, wondering whether he, and not Gradoff, was the head of the gang, Armstrong backed down to make his descent. The pole swayed as his full weight came upon it, and he saved himself from crashing to the ground only by desperately clinging to the ivy, and forcing the top of the pole into a tangled mass of the foliage. Then he slid rapidly down,

barking his hands on the rough stem.

"Quick!" whispered Warrender. "You made too much row."

He ran backwards, letting down the pole; Armstrong caught up the lower end, and they hurried away with it, laying it in the wood among the others. Meanwhile they had heard sounds of movement from the tower. Some one had come out. There were low voices, footsteps coming towards them. Without an instant's delay they pushed on in the direction of the river, thankful for the darkness of the night and the overshadowing trees. Only when they had gained the shelter of the thicket did they dare to pause for a moment to consult the compass. On again, but more slowly, lest the rustling leaves should betray them.

At length they came to the channel. The island was opposite to them. Turning southward, they groped along the bank until they stumbled upon the pram. They launched it, and floated down stream. When they were well past the southern end of the island they pulled round into the broader channel, and, closely hugging the right bank, rowed quietly up the river to their landing-place.

Only then did Warrender venture a whispered question–

"What did you see?"

"An oldish man, reading."

"Not one of those we have seen?"

"No. Can't make it out."

They returned to camp. It was past two o'clock. Pratt sprang up from his chair before the tent, and held a small paraffin lamp towards them.

"Well?" he asked, guessing from their aspect that they brought news.

"They were working in the tower," said Warrender. "We heard the machine, and couldn't risk going up from the tunnel. But we came back and reconnoitred the outside, and Armstrong climbed up and peeped through a crack in the boarding of the top room. What did you see, Jack?"

"An old man reading by the light of a paraffin lamp."

"Another one of the gang!" exclaimed Pratt.

"I don't know. Perhaps. He looked haggard and anxious."

"No wonder. What was he like?"

"Tall and thin, with grey moustache and beard."

"A foreigner?"

"Couldn't tell. He might well have been English. A queer old johnny–hook-nosed, high bald head: might have been a 'varsity professor."

"What!" shouted Pratt. "Bald! Beard! Hook nose! Like a professor! Great

heavens–my uncle!"

CHAPTER XVIII
ZERO

A half truth, some one has said, is the greatest of lies: perhaps there is nothing more staggering to the intelligence than a half discovery–a discovery which solves one problem only to propound another.

"My old uncle, for a certainty," said Pratt. "He has been bald as long as I can remember him: lost his hair in the wilds of Africa, I believe. Years ago his man stuffed me up with the tale that a lion clawed his tresses out by the roots. Lucky he didn't marry, or his wife might have plagued him about wearing a wig, like Mother Rogers. That's the mystery of the signal solved, then."

"Is it?" said Armstrong. "No signal was ever shown from the window of that top room; that I'd swear. The light we saw to-night was the merest streak: came through a slit certainly not more than a quarter of an inch wide."

"But hang it all!–there's the poor old chap a prisoner: who else would signal for help?"

"I thought you suggested Molly Rogers," remarked Warrender.

"I've given that up. Didn't Rogers say she knows nothing about signals? But that doesn't matter. The point is that those foreign blackguards have him under lock and key while they're committing a criminal offence on his premises. I shouldn't wonder if it killed him, or made him clean potty. He's over sixty, and solitary confinement—-"

"I say, it's very late," Armstrong interrupted. "We've none of us had much sleep lately. Let's see what's to be done and then get all the rest we can before morning. I foresee a thick time to-morrow."

"We must set old Crawshay moving," said Pratt. "No doubt he's hand in glove with the Chief Constable."

"We talked about Crawshay before," rejoined Armstrong. "The affair is complicated now. We've got your uncle's safety to consider. You may be sure that those ruffians won't stick at trifles, and if any action is taken against them publicly it's quite on the cards that they'd put a bullet into the old man. I'm inclined to think it's up to us."

"What do you mean?" asked Warrender.

”We know the subterranean entrance to the tower. Can’t we get in and release him ourselves? He’d be valuable outside as a witness.”

”But, my dear chap, if the prisoner disappeared the foreigners would know the game was up,” said Warrender. ”They’d clear off before they could be caught.”

”Look here, old man, he’s my uncle,” said Pratt earnestly. ”The poor old boy has been cooped up there goodness knows how long. He’s over sixty, accustomed to an active life: imagine what it means to him. It’s just the sort of thing to send him to a lunatic asylum for the rest of his days. I’d never forgive myself if I didn’t make some effort to get him out of it. If you put it to me, I say I don’t care a hang whether the forgers are caught or not. The personal matter quite outweighs any other. If we go interviewing magistrates and constables we’ll lose precious time: you know what officials are. The thing is, to rescue my old uncle without a moment’s delay, and let the rest take its chances.”

Pratt’s unwonted gravity had its effect upon his companions.

”Shall we try it?” asked Warrender, turning to Armstrong.

”I’m game,” was the ready reply. ”It’s risky: no good blinking that. We are three to six or seven, if we include Rush; and there’s not the least doubt they’re armed. Fellows like that always carry automatics. We’ve got cudgels! We can’t fight ’em; our only chance is to get in when there are few of them about.”

”That’s during the morning,” said Warrender. ”You remember that Gradoff has twice gone off in the car, and that morning we went up all the men were at the house.”

”Except Rush,” added Armstrong, ”and that ugly fellow we weren’t introduced to.”

”Well, then, I tell you what,” said Pratt. ”I’ll go into the village in the morning and find out whether the car has left as usual. We want some eggs, and some spirit for the stove. I’ll get that at Blevins’s, and see if I can pump a little information out of him or his assistant. If Gradoff and the chauffeur are away the odds against us will be reduced, and with luck we might get into the tower in their absence. What do you say?”

”There seems nothing better,” said Warrender. ”Let us turn in and get four or five hours’ sleep.”

Soon after breakfast next morning Pratt went off alone in the dinghy.

”By the way,” Warrender said as he was pulling away, ”bring an ounce of pepper, and a large tin of sardines. We can’t bother about cooking to-day, and sardines want a little condiment.”

”A packet of mustard, too,” called Armstrong. ”There’s none for tomorrow’s bacon.”

”Righto,” shouted Pratt. ”I shan’t be long.”

Arrived at the village, he made his purchases at the little provision shop,

thrust them into his pocket, and went on to the general dealer's for a can of spirit. As he approached, he heard a high-pitched, angry voice from the depths of the yard at the side of the shop.

"You go at vunce, at vunce, I say. Ve hire your car; vat is ze goot? Always it break down, one, two, tree times. It is too much."

"Ay, and you owe me too much already," replied Blevins gruffly.

Pratt halted, straining his ears towards the altercation.

"You pay up: that's what I say," Blevins went on. "You've had my car a week or more, and over-drive, that's what you do. And not a penny piece have you paid."

"But zat is all right," expostulated the foreigner. "Mr. Gradoff he pay at end of ze month. He say so; vell, you vait all right. You have–vat you call it?–a bike; it is ten mile, but vat is zat? You go quick."

[image]

"'BUT ZAT IS ALL RIGHT.'"

"And you think I'm going to ride twenty mile for a commutator. Not me. What do you want the car for, anyway? Driving in and out nigh every day, scorching along fit to bust up any machine. What's your game? Do 'ee take me for a fool? You're up to some hanky-panky while your master's away. Think I didn't know that all along? Nice goings on! A pretty tale the village 'll have to tell him when he gets back! Spending his money like I don't know what. Spending, says I; running up bills, that's what it is. You pay up, and you shall have a commutator. I don't need to ride no bikes to fetch it: I've got it on the spot; only I'll see your money first."

The men had begun to walk up the yard. Pratt slipped into the shop. Evidently the car would not be used to-day, he thought, if Blevins remained obdurate. Evidently, also, Blevins was suspicious of the doings at the Red House, though it was clear that he had no well-defined idea of what those doings were, or any knowledge of Mr. Pratt's whereabouts. He went past the shop, still bickering with the Italian. Pratt had a free field.

His former acquaintance, the youthful assistant, came forward to attend to him.

"Good-morning," said Pratt, genially. "It seems quite an age since I saw you. I've often thought of that pleasant little conversation we had. But I'm in rather a hurry to-day. I want some methylated spirit: that's what you call it, isn't it?–the stuff that burns with a blue flame. Rummy how often blue comes into business

affairs, don't you think? Last time I was here I wanted blue tacks, I remember. By the way, I suppose your friend, the gardener at the Red House, hasn't bought any more tacks?"

"No friend o' mine," growled the youth.

"Indeed! It's a pity not to be friends. Friendship oils the machinery of life, don't you know. Still, I am sure it's not your fault. Why doesn't he reciprocate the amiable sentiments you cherish towards him?"

The youth gave Pratt a puzzled stare. "I don't know nothing about that," he said slowly. "All I do know is, I hate furriners, I do so. Fair cruel they be. Why, the feller comed in here not a hour ago and wanted six foot of iron chain–to chain up a dog. 'Twas cruelty to animals, and so I told 'un."

"Perhaps the dog feels the heat and gets snappy."

"But the thickness of it! Look 'ee here, sir; here's the chain I cut. 'Tis thick enough to hold a mad bull. Do 'ee call that a chain for a dog? He wouldn't have a little small chain, as was proper."

"Well, after all, you haven't seen the dog. It may be a whopper of a brute. Give him the benefit of the doubt. You'll feel better now you've told me."

He paid for the can of spirit and left the shop. Blevins and the chauffeur were a little way up the road, still quarrelling. Forgetting the eggs that were part of his commission, Pratt hastened back to the ferry, and found that his friends had just arrived in the motor-boat.

"We saw Rush pulling down stream," said Warrender, "and hurried up to meet you and save time. He's one less. Any news of the car?"

"It appears to have broken down," replied Pratt, going on to relate what he had heard. "Pity Gradoff won't be away. But the Italian is still squabbling with Blevins, and if we look sharp we may get into the tower before he returns to the house. That will make them two short."

He had placed on the deck the can of spirit and the tin of sardines while he was speaking, then tied the dinghy astern and jumped aboard.

"Rush wasn't going to the island?" he asked.

"We watched him row past it," said Warrender. "He's probably off to his hut. Let's hope that the other fellows are at the house and not at the tower."

"It's 'over the top' now," remarked Armstrong, as the boat sidled away from the landing-stage.

CHAPTER XIX

THE PRISONER

Pratt was the only one of the three who had the curiosity to look at his watch when they descended into the cellar of the ruined cottage. It was twelve minutes past ten.

They had tied up the motor-boat at its moorings below the camp, and after a careful look-out in all directions, had crossed to No Man's Island by Mr. Crawshay's pram. For weapons Pratt and Armstrong each carried a short thick cudgel; Warrender at the last moment caught up his spanner, remarking that he might need a knuckle-duster.

The flat stone was revolved. They sprang lightly into the cavity below.

"Shall we leave it open in case we have to come back in a hurry?" asked Warrender in a whisper.

"Better close it," said Armstrong. "If Rush or the other fellow turns up and finds it open we may be fairly trapped."

Having made all secure they stood for a few moments listening. There was no sound.

"Now," said Warrender, moving to the front with his electric torch. "You're lucky, Pratt; you're the only one of us who can walk upright."

"'Were I so tall to reach the pole,'" Pratt quoted.

"Shut up!" said Armstrong, in a murmur. "Every sound carries. You can recite your little piece when we're through with it."

Slowly, quietly, in pitch darkness, they groped their way. Warrender thought it prudent not to switch on his light. At the dry well they halted to listen once more. On again, until they reached the vaulted chamber at the end. From overhead came the dull regular thud of the working machine. This was a disappointment. They wondered how many men were above. Did the trap here give entrance to a cellar as in the cottage? Was the printing done in such a cellar, or on a higher floor? They could not tell. The least movement of the flagstone might be noticed; they might be overwhelmed before they could emerge; but it was no time to weigh risks.

Armstrong went forward, and by a momentary flash from Warrender's torch saw the positions of the hand-grips. With infinite care he moved them round, and let the flagstone drop for a fraction of an inch. The sound from the machine was scarcely louder; only a subdued light shone through the crack. He lowered the stone noiselessly a little more; again a little more. The thuds continued; there was no other sound. No longer hesitating, Armstrong turned the stone over until it stood upright and peered over the edge of the cavity. He saw a large, dimly lit chamber, evidently underground, one side of which was filled

with packing cases, crates and boxes. On the other side was a wooden staircase with a short return, giving access to the room from which came, more distinctly now, the thud of the printing press. It was only through the opening at the head of the staircase that light, apparently from a lamp, penetrated into the chamber.

Armstrong scrambled up; Warrender was following him, when the thuds suddenly ceased. The boys held their breath. Had they been heard in spite of their care? There was no movement above. Warrender signed to Pratt to clamber up. Whether from excitement, or because he was shorter than the others, Pratt dropped his stick, which fell with a crack upon the floor. A voice from above called out two or three words which none of the boys understood. They had the rising inflection of a question; the last seemed to be a name. With quick wit Pratt uttered a low-toned grunt as if in answer. Armstrong flung a glance at his companions–a look in which they read resolution and a claim for their support. Then he walked boldly up the stairs.

On turning the corner he saw the well-remembered figure of Jensen the Swede in his shirt-sleeves, bending over, examining the platen of a small hand printing press. No daylight penetrated into the room, which was illumined by a powerful lamp hanging from the ceiling. Jensen's back was towards the staircase. He did not at once look up; Pratt's grunt had apparently satisfied him; but he growled a few words in a tongue unknown to the boys, as if he was finding fault with the machine. Receiving no answer, he glanced up. At the sight of Armstrong he remained for an instant in his bent position, motionless, as though turned to stone. Then he dashed towards the farther wall, where his coat hung from a nail.

[image]

"HE REMAINED FOR AN INSTANT IN HIS BENT POSITION, MOTIONLESS."

His momentary hesitation was his undoing. Armstrong sprang after him. Before the man could withdraw his hand from the coat pocket Armstrong struck down his left arm, raised instinctively to ward off a blow, with a smart stroke from his cudgel, following it up with a smashing left-hander between the eyes, which drove his head against the wall. While he still staggered, Armstrong seized him about the middle and flung him to the floor, wrenching from his hand the automatic pistol he had taken from his pocket.

"Hold his legs," cried Armstrong to Warrender, who had joined him. "Pratt, bring up some rope; there's plenty on the packing cases below."

The Swede heaved and writhed, but the firm hands of Armstrong and War-

render held him to the floor until Pratt had neatly bound his arms and legs. He filled the air with curses while the pinioning was a-doing. Warrender caught up some sheets from the pile of paper that had already been printed, and twisting them into a wad, stuffed it between the man's teeth. Laid helpless against the wall, the Swede concentrated all the bitterness of his rage and resentment in his eyes, which followed every movement of his captors.

Armstrong had already shot the stout bolt that defended the heavy oaken door on the inside. Having disposed of their victim, they threw a hasty glance at the small hand press, the piles of paper, printed and unprinted; in their eagerness to achieve their purpose they did not stay to make a thorough examination.

"Jack, will you close the trap-door below and remain on guard here?" said Warrender. "Take this fellow's pistol. You can spy out through a chink in the boarding, and if you see any of the others coming, sing out."

"Righto," said Armstrong.

Pratt was already through the low doorway in the north-east corner of the room. Warrender followed him, and found himself at the foot of a dark stone staircase, which wound so rapidly that Pratt was even now out of sight. The stairs were much worn in the middle, and in their haste to ascend the boys were glad to avail themselves of the rope that ran along the inner wall, supported by rusty iron stanchions.

When they had mounted a score of steps by the light of Warrender's torch, they came to an open doorway giving access to a low room lined with bookcases, except on the eastern wall, where a window, closely boarded up, looked towards the Red House. A desk stood in the centre of the floor; there was no other furniture, no occupant, only an array of small tin cases along one of the walls. Going higher, they presently halted before a closed door, the top of which was only a few feet below the massive timbers of the roof. Pratt turned the large iron ring; the door did not yield. He rapped smartly on the oak: there was no reply. Stooping, he peeped through the enormous keyhole. The interior of the room was dark. Warrender held the torch to the hole.

"The door's four or five inches thick," said Pratt. "No wonder he can't hear– if this is the room. Bang with your spanner."

Warrender smote the door vigorously, Pratt listening at the keyhole. There was no reply, but Pratt declared that he heard a slight movement, and putting his mouth to the keyhole he cried–

"Can you hear? We are friends."

Still there was no voice in answer. The only sound was a clanking of metal.

"Is your uncle deaf?" asked Warrender.

"He wasn't ten years ago. You try, Phil; your voice may carry better than mine."

”Are you Mr. Ambrose Pratt?” Warrender shouted, then turned his ear to the hole.

”Yes. Who are you?”

The words were spoken in tones so low and hollow that Warrender could scarcely distinguish them.

”Friends,” he replied. ”Your nephew Percy. Come to the door.”

”What did you say?”

”Come–to–the–door!” Warrender bawled, spacing out the words.

”Why do you mock me? You know I cannot.”

Again came the clanking of metal.

”He must be deaf,” said Pratt.

”We have come to help you,” cried Warrender, slowly and distinctly. ”Can you open the door?”

”To help me!” The clanking was louder, more prolonged. ”Are the villains gone? Who are you?”

”This is rotten,” said Warrender to Pratt. ”Shall I never make him understand? Please be still and listen,” he called. ”We are friends. We have come to let you out. Can you help us?”

”No. The door is locked. That man Gradoff has the key, and I am chained.”

”Good heavens!” ejaculated Pratt. ”Can we burst in the door?”

Standing on the narrow top step of the staircase, with winding stairs behind them, they were unable to bring any momentum to bear, and the pressure of their shoulders did not cause the heavy timber to yield a fraction of an inch. Warrender tried to force first the head of his spanner, then the narrower end of the handle between the door and the side-post. He failed.

”Get Jensen’s pistol and blow it in,” suggested Pratt.

Warrender hurried down the stairs. Returning with the pistol, he called through the keyhole–

”We will try to blow the lock in. Keep away from the line of fire.”

”Fire away. I am at the side of the room,” said the prisoner.

Warrender placed the muzzle in the keyhole and fired. There was the crack of shattered metal, but still the door did not yield. He fired a second time and pushed.

”It is giving. Shove!” he said.

Pratt turned his back to the door, and thrusting his feet as firmly as he could against the curving wall, he drove backwards with all his force. The fragments of the broken lock clattered upon the floor within, and the door swinging open suddenly, precipitated Pratt headlong into the room.

Warrender flashed his torch upon the scene. Against the left, the eastern wall, sitting on a roughly contrived bunk supported between two massive oaken

beams that stretched from floor to roof, was the tall lank figure that Armstrong had described. He was chained by the leg to one of the beams, the chain forming a loop around it, the last link being riveted to one in the longer portion.

Ambrose Pratt gazed in speechless surprise at the two schoolboys.

"Uncle!" exclaimed Pratt, going forward with outstretched hand.

Mr. Pratt looked with an expression of utter bewilderment and incredulity.

"Don't you remember me? I'm your nephew Percy," said the boy.

"My nephew!" murmured Mr. Pratt.

"Let us postpone explanations," said Warrender. "We have to get away. Hold the chain, Percy. I'll smash it with the spanner."

But the chain, which the general dealer's assistant had described as strong enough to hold a mad bull, resisted all the vigorous blows Warrender rained upon it.

"Run downstairs, Pratt," he said, "and see if there's a hammer and chisel below–or any tool about the printing press."

During Pratt's absence he repeated his efforts with the spanner, but made no impression on the tough steel. Pratt returned with a long steel rod which he had found lying near the press, and inserting this in one of the links, they tried to burst it.

"No good!" declared Warrender. "Nothing but a chisel and hammer will do it. I've both in my tool box in the motor-boat. We must have them. It's the only chance. You had better go for them, Pratt. Jack and I could tackle the foreigners if they came up."

"All right," said Pratt. "What's the chisel like?"

"What's it like?" exclaimed Warrender. "Like a chisel! Hang it! We can't risk a mistake. I'll go myself. You stay with your uncle. Jack will keep guard below, with the pistol. The door's strong, and we may be able to keep the enemy out until I have time to get back, suppose they come. I'll be as quick as I can: afraid I can't do it under half an hour. Good luck!"

CHAPTER XX
THE PACE QUICKENS

"So you are my nephew Percy," said Mr. Pratt when Warrender had gone. "Light the lamp and let me look at you. I don't recognise you. When was our last

meeting?"

"About ten years ago," replied Pratt, surprised at his uncle's calm demeanour. "You tanned me for picking one of your peaches."

"Did I?" Mr. Pratt smiled. "You were always a mischievous young ruffian. But how do you come here? Do you bear an olive branch from that cantankerous father of yours?"

"I came through the tunnel," Pratt began, ignoring the aspersion upon his father. Mr. Pratt interrupted him.

"What tunnel?"

"The tunnel between No Man's Island and this tower. Didn't you know of it?"

"I never heard of it before. Who told you about it?"

"We discovered it by accident. My chums and I came for a boating holiday, and camped on the island. We have had—-"

"You saw my signals?" his uncle interposed.

"Yes, and—-"

"And the police are informed? These villains will be arrested?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, Uncle," said Pratt, and was again interrupted.

"You did not? Then I am afraid you and your companions have tumbled into a hornets' nest, young man. As we are to have apparently a few minutes' leisure, I think you had better put me wise, as our American friends say, about the essential facts of the situation. How many do you muster?"

Pratt, in the exalted mood of a rescuer, and himself bursting with questions, was a little dashed by his uncle's cool matter-of-fact manner.

"There are three of us," he said. "We got in through the tunnel, and found one man below at the printing press."

"A printing press! Indeed! What literature are my guardians disseminating?"

"Forged notes."

"Forgers!" ejaculated Mr. Pratt, for the first time showing signs of agitation. "Things are worse than I dreamed. You are sure of what you say?"

"Absolutely. We found the watermarked paper."

"The scoundrels! You had better get away. If these fellows are an international gang of forgers they will have no scruples. The lives of you and your companions are not worth a rap. Leave me. Get away while there is time. Inform the police and leave matters in their hands."

"It's too late for that," said Pratt. "We have trussed up the man downstairs. Our only idea was to rescue you. If we left you now the others would find Jensen and know that the game is up. They might shoot you. We must get you away now at all costs."

”It is utter folly. Hare-brained adventuring! I fear you are right; it is too late. I must join forces with you when this chain is broken. I blame myself that my signals have let you young fellows into this terrible trap.”

”We had suspicions before we saw them–in fact, ever since we heard about your staff of foreign servants.”

”Yes, yes. I have been frightfully deluded. No doubt it is the talk of the village. I engaged my cook and gardener through an advertisement. The cook introduced that scoundrel Gradoff as an unfortunate Russian nobleman driven from his country. The plausible wretch engaged the others. They seemed a respectable, hard-working set of men. I was making hurried arrangements for a trip to North Africa via Paris. Gradoff gave me every assistance. I was on the point of starting. They kidnapped me and shut me up here. I thought their sole motive was robbery. Gradoff tried to get me to sign cheques for large amounts. I flatly refused, of course. They adopted starvation tactics, threatened to murder me; but I have looked death in the face too often to purchase life at such a price. They dropped these efforts some time ago, but I suspected that Gradoff was forging my name, and thought he would liberate me as soon as he had fleeced me bare.”

”And how did you signal, with the windows boarded up?” asked Pratt.

”With handfuls of flock from my mattress dipped in paraffin, stuck on a lath from my bed and poked up the chimney. Gradoff discovered me last night. I was in the chimney. He had gone to the roof, saw the flame emerge, and snatched the lath from my hands. He whipped out his pistol and threatened to shoot me. I laughed at him; asked him whether he wished to add murder to forgery; he gave me a curious stare at that. I reminded him that we still retain capital punishment. He cursed me and left. This morning he brought the chain. No doubt he would have killed me if there had been anything to gain by my death; but he must have supposed that the signals had not been seen; they had had no apparent result. You say you had suspicions before you saw the signals. Why?–apart from the usual British distrust of foreigners.”

Pratt was beginning to recount the series of incidents that had occurred since the arrival on No Man’s Island when there came a hail from below. He went to the top of the stairs.

”What is it, Armstrong?”

”Can you come down for a moment?”

Pratt ran downstairs.

”I didn’t want to alarm your uncle,” said Armstrong, ”but just now, looking through a chink in the boards, I saw four men coming towards the tower. What are we to do?”

Pratt went to the boarded window and looked out.

”Gradoff and the chauffeur,” he said. ”The other two I haven’t seen before. We might have tackled two; let ’em in and bagged them. But four!–probably armed, like Jensen. It’s no go.”

”We can only lie low, then, and play for time. The door’s a stout piece of timber, and it’s not so easy to blow off a bolt as to blow in a lock.”

”Don’t speak,” whispered Pratt, ”they’re just here.”

The handle of the door was turned. Then came a sharp knock. A pause of a few seconds; then a more peremptory knock and Gradoff’s voice.

”Jensen!”

The Swede prostrate against the wall wriggled and emitted a low gurgling noise through his gag. The boys glanced at him; he was unable to release his limbs; the sound could not have been heard through the thick door.

A third time Gradoff knocked. He rattled the door-handle, repeated his call, with the addition of sundry violent expletives. The boys remained tensely silent.

The voices without subsided. Conversation was still carried on, but in lower tones.

”Probably they think he is downstairs getting paper,” whispered Pratt. ”There’s nothing alarming at present.”

”But they’ll smell a rat if he doesn’t soon answer. What then?”

”They may think he has fallen ill or something.”

”And then?”

”Well, I can’t answer for the intelligence of Gradoff and company, but if I were in his shoes I should either break in the door or send some one round by the tunnel. You see, he can’t have the ghost of an idea what has happened. And if his game were discovered, he wouldn’t expect to find the place merely closed against him.”

”I dare say you’re right. But don’t you think you had better go through the tunnel and hurry Phil up? We should be in a pretty tight place if Gradoff did send a man or two round, and we found, when we had released your uncle, that the exit at the other end was blocked.”

”I don’t care about leaving you alone. Suppose they broke in while I was away?”

”Two wouldn’t be much better than one against four armed ruffians. And they’d guess that you and Phil had gone to fetch the police, and I fancy they’d be too anxious to save their skins to bother much about me. At any rate, I’ll risk it. I think you had better go. In fact, when you meet Phil, why not go and tell Mr. Crawshay how things stand? Phil and I will get your uncle away if it’s possible, and though I don’t suppose Crawshay could do anything to secure the gang–there’s apparently only one policeman–he might ’phone or wire the authorities, and set every one on the qui vive for miles around.”

”All right. If I’m going, better go at once, before any one has time to go round by the cottage. I’ll consult Phil about your suggestion, and go to Crawshay if he agrees. I wish I had the torch. I shall have to grope my way along the tunnel, but I’ll be as quick as I can.”

He ran noiselessly down the stairs. The flagstone was upright, as it had been left. He jumped into the cavity, crossed the store-room, entered the tunnel on the farther side, and hurried along as rapidly as the darkness allowed. Now and again he stopped to strike a match and to listen for Warrender’s footsteps, but he reached the end without having seen or heard anything of his friend.

By the light of a match he saw that the flagstone was slightly depressed. Then he caught sight of Warrender’s electric torch lying on the ground, and was seized with a vague uneasiness. He picked up the torch. Revolving the stone, he heard something slide with a metallic rattle along its surface, and felt a smart blow on one of his feet. He flashed the torch, and saw a hammer and a chisel. Still more uneasy, he clambered up into the cellar, and without lowering the flagstone, climbed on to the staircase.

”You there, Phil?” he called up.

There was no answer. The door at the top was open. He rushed up, ran through the kitchen and the corridor to the front of the cottage, and looked anxiously around. No one was in view.

”What on earth is he doing?” he thought.

It was clear that Warrender had fetched the tools from the motor-boat and returned to the cellar. Why then had he left them there? Where had he gone? What could have interrupted him?

Pratt felt himself on the horns of a painful dilemma. He had now the instruments of his uncle’s deliverance; one impulse urged him to hurry with them back to the tower. On the other hand, Warrender’s disappearance argued that something untoward had happened, and he was loth to leave the spot without making an attempt to find him. For a few moments he stood in the doorway, weighing the one course against the other. A search for Warrender might prove fruitless, and in any case would take time. Meanwhile affairs at the tower might be developing in a way that would nullify the prime motive that had actuated them all–the release of his uncle. It seemed that this had a paramount claim upon him, and he turned, reluctantly, to retrace his steps to the cellar.

As he passed the foot of the staircase to the upper floor, it occurred to him that from the windows there, giving a wider outlook over the surroundings of the cottage, he might see Warrender approaching: perhaps, indeed, as the result of an after-thought, he had made a second visit to the motor-boat. Pratt ran upstairs, and going from room to room, threw a searching glance upon the prospect. Neither on the eastern side nor on the western was there anything to attract his

attention. But looking out of the window of the room facing south, he noticed that the foliage of the thicket beyond the weedy path was violently disturbed. Some one was moving in it, towards the ruins. He watched eagerly: surely it was Warrender returning. Presently two legs came into view; but they were not Warrender's. They were encased in rusty brown leggings. In another moment the figure of Rush emerged from the thicket upon the path, and immediately behind him was a second form, that of a tall and heavily built man with a broad flattish face. When free from the thicket they quickened their pace.

Pratt hesitated no longer. The men were evidently making for the ruins: perhaps they intended to proceed along the tunnel. It was imperative that he should anticipate them. He hastened downstairs, and had just reached the cellar when he heard clumping footsteps overhead. Leaping into the cavity, he swung the stone over, turned the hand-grips, and by the light of the torch bolted along the tunnel. After running about twenty yards he switched off the light and stopped. Voices came from behind him; then he heard two heavy thuds in succession; the men had jumped into the tunnel. The flagstone banged as it was swung carelessly into place; the men were coming after him. Without more delay he set forward with all speed, guiding himself by touching the walls with his outstretched hands.

CHAPTER XXI
TRAPPED

Meanwhile, what had happened to Warrender?

On entering the cottage by way of the tunnel and the cellar, he went upstairs to make a careful survey of the surroundings, saw no sign of the enemy, and hurried across the island to the pram, in which he crossed the river unobserved. In less than ten minutes he was back at the cottage with the hammer and chisel taken from his motor-boat. As he was on the point of re-opening the trap, he found that the electric torch showed a much feebler light than before, and if it gave out before Mr. Pratt was brought away, the flight through the tunnel might be dangerously delayed. It seemed worth while to pay another rapid visit to the camp for the purpose of getting a small hand lamp or a couple of candles. Laying the hammer and chisel under the staircase, he went up again, once more crossed the island, found one candle in the motorboat, and returned without delay.

It happened, however, that as he left the cottage on this second journey, Rush and his big flat-faced companion were approaching it from the south. Unseen themselves, they caught sight of Warrender as he emerged from the entrance, watched him until he had disappeared into the thicket, waited a few minutes, then entered the cottage and descended to the cellar. They had no light, and Warrender had taken the precaution of carefully replacing the flagstone; but in his haste he had omitted to close the upright slab beneath the lowest step, leaving open the access to the handgrips. Rush was suspicious. The gap might have been left open, of course, by one of the confederates; on the other hand, it was possible that the secret passage had been discovered by the boy he had seen leaving the cottage. The boy might return, and Rush allowed his curiosity to delay the visit to the tower on which he had been summoned. It was an error of judgment that had important consequences.

He posted himself with his companion in a remote corner of the cellar, and waited.

Some ten minutes later, Warrender came down the steps. He flashed his torch to light the opening, retrieved the hammer and chisel, and laid them down on the flagstone while he inserted his arm in the gap to turn the hand-grips. All the time his back was towards the men lurking within twenty feet of him. As he sprawled over the stone, there was a sudden noise behind him. Hastily withdrawing his hand, he half rose, but too late. Seized by powerful hands and taken at a disadvantage, he was helpless. His torch fell into the gap, and in the darkness he was dragged up the stairs between his captors.

"Cotched 'en!" chuckled Rush, as they lugged him through the hall. "What'll we do with 'en, Sibelius?"

"Kill!" said the Finn. "Throw in river!"

"No, no, that won't do!" said Rush. "He bain't alone. There's the other young devils. It bain't safe. I think of my neck. No; we'll take 'en down to the hut and tie 'en up; he'll be out of harm's way there, and in a few hours it won't matter."

Like most Englishmen in speaking to a foreigner, he shouted, and the Finn warned him to speak more quietly: the prisoner would hear all he said.

"What do it matter?" laughed Rush. "Let 'en hear–by the time his friends find 'en we'll be far away. Curious 'tis, that we've cotched 'en the very last day. If it'd a been yesterday, we might have *had* to kill 'en. We'll stuff up his mouth, though; t'others may be about."

Pulling Warrender's handkerchief from his pocket, he rolled it up, and thrust it between the lad's teeth. Warrender ruefully reflected that just in such a way had Jensen been gagged that morning. Then the men hauled him through the thicket towards the point of the island where Rush moored his boat.

”I say, Sibelius,” remarked Rush, when they were half-way there, ”I reckon we’d better not take ’en to the hut after all. ’Twill take time, and we don’t know where his mates be. Better go and tell the boss all about it; he’d be fair mad if anything spoilt his game the last moment.”

”What we do, then?” asked the Finn.

”We’ll truss ’en up: plenty of rope in the boat; and put ’en in among the bushes. He’ll be snug enough there.”

He chuckled. Dismayed at the prospect opened before him, Warrender, who had hitherto offered no resistance, made a sudden dive towards the ground, at the same time throwing out his leg in an attempt to trip the bulkier of his captors. But though he succeeded in freeing one arm, and causing the Finn to stumble, he had no time to wrench himself from Rush’s grip before the other man had recovered his balance and seized him in a clutch of iron.

”Best come quiet!” growled Rush, ”or there’s no saying what we might do to you. I’ve got a tender heart,” he chuckled, ”but my mate ’ud as soon kill a man as a rat.”

Arrived at the boat, they threw him into the bottom, and the Finn held him down while Rush swiftly roped his arms and legs together. Then they carried him a few yards into the thicket, and laid him down in a spot where he was completely hidden from any one who might pass within arm’s length of him.

[image]

”RUSH SWIFTLY ROPED HIS ARMS AND LEGS TOGETHER.”

”Now we’ll traipse through to the tower,” said Rush. ”He’ll take a deal of finding, I’m thinking!”

The men struck away towards the ruins, satisfied that their victim could not escape, and that his hiding-place was not likely to be discovered until discovery mattered nothing. They had not noticed, however, that while the trussing was in progress, Warrender’s cap had fallen off, and now lay between two of the thwarts of the boat.

Pratt, hurrying along the tunnel with the hammer and chisel, and knowing that he was pursued, felt that he had done rightly in not making a prolonged search for Warrender. His sole pre-occupation now was the necessity of outstripping his pursuers by an interval sufficient to allow him time to block up their ingress to the tower. If Armstrong was still unmolested, and Mr. Pratt could be set free, the three were capable of dealing with the two men in the tunnel, and might make good their escape before Gradoff and his confederates at the tower

door had any inkling of the true situation.

He soon understood that he was gaining on the men behind; but he presently became aware that, not far ahead of him, daylight seemed to have percolated into the tunnel. For a moment he was nonplussed until he remembered the dry well. It then occurred to him in a flash that some one must have removed the boards that had lain across the top of the well, and he was seized with a misgiving. Had Gradoff, unable to obtain admittance to the tower, bethought himself of this opening into the tunnel from above, and lowered one or more of his men, who had already made their way to the end, and perhaps overpowered Armstrong?

Taking advantage of the faint illumination of the tunnel, he quickened his pace. In a moment or two he saw to his consternation a man swing down the well, and on reaching the ground, begin to release himself from the rope that was looped under his arms. It was not a time for hesitation. Pratt dashed forward, flung himself against the man before he was free from the rope, and drove him doubled up against the wall. The man yelled; from the top of the well forty feet above them came excited shouts; and out of the tunnel behind sounded hoarse reverberating cries from the pursuers, who must have seen what had happened. Pratt plunged into the tunnel beyond, and, sprinting along with reckless haste, arrived in a few minutes breathless at the end, where the flagstone was still raised as he had left it.

He sprang up, slammed down the flagstone behind him, and let out a lusty cry for Armstrong to join him.

"They're after me–at least three of them!" he exclaimed, as Armstrong came leaping down the stairs. "Help me to lug these boxes on to the flagstone."

The crates and boxes ranged along the wall were empty, and their weight alone would not have sufficed to resist the pressure of determined men below. But the roof was low-pitched, and the boys saw that by piling box upon box they could create an obstruction which would defy all efforts to remove it. With feverish haste they dragged the boxes across the floor, and had already placed them one upon another when they heard footsteps beneath, and felt a movement of the flagstone.

"Another box will do it," said Armstrong. "You must heave it up while I stand on the stone."

He placed himself on the half of the stone that moved upwards as it revolved, and bore down with all his weight. Pratt pulled over a fourth box, and, standing on the projecting edge of that which formed the base of the pile, managed with some difficulty to shove it on to the top, where a space of no more than two or three inches separated it from the roof.

"Good man!" said Armstrong, stepping off the stone.

The pressure below raised it perhaps three inches, then it stuck.

"We'll put another pile on each side, to make all secure," said Armstrong. "Then I think we needn't worry."

With less haste they erected the buttress piles, listening grimly to the hoarse curses of Rush, and shriller cries from a foreigner by whose voice they recognised the Italian chauffeur. In a few minutes their work was done. Short of an explosion, nothing could dislodge the jam of boxes between the flagstone and the roof.

Panting from the strain of their exertions, they went up into the tower.

"Where's Phil?" asked Armstrong.

"I don't know," replied Pratt, going on to relate rapidly his discovery at the end of the tunnel.

"They've got him, I expect," said Armstrong. "Though I can't make out how they came to leave this hammer and chisel."

"What has happened here?" asked Pratt.

"Nothing. Gradoff and the others waited outside for a bit, talking quietly. I couldn't understand what they said. Then Gradoff sent the chauffeur towards the house, and by and by went off himself in the direction of the river, leaving the two strangers behind. Evidently he had sent the chauffeur for a rope. Perhaps he thought Jensen had drunk himself silly, and decided to let a man down the well–a much shorter way than going across to the island and entering by the tunnel. The fat's in the fire now. If we release your uncle we can't get him away."

"No," replied Pratt, looking through the chink in the boards. "Here they come: Gradoff, Rod, the Pole, the whole gang except the fellows below. It strikes me we are squarely trapped."

Looking towards the prisoner on the floor, Armstrong fancied he caught a malignant gleam in the man's eyes.

"On the whole," he said quietly, "I'm inclined to agree with you."

CHAPTER XXII

A PARLEY

"You're more hefty with tools than I am," said Pratt to Armstrong. "So if you'll run upstairs and smash that chain off my uncle, I'll keep an eye on what's happening outside."

”Right,” replied Armstrong. ”The hammer strikes me as a bit light for the job, but one can only try. Yell if you want me.”

Taking the hammer and chisel, he leapt up the winding staircase to the topmost room. Mr. Pratt was thoughtfully drawing his fingers through his beard.

”So you are the third member of the trio,” he said.

”Yes, I’m Armstrong. If you’ll kindly stretch the chain tight over the edge of the bed, I’ll do my best to break a link. I’m afraid I shall jar you, but—-”

”Don’t consider that. Make your break as near my leg as you can.”

”I’ll break the loop. Are you ready, sir?”

”Quite.”

For perhaps two minutes the room echoed and re-echoed with the metallic din of hammering. The chisel was of finely tempered steel, and Armstrong compensated the lightness of the hammer by the vigour of his blows. A link snapped, the chain clanked upon the floor, and the prisoner stood up, free.

”Very neatly done,” said he. ”And now I will go below and join you and your companions in a council of war.”

”There are only two of us now, sir,” said Armstrong. ”Warrender didn’t come back.”

As they went downstairs he related succinctly the events of the last three-quarters of an hour. Mr. Pratt made no comment. Entering first the room at the bottom, he threw a glance on the printing press, the piles of paper, and the Swede glowering on the floor; then he turned to his nephew.

”Well, Percy, what is going on?” he asked.

”Nothing, Uncle. I haven’t seen any of the men. D’you think they see the game is up, and have bolted?”

”I think not, judging by what your friend has just told me. It appears that they have captured the other man–Warrender, I think you called him–and they know that you two are here. It seems improbable that they will decamp already. They outnumber you hopelessly, and it is more than likely that there is a large number of forged notes in the tower which they will secure if they can.”

”Well, as the coast seems clear, can’t we get away?” asked Percy. ”We came to rescue you; our job’s done.”

”But, if you’ll permit me, mine is just beginning,” said Mr. Pratt. ”Do you suppose that I’d be content to walk meekly away, and let the pack of scoundrels who have made my house a hotbed of crime get off with the fruits of their villainy?” The old gentleman spoke warmly. ”I’ve knocked about the world for more than thirty years, been in many tight corners, and I’ve never knuckled under to man, beast, or circumstance. This is the tightest of them all, and, by the Lord Harry, I’ll make a fight for it. You young fellows—-”

”We’re with you, sir,” cried Armstrong, enthusiastically.

”Rather!” exclaimed Pratt. ”If you’re game, Uncle Ambrose—-”

”Let us keep cool,” returned his uncle. ”I’m no longer under any illusions as to the character of the wretches I was misguided enough to employ. They are forgers–that is bad enough–but before they were forgers they were anarchists, members of that fraternity of fools whose ideas, put into practice, would turn the world into a hell. There are no more reckless malefactors than these international gangs who exercise their criminal propensities under the cloak of political enthusiasm. Make no mistake, young fellows; in resisting Gradoff and his gang we take our lives in our hands. In their eyes we are of less value than rats.”

”We’ve got to keep ’em out, then,” said Percy.

”Let us keep cool, I repeat. Let us discuss the situation.”

”Yes, sir,” said Armstrong, somewhat amazed at the professional manner of the old gentleman; ”but time’s flying, and—-”

”Therefore it is vitally important that we should focus our attention. As I read the situation, we shall have to stand a siege. Gradoff determines to save his forged notes, if not his accomplice yonder. The question is, what will he do?”

”I know what I’d do if I—-” began Pratt, but his uncle silenced him with a gesture.

”What you would do is not in question. What Gradoff will do we must infer from the probabilities. His final aim must be to get away quickly with his booty. His booty is inaccessible while we hold the tower. Therefore he must either persuade or compel us to let him in. Finding persuasion, reinforced by menace, futile, he will attempt compulsion. That is to say, he will bring up all his men and try to force the door. It is useless for us to blink facts–just peep through the crack, Percy, and see if he is already moving.”

Percy reported that still there was no one in sight.

”Then we will continue our calm conference. Gradoff had four men under him at my house. One of them, Jensen, the Swede, lies there. From what you tell me he employs also Rush, and another foreigner whom I have never seen. You tell me that two strangers–by their appearance foreigners–came with him to the tower to-day. Therefore we are three against eight.”

”But we are inside,” said Percy.

”As a chicken is inside an egg. The shell can be cracked. That door, stout as it is, can be hacked through, blown in, or battered down. Probably they will not risk an explosion; it might attract even our stolid village policeman to the scene. Defending our position with such poor weapons as we have, we cannot prevent the enemy from sooner or later forcing an entrance.”

”These are surely arguments for scuttling, sir, while we have time,” said Armstrong.

”I am not arguing, but calmly stating facts,” returned Mr. Pratt. ”Scuttle!

Is it conceivable that I shall scuttle for fear of this pirate crew, who have half-starved me, chained me up, carried on their dastardly work under my roof? But let me keep cool," he added, checking the tide of indignation. "The villains break in, I say, sooner or later. What then? With your assistance I propose to defend the stairs. The winding of the staircase is in favour of the defence. In so narrow a space the assailants lose the advantage of numbers. With resolution we shall hold our own."

"But that can't go on indefinitely, Uncle," said Pratt. "They could starve us out."

"Hardly; for this reason. You will be missed from your camp. Mr. Crawshay, you tell me, knows that you are making investigations. Your prolonged absence will alarm him; he will raise a hue and cry. Gradoff is perfectly aware that what he has to do must be done quickly. If we can withstand him for twenty-four hours, he is a beaten man."

"You think, then, sir, that they will give it up within twenty-four hours and then bolt?" said Armstrong.

"That is my forecast. They will save their skins and lose their forged notes, which are no doubt hidden away somewhere in the tower. Take another look out, Percy."

The boy peered through the crack in the boarding, and again reported no one in sight.

"Come with me to the roof," said his uncle. "From there we can survey a wide extent of the park. Armstrong will oblige me by remaining on guard."

He led the way up the stairs to the topmost room. Here he opened a low door in the wall, which gave access to a short flight of steps leading to the flat roof. Looking out towards the river, they saw a group of men gathered about the well-head. A moment later they caught sight of Gradoff and the two strangers approaching the tower from the direction of the house. Mr. Pratt leant over the parapet in full view, watching them. One of the strangers noticed him, and caught Gradoff by the arm. The Russian looked up, halted, and seemed for a moment to be taken aback. The three men spoke rapidly together, then advanced to the foot of the tower. Gradoff tried the door. Retreating a few steps, he called up–

"Holà!"

"Well?" said Mr. Pratt, leaning on the parapet.

"Come down and open the door. I have a proposition to make."

"Make it now. I can hear you quite well."

"You have Olof Jensen in the tower?"

"He is a prisoner. Yes."

"I also have a prisoner–one of three boys. I exchange him for Jensen, on condition that you come out with the other two."

”And then?”

”You shall go free, provided you promise to remain quietly in the park for two hours and do not approach the house.”

”You would accept my promise?”

”Certainly.”

”And what assurance have I that you would keep yours?”

”You have my word, witnessed by my friends here.”

”And what is your word worth, by whomsoever witnessed?”

Gradoff’s habitual smoothness left him. Shaking his fist, he shouted–

”I will show you what my word is worth. If you do not unbolt the door we shall kill you like–like a dog. I give you one minute.”

Mr. Pratt leant motionless on the parapet, gazing down at the three men with a grim smile. Beside him his nephew, tingling with excitement, felt unbounded admiration for this strange uncle of his. The minute passed in silence. Gradoff, watch in hand, paced restlessly about. His friends stood together.

At the end of the minute Gradoff thrust his watch into his pocket.

”Look out, Uncle!” cried Percy.

One of the strangers had whipped out a revolver with extraordinary rapidity and fired point-blank at the motionless figure above. Mr. Pratt did not wince–showed neither fear nor agitation. Slowly unfolding his arms, he stood erect and turned to his nephew.

”Come,” he said, ”I think it is time we went below.”

CHAPTER XXIII

”VI ET ARMIS”

When uncle and nephew regained the lower floor they found that Armstrong had not been idle. From one side of the room he had hauled a long, stout table and set it up endwise against the door, between that and the printing press.

”Capital!” said Mr. Pratt. ”You have doubled the thickness of our armour. But, in default of sandbags, we must find something to strengthen our defences still further.”

”I had thought of that, sir,” said Armstrong. ”There’s nothing but this bale of paper and the sheets already printed. I think they will pretty well fill the space between the press and the door; if not we can get some of the boxes from below.

They are no longer needed there."

"Excellent idea! You young fellows set about that while I keep watch."

In a few minutes the boys had wedged the paper and a number of boxes into the vacant space, so as to form almost a solid block. Mr. Pratt meanwhile reported the movements of the enemy without.

"Gradoff is surrounded by his gang. He is haranguing them. Two of them have gone away towards the river. Nick Rush looks a little uncomfortable. No doubt he prefers stealth and secrecy, and has visions of the interior of a prison cell. Wonderful how brave a man can be if he thinks he will not be found out. They are taking off their coats. Aha! They are going to ram us. The two men have returned with a long pole. A pity I had those trees felled; pity, too, that I had the parapet so thoroughly repaired, or we might have hurled stones upon our assailants in the manner of our ancestors. They used boiling oil, too, molten lead, and various other pleasant devices which are out of our power. Ah! The performance is about to begin. Six of them have lifted the pole–a fine, straight piece of timber. One of the strangers, I observe, is lending a hand. Gradoff is usually so calm and self-contained that the excitement with which he is now giving orders is somewhat amusing. What weapons have we, by the way?"

"I have that fellow Jensen's pistol, sir," said Armstrong. "Besides that we have only short cudgels."

"And the hammer and chisel," added Percy.

"We are unexpectedly well off," said Mr. Pratt. "I think I will take the pistol; no doubt I am a little more used to that sort of thing than Armstrong. For the rest–come, my lads, Gradoff has finished. Stand ready!"

The position now was that before an entry could be forced, the door must be broken, and the barricade of table, boxes and paper overthrown. Mr. Pratt and the boys had just posted themselves beside the printing press, when there was a thundering crash at the door. The room seemed to quiver; some of the upper sheets of paper rose and fell as if a wind had blown upon them; and the vibration caused the printing press to give forth a low ringing note. But the stout oaken door had not yielded. There were shouts outside. A few moments passed; then the building shook under the impact of a second stroke.

"Heart of oak!" exclaimed Mr. Pratt, with satisfaction. "The door is oak; the ram, I think, is beech. Listen."

The tones of Gradoff's voice, soaring to an unnatural pitch, were heard chiding, urging, encouraging. A third time his men advanced, not with the cheery unisonal "Yo! ho!" of British tars, but each man raising his particular cry.

"More vim in that," remarked Armstrong, as the shattering blow resounded. "And look, sir."

About a foot below the upper hinge of the door, which was not covered by

the table, a jagged streak of light shone through.

"Yes," said Mr. Pratt, coolly. "They have cracked the shell. The hinges will give. In five or six minutes they will be scrambling over our barricade. I find I have only four cartridges; they must be reserved for the critical moment. Percy, run upstairs and bring down the hammer and chisel–yes, and the chain. I have no objection whatever to turning the enemy's weapons against him."

While Percy was absent, the assailants, who had evidently marked the damage already done, again rammed the door, on the same side. There was a flood of light through a gap nearly a foot square; splinters of timber across the upturned end of the table fell at Armstrong's feet. At the next blow the door split from top to bottom, and the whole of the upper part fell inwards. Apparently the enemy guessed that some attempt at a barricade had been made, for their next stroke was delivered lower down, with such force that it broke through the door, drove the table in, and sent some of the piled-up boxes toppling.

"Won't you now try a shot, sir?" said Armstrong.

"They have drawn back; next time," replied Mr. Pratt. "Stand clear."

Once more the battering-ram was rushed forward. It could now be seen that the shorter men held the fore part; the taller men were behind. Mr. Pratt raised his arm, but before he could take deliberate aim the forceful stroke carried the remnants of the door inwards, and hurled the shattered table, broken boxes, and flying sheets of paper in one indistinguishable mass upon the printing press, which gave way and fell with a mighty crash upon the floor. Mr. Pratt barely escaped being overthrown with it. He staggered backward, and the pistol was knocked from his hand. The small figure of the Italian chauffeur leapt into the breach, and began to clamber over the wreckage. Armstrong darted forward, and, before the man had time to swing round, Armstrong's cudgel descended with a resounding crack upon his skull, and he fell sprawling among the litter.

[image]

"HE STAGGERED BACKWARD, AND THE PISTOL WAS KNOCKED FROM HIS HAND."

But Maximilien Rod was at his heels. Stumbling over him, the cook plunged head foremost among the boxes, only his fall saving him from Armstrong's club. Immediately behind him dashed the tall Pole. Having no time to swing his cudgel, Armstrong jabbed at him, and catching him under the chin sent him reeling against the doorpost. Meanwhile Mr. Pratt had disengaged himself from the obstructing press and regained his pistol, just as Rush and his big comrade of the

island forged through the opening. The Pole had sprung to his feet with catlike agility. A revolver cracked. Mr. Pratt recoiled, rapidly changed his pistol from the right hand to the left, and fired.

There was a sudden lull. Rush and the Finn had slipped back out of harm's way. Through the smoke Armstrong saw two men on the floor–the chauffeur whom he had felled, and the Pole, victim to Mr. Pratt's pistol.

"Back to the stairs!" murmured the old gentleman. He tottered.

"Are you hit, sir?" cried Armstrong, darting to his support.

"Yes. Leave me and hold the stairs."

At this moment the entrance was darkened by the forms of the remaining members of the attacking party, Rush and the Finn, urged forward by Gradoff and his friends. Armstrong, holding Mr. Pratt, felt that the game was up. But now came Percy leaping down the winding stairs. Into the room he dashed, carrying a long bar of iron. Taking in the situation at a glance, he flung himself at the foremost intruders. Rush doubled up under his vehement onslaught; Sibelius recoiled upon Gradoff; and the momentary check gave Armstrong time to haul Mr. Pratt out of the light to the foot of the dark stairway. Swiftly withdrawing from the heap of wreckage, Percy had barely joined them and helped to draw his uncle up a few steps to the protection of the curving wall, when four pistols cracked, and chips of stone fell clattering upon the stairs.

Immediately afterwards a burly arm and shoulder showed itself in the round of the wall. Quick as thought Percy lunged with his iron bar and jabbed the intruder just below the elbow. The man threw out a hoarse, savage cry, and disappeared. For a brief space there was silence; then came the noise of heavy feet kicking aside the debris in the room below, and rushing towards the stairway.

"Leave me," said Mr. Pratt again, sitting on one of the steps.

Armstrong sprang down, and darting in front of Percy, came face to face with one of the strangers, who was rounding the corner, brandishing a pistol. Unprepared, apparently, for sudden counter-attack, and incommoded by the right-hand twist of the narrow staircase, the man let slip his momentary chance of firing point-blank, but had enough presence of mind to dodge the blow Armstrong aimed at him. If there had been room for two abreast on the stairs it might have gone ill with Armstrong then; he staggered forward and thrust his hands against the wall to save himself from falling. Behind him, however, Percy had swiftly taken his cue. With his extemporised pike he caught the stranger in the middle. The man recoiled upon his companions in the rear. A storm of curses broke from them, but in a few moments the din subsided, and nothing was heard except the low voices of the enemy in consultation.

"Jolly good weapon," whispered Armstrong, indicating the iron bar. "Where did you get it?"

”Wrenched it off my uncle’s bedstead,” replied Percy.

”Any more?”

”One.”

”Well, leave me this and go and get it, old chap. It’s more useful than the club.”

”Is there time?”

”I think so. They won’t know quite what to do. But hurry up. I’ll look after your uncle–give him first aid. He ought to go upstairs; by the time you’re down again I’ll have him ready to move.”

”Much hurt, Uncle?” asked Pratt, bending down.

”A furrow ploughed in my forearm; nothing vital. Perhaps one of you will bind up the wound for me.”

”I’ll do that, sir,” said Armstrong. ”Cut away, Percy.”

CHAPTER XXIV

A LEVY EN MASSE

To lie on one’s back, bitted like a horse, trussed like a chicken, with flies and midges disporting themselves, unchecked, about one’s features, and ants making adventurous journeys among one’s clothes, is a situation that, to say the least of it, puts a strain upon a man’s patience and equanimity. It is not greatly eased by the liberty of his eyes when their range is limited by dense overhanging foliage, which stirs in the breeze, opening tantalising glimpses of a sunbright sky.

On his turfy couch Warrender lay, groaning inwardly, cursing himself for delaying his errand, and Fate for bringing his enemies just then upon the scene; vexing his soul with visions of his companions caught unawares, and of Mr. Pratt still chained to his post; blaming himself, with the insight of the afflicted, for having countenanced a scheme that usurped the functions of the officers of the law. A fly feasted on his nose; gnats buzzed in and out of his ears; ants chased one another over his neck and up his arms, causing him to feel one multitudinous and intricate itch.

He had tried to wriggle himself free from his bonds, but Rush had not been poacher and fisher for nothing. Desisting from his vain struggles, he lay mumbling his gag, shaking his head like a tormented horse, and, as the minutes passed, sweating with alarm.

Presently his straining ears caught the faint regular thud of oars turning in rowlocks. The sound drew nearer. He tried to shout, but was capable of nothing more than a gurgling grunt. The knowledge that a boat was rounding the southern end of the island set him a-throb with hope, anxiety, despair–for what should bring the oarsman to shore? If, indeed, he should land, what should draw him to this overgrown spot, or cause him to pry among the bushes? The sound began to recede; the boat was passing on down the river; his momentary hopefulness was crushed under the weight of disappointment.

But after a little while his numb spirit was revivified by the sound of oars approaching again. He listened with throbbing eagerness. The movements were not now so regular; they were interrupted; presently they ceased altogether. Then he heard a rustle, and a slight thud as of some light-footed person jumping ashore. Again he tried to shout, but only the feeblest groan issued. All was silent. The new-comer, whoever it was, had seemingly not moved. But–was that not a cry?–a faint coo-ee, like an attenuated echo rather than a substantive sound. It came again, a little louder. After an interval, a third time, louder still. But there was no footstep, no rustling of branches, or swishing in trodden grass.

Frenzied by the thought of some one standing within easy reach of him–some one, too, who was seeking, if not him, at any rate somebody–Warrender jerked his jaw until he succeeded in shifting a little the handkerchief knotted behind his poll; and, blowing out his cheeks, he fetched from the depth of his throat a note like the boom of a bull-frog. He heard–or was it fancy?–a muffled exclamation. Again he boomed. Then–surely he was not mistaken?–a light-toned voice, asking, with the breathless utterance of surprise, ”Who is it?” He could but reply with his inarticulate bass note. Footsteps came towards him; then hesitated. He boomed encouragement.

”Where are you?”

The words were scarcely above a whisper. Boom, boom! The swishing footsteps advanced, leaves clashed together, twigs snapped, and Warrender, feeling that his throat would crack and his cheeks burst, kept up his hollow note in moto continuo–accelerando–crescendo, as the hoped-for relief drew nearer.

Presently, after what seemed an age, the foliage above his head was gently, timorously parted, and his eyes beheld amazement, concern, indignation in the face of Lilian Crawshay.

”Oh!” she exclaimed, pushing through the shrub. ”What–why–oh, you poor thing!”

She dropped on her knees, lifted his head, and swiftly untied the knot in the handkerchief.

”Thank you,” he gasped.

”Who did it? What does it mean? But presently–presently. Your arms!”

Turning, she sought to untie the knots. They were too firm, the rope too coarse, for her little fingers.

"My knife–coat pocket," murmured Warrender.

In a trice she found the knife; even its keen blade she had to use as a saw before the bonds were severed. Warrender got up, stiffly. He stretched his aching arms, shook himself, stamped his feet.

"I can't thank you enough," he said, the words coming hoarsely through his parched lips.

"But who had the wickedness—-? Never mind; tell me presently. What can I do? There is something–something terrible, I know. What can I do to help?"

"Will you row me to our camp? As we go, I shall be able to explain. My voice is coming back."

"Yes, let us go. Let me help you."

She took his arm, hurried him on his cramped legs to the skiff that lay half on the bank, and, hauling this into the water, assisted him to the stern thwart. Then she turned, ran a few steps to Rush's boat, and brought from it Warrender's cap.

"But for this—-" she began. "Oh, it's too horrible!"

Springing to her seat facing him, she unshipped the sculls and began to pull up stream.

"I rowed to your camp," she said. "My father gave me a message for you. I was surprised to find it deserted, and came down, thinking I might see some of you on the water. But there was no sign of you, and I was returning when I caught sight of the cap in Rush's boat. I wondered. I knew it belonged to one of you, and it surprised me to find it there. I got ashore. Did you hear me coo-ee? It was very soft; I hardly knew what to think."

Warrender nodded.

"Then I heard that strange sound. I was a little frightened; but after a moment I thought it might be Mr. Pratt; he is funny sometimes. It was when you didn't answer that I thought something must be wrong, and–well, you know. I am so glad I didn't run away. How long had you been in that dreadful position?"

"I don't know–an age."

"And was it Rush?"

"Yes. I must tell you. The foreigners at the Red House—-"

"Oh, I guessed! Dear old Father was so mysterious. Did he tell you to keep it from me?"

"Well, yes, he did."

"I knew it. Why does a man like to play the ostrich? I knew ages ago there was something strange happening, and we poor women creatures mustn't be startled, shocked. Daddy is an Early Victorian. Is it so very horrid?"

”It’s a long story. D’you mind if I tell you later? I want you to land, if you will, at the camp, and go across to your house as quickly as possible, and ask Mr. Crawshay to bring every man he can muster, armed, to the tower in Mr. Pratt’s grounds. One thing I had better tell you at once: the foreigners had Mr. Pratt a prisoner in the tower.”

”Good gracious! Mr. Ambrose Pratt?”

”Yes. Here we are. Please give my message at once. Mr. Crawshay will partly understand. Impress on him that speed is vital.”

”And you?”

”I am going to rush up to the village in the motor-boat.”

”But are you able?”

”Quite. The stiffness is wearing off. Tell Mr. Crawshay I am taking some men–all the able-bodied men I can collect–to the tower, and if he can somehow send a message to the nearest town for the police—-”

”Yes; I understand. We’ve no telegraph or telephone in this benighted place, but it shall be done. You are quite sure you can manage alone? I don’t think you are fit for much exertion, you know.”

”I’m quite all right,” replied Warrender, smiling as he handed the girl ashore. ”By the way, Pratt and Armstrong are in the tower. Will you tell Mr. Crawshay that? And speed is all important.”

”I’ll run like a hare. Good-bye. I do hope—-”

She left her thought unsaid, and, gathering her skirt, fled across the field towards her home.

Ten minutes afterwards, Warrender ran the motor-boat alongside the landing-stage, sprang ashore, and hurried up to the Ferry Inn. The door was open–it was the mid-day interval for refreshment–and he saw a good many familiar figures with their elbows on the bar, or tipping up the pots which Joe Rogers, in his shirt-sleeves, had drawn for them. His arrival precisely at this moment could not have happened more luckily. Rogers greeted him with a smile; Henery Drew and one or two others nodded and went on drinking. No one spoke; the countryman takes a minute or two to think of an opening.

”Rogers, my friends, I want your help,” said Warrender. The rustics looked at him solemnly. He went on, not pausing to choose his words: ”Those foreigners are forging Treasury notes in Mr. Pratt’s tower. They have Mr. Pratt himself a prisoner there.” Eyes widened; pots were suspended in mid course. ”My chums have got in and are holding the place against them. I want every man of you to come with me and lend a hand. With your help we’ll collar the whole gang. There’s no time to lose.”

No one moved. Rogers stood staring, with his hand on the draw-pull. The others gaped.

”Don’t you understand?” cried Warrender. ”Mr. Pratt’s in danger. They’re desperate criminals–six or eight of them against three. You, Mr. Drew–you’re a soldier. Rogers—-”

”What have they done to my sister Molly?” shouted Rogers. ”Neighbours all, do ’ee hear? Mr. Pratt, as we thought abroad–’od rabbit it all, come on!” He darted round the counter.

”Got a gun, Rogers?” asked Warrender.

”Ay, there’s a fowling-piece in the parlour,” cried the man, running back again.

”I’ve got one up along,” said Drew. ”Do ’ee say now! I’ll fetch ’en.”

”Stay!” said Warrender. ”There isn’t time. You must bring what you can. Don’t delay. Sticks, forks, spades–you’ve a mattock there,” he added, addressing a man on the settle against the wall. ”Bring it along. All of you bring what you can lay hands on. Mr. Drew, you’re an active man. Run up into the village and collect all the men you can find, and take them up to the Red House by the road. Set a couple to guard the gate, lead the rest on to the tower. You others, borrow some garden tools from Rogers–or anything; and come with me. Here’s Rogers.” The innkeeper, minus his wig, came back with his fowling-piece. ”You’ll lend your tools?”

”Ay sure. In the shed, neighbours; you do know the way. My poor Molly!”

”I give you five minutes!” cried Warrender. ”Come down to the ferry. I’ll wait for you–five minutes only.”

He hurried out, followed by Rogers. The younger men among the rest, bestirring themselves at last, went round the inn into the garden. Within five minutes a group of seven, armed with hoe, rake, spade, mattock, fork, fowling-piece, and coal-hammer, was gathered on the landing-stage.

”Squeeze into the boat,” said Warrender. ”I’ll run you down and land you opposite No Man’s Island. You must pack tight.”

[image]

”’SQUEEZE INTO THE BOAT.’”

They crowded into the boat. Warrender opened the throttle. A shriek was heard, and Mrs. Rogers came flying out of the inn, flourishing her husband’s wig.

”Joe, you gawkhammer, you’ve left your hair behind.”

”Make it into a stew and be jowned to it!” shouted Rogers, as the boat hummed away.

Landing on the bank opposite the cottage, the party hurried through the

plantation, Warrender taking the lead.

”No talking, men,” he said.

They emerged into the park. The tower came in sight. From the roof a dense column of brown smoke rose straight into the still air. Rogers groaned.

”God send we be in time!” he murmured, as he pounded heavily along.

CHAPTER XXV
SQUARING ACCOUNTS

Armstrong profited by the enemy’s first check to bind his handkerchief round Mr. Pratt’s arm.

”Hadn’t you better go upstairs, sir, out of harm’s way?” he asked.

”Call myself a casualty and slink to the rear? No, thank you, my lad. Not while I can stand and use my left arm. We must hold our ground here at all costs.”

”Here, sir?”

”Yes. They must not drive us beyond the first floor. No doubt they have released the man you tied up, and the fact that they still attack us shows there is something upstairs they don’t want to leave.”

”I saw some tin cases in the room above.”

”Filled with forged notes, beyond doubt. But what’s this? Do you smell burning?”

”Smoke–wood smoke. D’you hear the crackling? They have fired the tower.”

”Not they. They won’t burn their notes. They want to drive us above. It is very ingenious–and very unpleasant.”

The pungent smoke from burning wood rolled up the staircase in ever-increasing volume. Percy came running down, carrying, not an iron bar, but an assegai taken from the wall of the top room.

”Didn’t notice it before,” he said.

”Run up again and open the door to the roof,” said his uncle. ”We may as well stave off asphyxia as long as we can.”

Armstrong caught sight of a head peering up from the round of the wall below. He raised his hand suddenly as if to fire. The head disappeared.

”Spying to see if we have gone,” chuckled Mr. Pratt.

With the opening of the door above, the smoke rose more rapidly. Mr. Pratt

coughed.

"I have the misfortune to be a trifle asthmatical," he said. "It is very unpleasant."

"May as well cough, too. It will encourage 'em," said Armstrong, with a grim smile. "Percy, you can manage a churchyard cough."

They both coughed, at first deliberately, but as the smoke thickened, involuntarily.

Suddenly there was a rush of feet below. Armstrong bent forward, thrusting out his iron bar; but the foremost of the assailants, the Swede, seemed to have expected the move, for he slipped aside, bent almost double, crying to his comrade behind him, and sprang towards Percy. The boy, having just run downstairs and only at that moment caught up the assegai, was a little late with his lunge. Jensen seized the head of the weapon and tugged at it, forcing Percy down a step or two. To save himself, Percy let go; the Swede staggered backward against Radewski, who was in the act of discharging his revolver at Armstrong. The jostling of the man's arm spoilt his aim, and the bullet, which, fired point-blank, would probably have found its billet in Armstrong's breast, struck him on the right shoulder and spun him half round. Mr. Pratt had hitherto been unable to use his pistol for fear of hitting one or other of the boys; but now, seeing that both were for the moment at a disadvantage, he dashed between them, fired with his left hand at the Pole, only two steps below, and sent him rolling down the stairs with a shot in his groin.

But the enemy were not this time to be denied. Jensen, inspired with lust of vengeance, had quickly recovered his footing. Immediately below him Rod and Sibelius, pointing their revolvers, only awaited an opportunity of firing as soon as there was no risk of hitting their own comrade. Mr. Pratt, who was weaker than he knew, had just pulled his trigger without effect; either the chamber was empty or something had jammed. Armstrong, with a wound in the shoulder, was leaning, for the moment overcome with pain, against the wall of the staircase. Taking in the whole scene, Percy felt that all was over. His own weapon was gone; even if he should seize Armstrong's bar, single-handed he must soon be overpowered.

At this crisis, by one of those tricks of the mind which no one can account for, he suddenly remembered the packet of pepper he had bought in the village, and one of the uses to which pepper could be put. It was still in his pocket. Snatching it out, he swiftly unfolded the top of the cone-shaped paper bag, and holding the bag by the screwed-up end, he scattered its contents upon the face of Jensen, just rounding the bend. With a howl of rage and pain the Swede recoiled on his comrades behind, driving them back upon the remainder of their party at the foot of the stairs. The volume of wood smoke had lessened when they started

the attack; and now the cloud of pepper, floating down slowly upon the fumes, spread over the whole width of the staircase. A chorus of sneezes soared up–a chorus in many parts, from the shrill tenor of Prutti, the Italian chauffeur, to the resonant bass of the corpulent Swiss, Maximilien Rod. Gradoff's sneeze was distinguishable from Jensen's, and the two strangers performed a duet in sternutation. There were interludes of cursing and yelling; Rush's sense of humour appeared to be tickled, as well as his nostrils; for Pratt declared that he heard him guffawing between his sneezes. After all, Rush was an Englishman.

The performers were still busy–the audience on the stairs was about to move a little higher up–when there came, from some spot without, a sound of cheers. Never was applause so unwelcome to a foreign band. With the sneezes now mingled cries of alarm, the noise of feet scuffling amid litter, a running to and fro. Percy, with a whoop of delight, dashed downstairs, picking up his assegai on the way. When he reached the room below, he was momentarily checked by a sneeze; then, through the clearing smoke, his streaming eyes beheld two figures struggling on the floor. A second glance distinguished them as Jensen and his old enemy, Henery Drew. The farmer was uppermost.

[image]

"THE FARMER WAS UPPERMOST."

"Come and see fair play, Jack," Pratt shouted up the stairs to Armstrong, who had pulled himself together and was following him.

From outside came fierce shouts, pistol shots, the clash of weapons. Pratt dashed out. Gradoff and his gang (all but Rush, who had surrendered at once) were sustaining an unequal struggle with the infuriated villagers who had closed upon them. On the one side Warrender, with Rogers and the rest, on the other the group of villagers collected by Drew–of whom the general dealer, smarting for his unpaid bill, had constituted himself the temporary leader in rivalry with Constable Hardstone–a body of some twenty determined men, who were perhaps a little breathless from haste. Not so with the others. As Samson lost his strength with his hair, so these international adventurers, desperate, courageous enough, holding life cheap, became as children under the debilitating pungency of pepper. A man cannot sneeze and fight. Some few shots were fired; a bullet grazed Rogers's shining skull; another struck out of Blevins's hand the mallet he carried; a third carried away the lobe of an ear from a young carter, who refused to leave the field until he had found it. Short, sharp, decisive, the battle ended in a general capitulation. Only one of the foreigners escaped; Gradoff, seeing that

all was lost, kept his last bullet for himself.

From the doorway Mr. Pratt had watched the pinioning of the prisoners. A cheer broke from his neighbours and tenants. And, just as a move towards the house was being made, Mr. Crawshay and two of his men, armed with shot-guns, came trotting across the sward.

"God bless you, Pratt, my dear fellow," cried the old gentleman, grasping his neighbour by the hand, and shaking it vigorously up and down.

Mr. Pratt sneezed.

"And you, Crawshay," he said. "But try the other hand, my friend; my right arm bears an honourable wound."

EPILOGUE

It was Saturday afternoon. The spacious lawn in front of Mr. Crawshay's house was spread with bamboo tables and deck-chairs. At the porch stood Mr. Crawshay and Mr. Ambrose Pratt side by side, smoking long cigars, chatting and laughing with the familiarity of old friends. Mr. Pratt's right arm was in a sling.

"It's time they came," said Mr. Crawshay, taking out his watch. He wore a large panama, and his suit of spotless ducks gave him a festal air.

"They're probably squabbling for precedence," said Mr. Pratt; "not on social grounds, but for modesty. It's an ordeal, you know, Crawshay; and when they see your rig, and that purple tie of yours, they'll be abashed."

"What'll they say to the women, then?" returned Mr. Crawshay. "Upon my soul, Pratt, I think you are right to come in your old clothes; they'll feel more at home. It never occurred to me."

"Oh, well, you're lord of the manor; I dare say you're right to look the part. But here they come, in a bunch. Mrs. Rogers is, perhaps, a shade ahead."

Mr. Crawshay turned and called through the open door. His daughter, in a dainty confection of muslin and lace, and a straw hat trimmed with pink silk, came running out, followed by her mother, an impressive figure in blue, and our three campers, in flannels and blazers. Armstrong also had an arm in a sling.

Grouped in front of the porch they awaited the coming of the party that had just entered the drive. Mrs. Rogers, in stiff black silk, and a wonderful bonnet, marched along a little in advance of her husband, hardly recognisable in his Sunday suit of blue serge and a bowler hat sitting uneasily on the back of his head.

Samuel Blevins, the general dealer, had affected a long frock coat and a tall hat. Henery Drew, magnificent in a brown bowler and a suit of large-checked tweed, walked beside Hardstone, the constable, disguised in habiliments that might have become a prosperous plumber. The rest of the company, whose names we do not know, were alike in one respect; all had donned their "Sunday best." Every face, without exception, wore an air of deep solemnity.

Mr. Crawshay took a step forward.

"Glad to see you, neighbours," he said, genially. "We are lucky in a fine afternoon."

He shook hands with them individually, a greeting that inflicted on them various degrees of embarrassment, deepened by the smiling welcome of his wife and daughter. Mr. Pratt contented himself with a general salutation; it was not until the boys began to crack jokes with them that the prevailing gloom lightened.

"You didn't bring your sister, Rogers?" said Mr. Crawshay to the innkeeper.

"True, sir; she bain't come along."

"She couldn't face 'ee, sir," added Mrs. Rogers. "I always did say as she was making a rod for her back, though never did I think Rod was such a downright wicked feller. And Henery Drew, as would have made her a good husband as far as husbands do go, and now he can't marry her without committing bigamy."

"Well, well! We must hope for the best," said Mr. Crawshay. "Now, my friends, we're all here. Take your seats, and we'll have tea."

The company seated themselves. Maids brought from the house trays filled with good things. Mrs. Crawshay poured out tea, and Lilian and the boys carried round the eatables. Under the influence of good cheer the villagers' stiffness wore off, and they began to descant upon the moving events of the past days. For the first time in its history the village had become a place of importance. Visitors had flocked to it from all parts; journalists with cameras had interviewed the actors in the drama, and expressed themselves very freely on Mr. Pratt's refusal to admit them to his grounds, and to pose for his photograph. His modesty in this respect was a standing puzzle to his humble neighbours. Mrs. Rogers, for instance, was extremely proud of the portrait of her husband that had appeared in the previous day's picture paper.

"The scar shows beautiful," she said, complacently.

"Dear me," said Mrs. Crawshay, with a discreet glance at Rogers's broad face, "I wasn't aware—-"

"Take off your hat, Joe, and show the lady."

Removing his hat, Rogers displayed a red furrow that ran across his shiny pate.

"What a narrow escape!" exclaimed Mrs. Crawshay.

"Ay sure, ma'am, 'twas so," said Mrs. Rogers. "And I'm certain a widow's

cap wouldn't have suited me."

"Well, Mrs. Rogers, you won't be so particular about Joe's wig after this," said Percy Pratt. "You see, if he'd worn his wig, his scalp wouldn't have been touched; think what millions of people have had the pleasure of admiring your husband, talking about his bravery, discussing the track of the bullet across his skull. No one wanted to take my photograph."

"They took 'ee unbeknownst, then, becos there you be, next to Joe, with 'Pepper and Salt' printed underneath; very clever, I call it, Joe being once a sailor."

"Oh, I say," exclaimed Pratt, "did they get the others too?"

"No, sir. Not as I think it a very good likeness. You've got your two eyes half shut, and your mouth is a very queer shape, like as if you was expecting of somebody to pop something in it–a drop of physic, maybe."

The villagers looked merely interested, the others frankly amused. Pratt blushed.

"He must have caught you when you were singing a particularly sentimental song, old chap," said Warrender, smiling.

"That reminds me," said Mrs. Crawshay. "Do bring out your banjo, Mr. Pratt, and sing us something."

"Wait a minute," said Mr. Crawshay. "Before we begin the–entertainment, shall I call it?–I want to say a word or two."

"Hear, hear!" exclaimed Blevins. "'Tis what I call an event."

"No heroics, for goodness' sake, Crawshay," murmured Mr. Pratt.

Mr. Crawshay assumed the look of one determined not to be interfered with.

"I just want to say, neighbours," he proceeded, "how glad I am to see you all here this afternoon, in celebration of what Mr. Blevins rightly calls an event in the simple history of our little parish. You all had a part in the frustration of the most nefarious criminal conspiracy that has ever come within my long experience as a county magistrate. Thanks to the ingenuity and perseverance of my dear young friends, their refusal to be intimidated, their sleepless vigils and untiring watchfulness, the secrets of that criminal conspiracy were laid bare, my old friend and neighbour was rescued from a most distressing situation, and you, anticipating the slow operation of the law, but sanctioned by the presence among you of an officer of the law, were able to secure the apprehension of the whole band of criminals, who are now awaiting in the darkness of the county gaol the due reward of their deeds. Our village is to be congratulated on the visit of three young men, typical products of our renowned public school system, and on the public spirit of its own inhabitants, who, when the call for action came, forgetting all class distinctions, regardless of personal risk, braved the murderous weapons of unscrupulous villains, and nobly carried out the first duty of the

patriotic citizen. I am speaking the mind of you all," the worthy magistrate went on, warming to his subject, "when I say that we shall long treasure the memory of our young friends, their high spirits, their unfailing cheerfulness under persecution, their courage and ingenuity; and it is a matter of regret that, yielding to paramount claims, the claims of parental affection, they are leaving us to-day. But it will please you all to hear that, in response to my invitation–I may say to my insistence–they have agreed to visit us again next year; and I understand from my old friend and neighbour, Mr. Pratt, that he intends to acquire No Man's Island, so long derelict, and restore the cottage as a holiday hostel for boys of our public schools."

Here there were general cheers.

"Dear old Father!" whispered Lilian to the boys. "He gets so few chances of making a speech, and he does love it so."

"I won't detain you longer," Mr. Crawshay went on. "No doubt Mr. Pratt would like to say a few words."

"Hate it!" exclaimed Mr. Pratt. "One thing only. I've had a bad time. I deserved it. I was over-hasty. My old servants are scattered; if any of you know where they are, tell them to come to me. I'll reinstate them–if we can agree about wages."

Under cover of the villagers' applause, Percy seized the opportunity of unbosoming himself to a select audience, his companions and Lilian Crawshay.

"Are we blushing, Miss Crawshay?" he asked. "I don't think we are, because, you see, we are supremely conscious of each other's merits. We really are benefactors, you know–public and private. Who would ever believe that the two old gentlemen were not long ago calling each other luna—-"

"Now, Mr. Pratt," the girl interrupted.

"Well, X and Y then," rejoined Pratt. "It's undeniable, isn't it, that they're reconciled through us? And as for my uncle and me, we're quite pally; the old feud is healed, and before long I expect my father and Uncle Ambrose will kiss again with tears. Tennyson, you know. Anyway, it's been a ripping holiday, and—-"

"Now, Mr. Pratt, we are all waiting," said Mrs. Crawshay, amiably.

Pratt obediently went into the house, brought out his banjo, and trolled out ditties of the most sentimental order. Presently Warrender announced that it was time to go if they meant to reach Southampton before dark. The whole company trooped down to the bank with them, and watched them board the motor-boat, already loaded with their camp equipment. Last good-byes were said; Warrender opened the throttle; and as the boat panted down stream there came to the ears of the silent spectators the gentle strumming of the banjo, and Pratt's melodious tenor–

”Our hearts were once divided,
But now they beat as one;
The clouds roll by across the sky,
And yonder shines the sun.”

THE END

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