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GREEN-PAINTED SHIP



ROBERT LEIGHTON

THE GREEN- PAINTED SHIP

~
ROBERT LEIGHTON



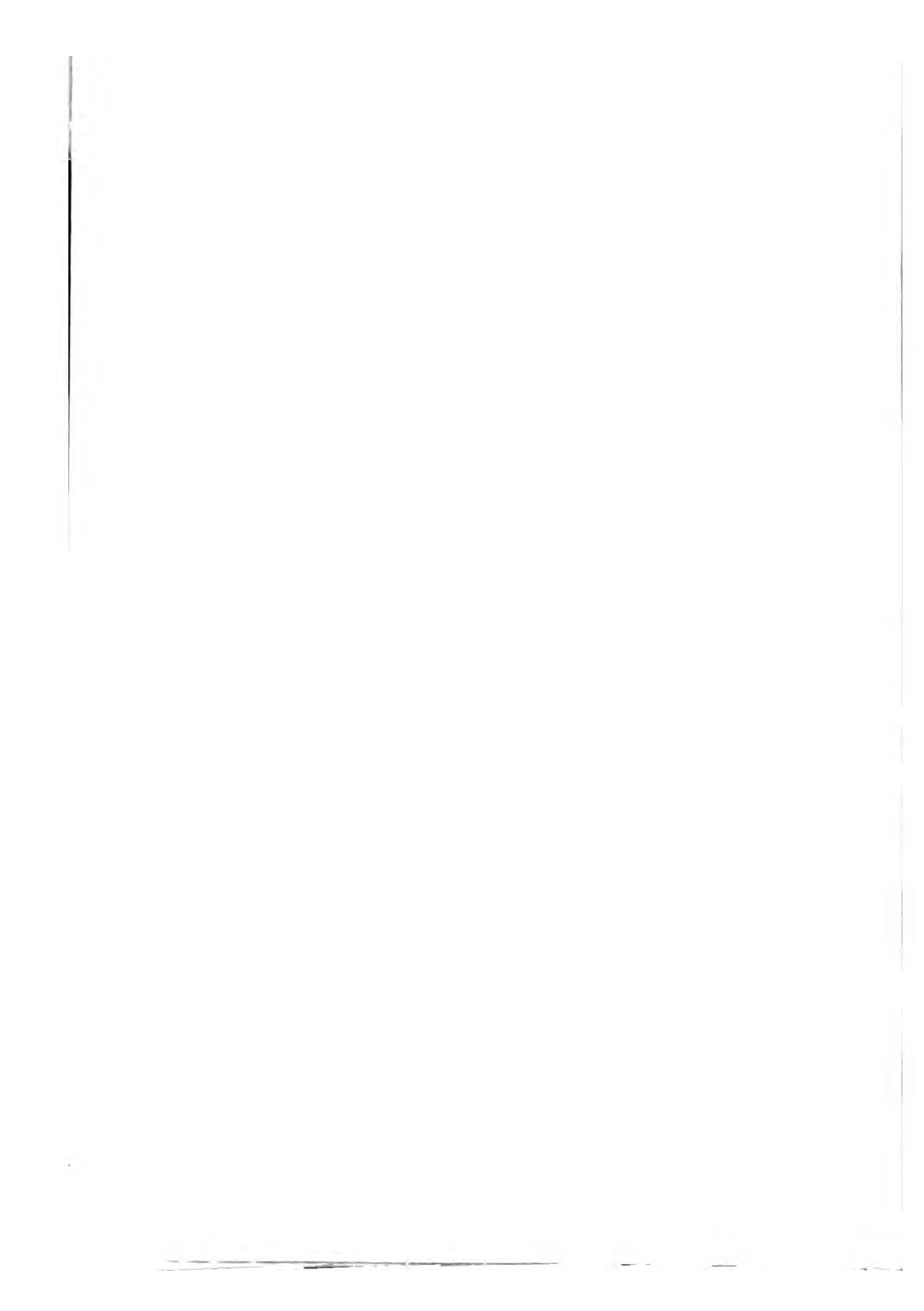
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ELROSE

THE GREEN-PAINTED SHIP



ROBERT LEIGHTON



THE GREEN PAINTED SHIP

OTHER BOOKS FOR BOYS

BY

THE SAME AUTHOR

IN THE GRIP OF THE CORSAIR.

UNDER THE FOEMAN'S FLAG.

THE SPLENDID STRANGER.

THE HAUNTED SHIP.

FIGHTING FEARFUL ODDS.

IN THE LAND OF JU-JU.

THE OTHER FELLOW.

HURRAH! FOR THE SPANISH MAIN.

LONDON :

ANDREW MELROSE, 16 PILGRIM STREET, E.C.





A BOY'S HAGGARD FACE THAT WAS WHITE AS THE
SNOW OUTSIDE.

Frontispiece.

See page 80.

THE
GREEN PAINTED SHIP

BY
ROBERT LEIGHTON

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY J. H. B. COLEMAN

LONDON:
ANDREW MELROSE
16 PATERNOSTER SQUARE, E.C.



A BOY'S HAGGARD FACE THAT WAS WHITE AS THE
SNOW OUTSIDE.

Franklin

1888

THE
GREEN PAINTED SHIP

BY

ROBERT LEIGHTON

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY J. W. CHARLTON

LONDON :
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16 PILGRIM STREET, E.C.



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ILLUSTRATED BY J. W. CHALTON

LONDON:
ANDREW MELROSE
10 FIDELITY STREET, E.C.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS



A BOY'S HAGGARD FACE THAT WAS WHITE AS THE SNOW OUTSIDE	<i>Frontispiece</i>
"WHAT DO YOU MEAN?" HE CRIED	<i>Facing page 32</i>
GRIGGS WAS BORING A HOLE THROUGH THE BILGE STREAKS	„ 120
THE SIGHT THAT MET HIS GAZE MADE HIM SHRINK BACK WITH A SMOTHERED CRY	„ 160
"I'VE GOT HOLD OF YOU," HE SAID	„ 200
"LEAVE VENNER ALONE!"	„ 240
"I KNOW IT NOW BY THE WHITE PATCH IN THE SAIL"	„ 297
HE WENT DOWN ON HIS KNEES AT THE MAN'S SIDE	„ 360



CONTENTS



CHAP.	PAGE
I. THE GREEN PAINTED SHIP	7
II. THE HEAD OF THE FIRM	13
III. THE TRAGEDY IN THE FOG	24
IV. MISSING	31
V. AN OCEAN WAIF	38
VI. THE DERELICT	48
VII. THE FIGURE IN THE DARK	56
VIII. THE FACE ON THE PILLOW	63
IX. WHAT WAS FOUND IN THE FORECASTLE	75
X. A CRY FROM THE UPPER DECK	81
XI. MR. ADAM CROSBY IN A TIGHT CORNER	89
XII. "IF THERE IS TIME"	100
XIII. MARTIN VENNER EXPLAINS	106
XIV. HOW GRIGGS FULFILLED HIS COMPACT	119
XV. A LUNCH FOR NOTHING	125
XVI. ROCKS AHEAD	133
XVII. A DOUBTFUL REFUGE	143
XVIII. THE MAN OF THE CAVE	151
XIX. SKELETON CAVERN	162
XX. JACK HOBSON	167
XXI. A NEW MISFORTUNE	177
XXII. THE CRY FROM THE DEPTHS	185
XXIII. A FAIR EXCHANGE	199
XXIV. A TERRIBLE SUSPICION	211

CHAP.	PAGE
XXV. WHAT MARTIN SAW FROM THE CLIFF	222
XXVI. MARTIN VENNER'S MISSION	228
XXVII. IN POSSESSION	244
XXVIII. A RACE FOR THE SHIP	256
XXIX. GRIGGS OUTWITTED	266
XXX. IN THE FIRST MORNING WATCH	278
XXXI. FRANK KERSHAW'S "FOSSILS".	289
XXXII. THE BOAT IN THE RAIN-MIST	297
XXXIII. ADAM CROSBY LETS THE CAT OUT OF THE BAG	307
XXXIV. THE END OF THE GAME	316
XXXV. RETRIBUTION	331
XXXVI. THE SCHOOLMASTER'S POSTSCRIPT	347
XXXVII. THE NEW <i>ALBATROSS</i>	358

THE GREEN PAINTED SHIP

CHAPTER I.

THE GREEN PAINTED SHIP.

THERE was no denying the fact that, for a boy of fifteen, Martin Venner knew a lot about ships. Perhaps he owed much of his knowledge to the circumstance that he crossed the busy Mersey twice every day on his way between his home and his office in Liverpool; but there is also the circumstance that his people were shipowners, and that he had been accustomed from his earliest years to hearing talk about ships and freights and cargoes.

Anyhow, he knew a lot about ships; and when he made the remark to Frank Kershaw that he didn't much like the looks of the *Albatross*, and wouldn't care to go to sea in her, Kershaw accepted his opinion as final, and did not venture to question it.

They were standing on the edge of the dock wharf looking down upon the barque's decks, where her hands, who had newly signed on, were lounging lazily about, each, as it seemed, a stranger to the others.

The cargo was stowed, the hatches were covered, her decks had been cleaned down, and, but that the master and mate were not yet on board, she was ready to be warped out of the dock into the river.

"No," repeated Martin Venner, with decision, "I wouldn't go this voyage in her for anything."

Frank Kershaw glanced up at the vessel's three tall masts and her taut standing rigging. His glance lingered for an instant on her maintopsail-yard, where two seamen were at work. Then he looked forward to her forecastle head, and aft to her square, old-fashioned poop-deck.

"Everything looks shipshape, so far as I can make out," he remarked; "everything, that is, excepting her crew. I can't say that I think much of them. They're about as low-down a gang as you could scrape together, and most of them are foreigners."

Venner, who was eating an orange by way of dessert after his lunch, flicked a piece of the peel at a brown retriever dog that sat on its haunches staring at him hungrily on the roof of the deck-house.

"I suppose that mongrel belongs to Captain Teach," he remarked, as the dog tried to gain possession of the morsel from the midst of a coil of rope. He dropped the rest of his orange-peel between the wharf and the ship's green painted hull. "Yes," he resumed, "they are mostly foreigners, I know. I had the job this morning of copying out their names. José Rossi was one, I remember. I daresay that's the name of the Italian-looking Johnnie sitting on the

main-hatch cover pretending to mend the scrubber. Then there were such names as Petersen, Haldane, Fischer, and Steffanson. It's one of the firm's bad habits to employ foreigners on their ships. Father doesn't approve of it; but then it's not a bit of good his trying to convert the old governor to his way of thinking. Foreigners are so much cheaper than British seamen, you know."

The "old governor" to whom he so disrespectfully referred was Mr. Adam Crosby, the head of the firm of Crosby, Venner, & Co., shipbrokers, in whose offices on the sunny side of Water Street, Martin Venner and Frank Kershaw acted in the capacity of assistant junior clerks (they objected to being called office boys), working at the same long mahogany-topped desk, with their high stools side by side.

They had always been companions, these two boys, ever since the day when they first met, as mere children, in Miss Glynn's seminary, over on the Cheshire side.

Later, when they assumed the dignity which goes with long trousers and Waterbury watches, it was at the beginning of the same term that they, for the first time, answered to their names in those excellent day schools in Caledonia Street, where they received the best part of their education. They were not always in the same class, it is true, for Kershaw was Venner's senior by a year, and it is not easy for two boys to keep abreast of each other in matters of learning; but in the mornings they usually contrived

to catch the same boat to cross from Seacombe Ferry to the Liverpool landing-stage, and in the evenings, unless one of them happened to be kept in to do some imposition as punishment, they went home together, with their satchels over their shoulders, often helping each other with their exercises as they crossed on the ferry-boat.

Kershaw's father, who was a master mariner, had intended Frank to follow the sea, and had even contemplated entering him for the *Conway* training-ship. But when Martin Venner left school to go into Crosby, Venner, & Co.'s shipping office (with the prospect of ultimately becoming a partner in the firm), a vacancy occurred for a second boy. It was offered, as a matter of course, to Kershaw, who accepted it at a rising salary, beginning at ten shillings a week. And now they had been in the office for twelve months, occupied together in the work of copying out charter-parties, bills of lading, ship's inventories, and schedules of freight, and in learning the details of maritime commerce.

"Yes," said Frank, in response to his companion's observation about foreign seamen, "the old governor seems to have a good many unpatriotic notions of that sort. I'm afraid he doesn't very much mind what he does, so long as there is money to be made out of it. That is why he is so rich, I suppose."

Martin nodded.

"He's a miserable old skinflint; that's what he is," he smiled. "I wish to goodness he would retire and

leave the management of the business to father. But there's jolly little chance of that. He'll come down to the office as long as ever his legs will carry him, and even when his legs fail him, then he will bully us all through the telephone—fixed up, for convenience, at his bedside. Ah, I've learnt a lot about him since I've been in the office."

"And so have I," said Kershaw.

"Have you?" Martin glanced at him quickly. "What have you heard?"

"Oh, lots," returned Kershaw. "He's got an awfully bad name in the town. He's a regular rotter, according to all accounts. But it was before the days of the Merchant Shipping Act that he was at his worst. That was when his ships got the ominous name of Crosby's coffins. I don't know if it's true, but I heard some fellows, the other day, talking about a ship called the *Queen of the Seas*, which belonged to Crosby. She was sent out on a voyage from which it was known beforehand that she would never come back. And—well, she never did come back."

"Yes, I've heard that story more than once," nodded Martin, "but it was never proved that she was actually scuttled, and Lloyd's paid the insurance. It was a bad business, though."

"Particularly bad for the poor seamen who were sent to their death," agreed Kershaw. "It was jolly well time the law should come in and put a stop to a game like that. I call it nothing less than cold-blooded murder."

“But the law hasn’t put a stop to everything, even yet,” pursued his companion. “It is supposed to have put a stop to overloading and to over-insuring, but it still allows an owner to send a ship to sea without hands enough to manage her, and it doesn’t prevent him from manning her with measly foreigners who don’t always understand what their British officers say to them. Look at this vessel here, the *Albatross*,” he went on. “Her crew is made up out of a dozen nationalities. Her fore-castle will be like a regular Tower of Babel when they are all in there together!”

He moved a few steps along the wharf and stood looking down at the ship’s galley, where a negro was busy frying a chop, watched by the ship’s boy.

“Even Africa contributes, you see,” he smiled.

“When does she sail?” questioned Kershaw, as they passed beyond the ship’s bow with its figurehead of a large white bird.

Martin Venner paused and cast a critical eye at the ship from her bulging bows to her square-built stern.

“She goes out of dock this afternoon,” he said, “and I daresay will drop down the river with the evening’s ebb. So you may take your last look at her.”

Kershaw turned upon him inquiringly.

“Why my ‘last’ look?” he asked.

There was a curious expression of mingled embarrassment and mystery in Martin’s eyes as he answered lightly—

“Only because I have a fancy that neither of us will ever look upon her again.”

CHAPTER II.

THE HEAD OF THE FIRM.

“TELL me, Mart,” said Kershaw, when, after threading their way through the throng of clerks and office boys, seafarers and dock labourers in Goree Piazzas, the two boys turned into Water Street. “Tell me what you meant just now when you said you had a fancy that neither of us would ever see the *Albatross* again. I don’t, for my own part, care whether I ever set eyes on the craft again or not. She’s of no particular interest to me, except, of course, that she is owned by Crosby. But you must have some reason for your fancy, and you’ve excited my curiosity. What did you mean?”

Martin Venner took hold of his companion’s arm and led him through a narrow alley into St. Nicholas’ Churchyard. They had still some ten minutes of their lunch hour to spare. In the churchyard all was very quiet. Martin paused at one of the seats and leaned over the back of it, looking out towards the pierhead and beyond it, to the misty river, where a great Cunard steamer lay at anchor surrounded by a flotilla of barges and panting tug-boats. He was silent for a long time—his breath showed like smoke in the cold wintry air.

“I am troubled, Frank,” he said at last.

“Is it about the *Albatross*?” Kershaw inquired.

Martin nodded.

"Yes," he answered slowly. "Perhaps I ought not to say anything about it to you, or to anybody except my father. But father is awfully busy to-day, looking after that big contract, and I've not been able to get hold of him. He doesn't know anything about this affair. It's all the old man's doing. Father would never soil his hands with any business that wasn't straight and above-board, but Adam Crosby's not like him a bit. He takes delight in defeating the law. What a ripping smuggler he'd make, if only it was possible still to cheat the revenue! But as smuggling isn't any longer a paying game, he takes to defrauding the underwriters."

He paused and looked up at the old church clock.

"The *Albatross* is insured to the value of every rusty nail and rotten plank in her fabric," he resumed. "She had been condemned as unseaworthy before he bought her in Cardiff, two months ago, and ought to have been sent to the ship-knackers to be broken up; but he had her patched up a bit, and painted a nice, enticing, fresh green, and then persuaded Lloyd's that she was everything she ought to be, which she isn't by a long chalk. Why, her lower timbers are so rotten, it's a wonder her cargo doesn't fall through! As for the cargo itself, it's composed of a lot of gimcrack Brummagem ware that's hardly worth the boxes it's packed in! Then she's undermanned, and by a gang of foreigners. A ship of her size and rig ought to have, at least, half a dozen more hands."

"Well," interrupted Kershaw, "she's only going a

short voyage—to the Baltic and back. Lloyd's don't run very much risk, do they?"

Martin stood upright, with his hands in his overcoat pockets.

"That's the point that troubles me," he continued. "There wouldn't be much risk in calm weather and if everything was straightforward. But there's some trickery going on, and I don't believe she will ever get as far as Copenhagen. There's some person among her crew—I don't know his name, or what position he holds. It may be Captain Teach himself, or it may be the mate—who has got his instructions to see that the ship doesn't reach her destination."

Frank Kershaw stared at his companion in amazement.

"Instructions!" he cried incredulously. "Instructions from whom?"

"From the head of the firm," declared Martin Venner, in a quiet undertone. "I've had a suspicion of it since last night, when he went on board on pretence of seeing the skipper, whom he knew to be across in Birkenhead."

"But surely an owner can go on board his ship without being suspected of plotting to scuttle her?" protested Kershaw. "You are alarming yourself without cause. You dislike the old governor; you seem sometimes even to hate him, and you are always ready to believe the worst of him on the slightest provocation; but I don't think he's so black as you paint him. If you've got no more ground for your strange fancy about the *Albatross* than the fact of Adam Crosby going aboard of her in the captain's absence,

why, then, you'd better say no more about it, and believe that he's as straight as he represents himself to be. But if your suspicions have really got any sound foundation—if you've got any proof against him—then take my tip and go at once to your father and tell him all about it, so that he may stop the game while there is time."

"I don't pretend that I have proof," declared Martin, turning to continue the walk back to the office. "When people mean to commit a crime, they don't generally announce the fact from the housetops. All that I know is this. Last night I was kept late at the office. Before going home I went into Orfew's coffee-shop to get a cup of tea. At the table next to me a fellow sat writing. He was rather a shabby-looking customer—looked like a seaman, for he had rings in his ears and an anchor in indigo on the back of his left hand. He didn't seem to be accustomed to writing, and he evidently found it difficult to do the thing to his satisfaction. When he'd written a few lines he read them and then tore the paper up and dropped the pieces between his knees, and wrote it again on a clean sheet. When he had finished, he folded the letter very carefully, put it into an envelope, which he fastened and addressed, and then strolled out. I don't know why I did it, but when he had gone, I had the curiosity to pick up the torn fragments, piece them together, and read what he had written. To my astonishment, I saw that it was the beginning of a letter to someone aboard the *Albatross*, warning him to beware of foul play, because the ship was

going to be scuttled by someone who was sailing aboard her, and had been promised a share in the insurance money which Crosby would get when she had foundered."

Kershaw gave a low whistle that signified his lively interest in his chum's piece of news.

"Of course, you have saved those scraps of paper?" he questioned. Martin shook his head.

"No, I haven't," said he. "I chucked them in the fire as I came out of the coffee-shop and ran after the fellow. I wanted to ask him what on earth he meant. But it was foggy, and he'd got a good start of me, you see, and I couldn't find him."

"That's a pity," resumed Kershaw. "You ought to have kept them and shown them to your father when you got home. At the least, you ought to have told him of the incident. Why didn't you?"

"You forget that he was in Manchester last night," explained Martin. "I haven't seen him to speak to since lunch time yesterday. But I will tell him now, when we get into the office."

"Do, by all means," Kershaw recommended.

That afternoon Martin was put to the work of searching for a missing document among the old files that were kept in the upper room, and he did not return to his desk until it was nearly time to leave off. His father, too, Mr. Royden Venner, was busily occupied out of doors. It happened, therefore, that if the boy really intended to speak of his suspicions to his father, he had not an opportunity of doing so.

At about three o'clock, Frank Kershaw got down

from his high stool to answer a summoning knock on the little counter near to his desk. He pushed back the sliding window in the glass partition which protected him from the draughts from the outer corridor, and looked out at a tall red-bearded man, who wore a blue pea-jacket, buttoned up at the throat, and a seaman's peaked cap. Seamen often came in to Crosby's, and Kershaw regarded this one with but ordinary curiosity, momentarily wondering if he had come to ask for a berth on some outgoing ship.

"Can I see Mr. Crosby—Mr. Adam Crosby?" was the stranger's demand, spoken in a gruff, quarter-deck voice.

"I'm afraid not," replied Kershaw, balancing his pen more securely behind his ear. "He is very busy to-day. But I will see. What name, please?"

"Captain Teach."

"Captain Teach!" Kershaw repeated the name in surprise. What had brought the master of the *Albatross* to Crosby's at a time when he was supposed to be getting his ship out of dock?

"He will see me, I take it, howsoever busy he is," said the mariner, pushing open the swing-door with the determination of one who obviously believed that the interview he sought could not possibly be refused. He was agitated, and evidently in a hurry. So much so that he did not wait for permission, but, passing through the swing-door, followed closely upon Kershaw's heels to Mr. Crosby's private room, unhindered by the clerks who watched him in amused surprise. He elbowed Kershaw aside and boldly entered.

Adam Crosby rose from the table at which he had been writing, and stared in astonishment at the intruder.

"Captain Teach!" he exclaimed. "What is this? What brings you here? I thought you were out in the river by this time! What has happened?"

The shipmaster removed his cap and fumbled in his jacket pocket. He had suddenly assumed an air of humility, regarding his employer nervously, as if regretting that he had been so precipitate as to enter the room unexpectedly and unannounced.

Mr. Adam Crosby was a little, grey-haired man, with a sallow, clean-shaven face, and alert brown eyes, which seemed to shrink from resting fully upon his visitor.

"What has happened?" he requested, tugging at his black necktie as if it were too tight about his thin, red neck. "Why have you not set sail?"

Captain Teach coughed uncomfortably, and drew a sheet of folded paper from his pocket.

"Time enough to set sail when we're clear of the dock, sir," he stammered, "and when I've learned the meaning of this here letter that I found on my cabin table half an hour ago." He tapped the paper with his finger-tips. "And I take it that you can tell me the meaning of it as well as anyone else, Mr. Crosby."

Mr. Crosby leaned forward over the intervening table, and put forth a long, thin hand for the letter, which, however, Teach retained.

"I'll read it aloud to you, sir, to save you the trouble," said the captain, opening the paper. "It's meant for me, sure enough, for my name's at the head of it."

He cleared his throat and then read the letter aloud, pausing once or twice in the midst of it to notice the effect of the words upon their hearer.

“CAPTAIN SIMON TEACH.

“*Barque Albatross*, SALTHOUSE DOCK.

“This is to warn you to beware of foul play. Your ship goes to sea never to reach port. Perhaps you’ve never heard tell of Crosby’s coffins, but the *Albatross* is one of them, which there is a insurance fraud intended by her. I can’t tell you how it’s going to be done, but warn you to keep a sharp eye on your ship’s company, from the oldest A.B. to the youngest boy, without respect to persons, and lay hold of the one that’s got the straight tip to do the job when you are out at sea.

“FROM A FRIEND.”

“There, sir!” cried Captain Teach, again tapping the paper, this time more vigorously, to give emphasis to his indignation. “What am I to make of a warning like that?” He flung the letter on the table. “I take it you can enlighten me, if anybody can.”

Mr. Crosby reached forward and drew the paper to him with trembling fingers, glanced first at the handwriting, and then at the seaman.

“You are to regard it for what it is, Captain Teach—an infamous lie,” he responded firmly, between his closed teeth. “There is not a grain of truth in it.”

Captain Teach stood silent for a moment, twisting his cap nervously in his two hands, and fixing his eyes steadily upon those of the head of the firm.

“Not a grain of truth in it!” he repeated, in a tone which implied that he still had doubts.

"It is a senseless attempt at a joke," insisted Mr. Crosby. "I wonder at you taking a moment's notice of it, Teach."

"When a man has the lives of his crew in his charge he isn't likely to treat a warning like this as a joke," pursued Teach. "You'll allow that I could hardly put to sea while believing that a game of this sort was on hand. I'm willing to take all ordinary risks, Mr. Crosby, and, weather permitting, I'll bring my ship home safe and sound. But I draw the line at scuttling."

"Scuttling!" exclaimed Mr. Crosby, in shocked astonishment. "But, Captain Teach, do you suppose——"

"You can't deny that the thing bears that complexion," interrupted the seaman.

"Well," returned Mr. Crosby, again examining the letter, "it may, indeed, be so interpreted. And, reading it in that way, I frankly admit that you are amply justified in coming here now with your complaint. But surely, Teach, you could not, for a moment, have believed that there was any truth in it?"

Teach stroked his pointed red beard.

"I've not got a ghost of a notion who wrote it," he said, contemplating the picture of a ship in an impossible storm behind Mr. Crosby's chair. "But whoever it was, I take it that he knows a thing or two about the history of Crosby & Co."

Mr. Crosby picked up his pen, which he had dropped on the floor. When he stood up again, his face was very red and his hand shook visibly.

"I presume you refer to the mention of — of Crosby's coffins?" he faltered.

Captain Teach inclined his head affirmatively.

"It's not the first time that those two words have been put together," he ventured.

"Are you aware that the man who first put them together—the newspaper editor who dared to publish the libel on this firm—was put into prison for it?" questioned the shipowner. "That is what will happen also to the person who wrote this intimidating letter to you, if he can be found. The police will find him." He touched the bell on his table. "I will send this at once to Dale Street," he added. "In the meantime, you can take my word for it that there is absolutely no ground for this ridiculous suggestion, and proceed on your voyage with a comfortable mind."

It was Frank Kershaw who answered the bell. He saw his master and Captain Teach shaking hands.

"Good-bye, then, Teach," Mr. Crosby was saying, "and a prosperous trip to you!" He turned to Kershaw, and, in the captain's hearing, said, "Kershaw, I want you to run with a message to Dale Street police station." He waited until the door closed, and Captain Teach's footsteps sounded along the stone corridor outside. "Or, no," he decided, "on second thoughts, perhaps I had better go myself."

Kershaw noticed that while he spoke, Mr. Crosby was tearing up what looked like a letter into exceedingly small fragments,—tearing it angrily, vindictively, before dropping the tiny remnants into the waste-paper basket.

It was towards evening that Mr. Royden Venner looked into his partner's private room. The head of

the firm was drawing on his gloves, preparatory to going home to his luxurious mansion in Aigburth.

"I hear that Teach came in this afternoon," casually remarked the junior partner. "Nothing wrong about the *Albatross*, I hope?"

"No—oh no," returned Adam Crosby evasively; "he merely dropped in on his way to the ship to report that one of his crew, a Dane, I believe, had taken ill, and that he had been exchanged for an Englishman who seems to be a more capable sailor."

"I am glad to hear that there is, at least, one foreigner fewer on board," nodded the other. "I only wish that half a dozen more of them had been taken ill in the same way, to be similarly replaced by honest Englishmen."

Some ten minutes later Martin Venner and his father met in the outer office.

"I've got something I want to tell you," said Martin; and the two retired together into an inner room, from which Mr. Royden Venner presently hastened out.

The clerks, observing his agitation as he hurried out of the office, wondered what had happened to disturb his usual calmness. Had they followed him they would have seen him walk quickly down Water Street and through Back Goree in the direction of the Salthouse Dock.

He was not long in arriving at that part of the dock basin which had been occupied for a fortnight past by the barque *Albatross*. But now another vessel was berthed in her place, for the *Albatross* had been warped into the river, even if she had not already been towed out across the bar.

CHAPTER III.

THE TRAGEDY IN THE FOG.

“HELLO, Mart!”

“Hello, Frank! Awfully foggy morning, eh? I could hardly find my way down to the ferry, it's so thick. Cold, too, isn't it?”

“Beastly cold,” agreed Kershaw, shoving his hands deeper into his overcoat pockets. “I see your pater is on board. He doesn't often catch this early boat.”

“No. But he has got to see his lawyer this morning before he goes to the office. He signed his will last night, and wants to put it into safe hands.”

The *Gem* ferry steamer, crowded with business men, had just started from Seacombe, and was making her way slowly and cautiously across the river to the Liverpool side. Most of the passengers sought the shelter of the cabins, many stood under the bridge in the warmth of the funnel, or within the current of odorous air that came up from the engine-room, while others paced the deck, smoking pipe or cigarette. Frank Kershaw and Martin Venner remained abaft the paddle-box on the starboard side.

“I should have thought that he had made his will years ago,” observed Kershaw, trying to distinguish the number on the sails of a pilot schooner that showed like a dim shadow through the fog.

“Some people have a superstition against making their wills,” smiled Martin. “They generally leave it until the last minute. But that wasn’t father’s reason for not making his before. He used to think that his marriage settlement was as good as a will, but he was looking at it some days ago, and he discovered that it wasn’t at all fair to my mother. It was my grandfather who made the settlement sixteen years ago, and it was a one-sided, rotten sort of arrangement altogether, so worded that if anything were to happen to father, all his property would revert to grandfather, and mother would get absolutely nothing. So pater made up his mind to squash it by drawing up a will entirely in mother’s favour. And that’s what he has done. Hello, we’ve stopped!”

A steamer’s hoarse fog-horn had sounded through the surrounding mist, and, as the *Gem* slowed down and reversed her engines, the high hull of an ocean tramp glided like a phantom across her bows. When this danger had passed, the ferry-boat proceeded at half-speed, her steam whistle keeping up a continual discordant screech. Towards the middle of the river the fog thickened, wrapping the boat round in a dense white curtain until even her passengers appeared as ghosts about her deck, and her mast and white painted funnel were scarcely discernible. The bells of vessels at anchor and the hooting of steamers’ fog-horns pierced the still, cold air. Ships’ riding lights, when they could be seen at all, were but tiny yellow specks, too feeble to be effectual until the peril they announced

was close at hand. Many times the *Gem* came to a dead stop. Her passengers began to grumble at the delay in getting to their offices.

"Ah, you're here, Mart! I have been searching for you. I thought you were below in the cabin."

It was Mr. Royden Venner who spoke to his son. He was a tall, athletic-looking man of about forty, with a fair moustache, which now glistened with dewy moisture from his breath. He unbuttoned his heavy winter overcoat and drew a long blue envelope from its inner pocket.

"We shall be late in landing," he said, "and I shall not have time to go up to Cook Street. I want you to take this packet to Goffey and Trimble's. Mind you don't lose it. You know what it is. Tell Mr. Trimble that I shall call later in the day."

He handed the envelope to his son, who put it into his breast pocket. Then Mr. Venner began to pace the deck, stamping his feet to keep them warm. As he turned for the fourth or fifth time he stopped by the cabin stairs to light a cigarette. A man approached him, apparently with the purpose of asking for a light. Mr. Venner, however, did not notice him in the fog, and resumed his walk towards where Martin and Frank were standing beside the paddle-box. The stranger followed him like a silent shadow. As they passed, Martin Venner caught at Kershaw's arm.

"Frank!" he whispered excitedly. "Do you see that chap following father? It's the fellow that I saw in Orfew's coffee-shop writing the letter about the *Albatross*! Look! What's he up to?"

Mr. Venner turned. The stranger confronted him and seized his arm roughly.

“I know you!” Kershaw heard him cry viciously—“you that send innocent men to sea in rotten ships, that gamble with men’s lives. You tried to make me—*me*—one of your victims in the coffin that you called the *Queen of the Seas*. Yes—I know you!”

His voice, loud though it was, was drowned amid a shout of alarm that came from the forward part of the boat. The shout was immediately followed by the breaking of timber. Through the mist there loomed the high prow of a ship, from which a lighted lantern shone dimly. The vessel’s long, stout bowsprit projected over the ferry steamer, tearing down her mast as she passed under it. The mast fell with a crash, and then, as she swept on, her funnel also was caught by the stout spar. It swayed and fell over on to the crowded deck, crushing men beneath its weight and flinging others over the bulwarks into the rapid tide. At the same moment the *Gem* herself came into violent collision with the vessel’s anchor chain and was listed over to starboard at a sharp angle.

In the confusion Frank Kershaw scarcely knew what was happening. He felt himself falling backward down the inclined deck. He saw a gust of smoke and flame and sparks rise up from where the funnel had been. In that shaft of light, which imparted a weird glow to the enveloping fog, he caught sight of Mr. Venner wrestling with the strange man who had accosted him, being forced back and

back to the bulwarks. The man's right hand was uplifted. There was a flash of a knife and a dull splash.

The next thing that Frank Kershaw knew was that he was himself in the water, clinging desperately with cold, stiff fingers to something which seemed to be dragging him with it through the icy tide that splashed and hissed about his ears. He heard the slow beating of the steamer's revolving paddles close beside him, and presently he realised that what he clung to was an iron stanchion supporting the paddle-box. He tried to raise himself to get his arm round the stanchion. The wash from the paddles lifted him and he succeeded. Then the paddles ceased to turn, and in the darkness he made out that the ferry-boat was floating upright and safe, and that efforts were being made to rescue the passengers who had either been thrown into the water by the impact or had dived in to save themselves by climbing up the anchor chain of the vessel which had caused the mischief.

Boats had been put out from the ship, lifebuoys had been thrown to swimmers whose position could only be guessed by their calls for help. Another ferry-boat, attracted to the spot by the bellowing of the fog whistle, the ringing of bells, and the cries of the drowning and the injured, had drawn near to offer succour.

Vaguely through the mist, Kershaw saw a rowing boat approaching. He called aloud, and the rowers hearing, pulled towards him.

“ There’s one of ’em—under the sponson ! ” cried a man at the boat’s bow. “ Pull your left, Jim ! ”

Jim pulled, and the boat came closer. The man at the bow leaned over the gunwale, holding aloft a lighted lantern, and caught at Kershaw’s arm just as he was relinquishing his hold. Two pairs of strong arms lifted him and pulled him inboard, dripping and shivering, almost unconscious. Some men kneeling on the platform of the steamer’s sponson, then stretched forth their hands and dragged the boy into safety, carrying him into the warmth of the engine-room, where four other rescued passengers were already being attended to.

Several rowing-boats were now in the water searching in the fog for further survivors. It was not yet known whether the *Gem* had sustained any dangerous damage to her hull, but, lest this should be so, all haste was made to bring her to her berth at the landing-stage. Her engines were again set going at half-speed, and, with her wrecked funnel and mast lying in confusion across her deck, and her passengers in a state of restless excitement, she continued her journey.

When at length she was brought alongside the pier and the gangway was lowered, the passengers coming ashore were carefully counted.

Many hastened away to their places of business, merely thankful for their escape ; others lingered to know the worst result of the accident. Those who had been in the water, or were injured by the falling

funnel, were conveyed to the waiting-rooms close at hand, where they received prompt medical help, and were supplied with warming drinks before a blazing fire.

It was impossible yet to know how many lives had been lost, and until the fog lifted and other survivors had been brought ashore—until the number who had landed had been compared with the number who had passed through the turnstiles on the other side—it could not be told how many passengers were missing.

Frank Kershaw looked around for Martin Venner. He remembered now having seen his companion clutch at a lifebuoy as the ferry-boat heeled over, remembered seeing him fall, but whether into the river or not he could not say. He had also caught sight of Mr. Royden Venner struggling desperately in the grip of his assailant, and the recollection of that grim tragedy in the fog—of the man's hand, with its flashing weapon uplifted to strike as he pressed his victim back—made him shudder with horror. Had that tragedy been completed?

Trying to recall what he had seen, Kershaw was now assured in his mind that he had seen Mr. Venner flung into the water. What had been his fate? Possibly he had succeeded, as many others were believed to have done, in climbing on board the anchored sailing vessel. Possibly he had been picked up by one of the boats that had hastened to the rescue. But it was certain that neither he nor his son had been brought ashore.

CHAPTER IV.

MISSING.

WHILE his clothes were drying, Frank Kershaw sat before the waiting-room fire wrapped in a warm rug, drinking cup after cup of hot coffee. Someone drove up to Castle Street to purchase new underclothing for him and for others who were in a plight similar to his own, and by eleven o'clock he was in a condition to go on his way, not very much the worse for his adventure, excepting that he had received some bruises and scratches, and was shaky in his nerves.

So nervous was he that he shrank from crossing the river again while the fog was still thick. He waited, hoping that it would clear; hoping, too, to hear news of Martin Venner. Some twelve men who had been rescued were brought ashore, but neither Martin nor Mr. Venner was among them. Many of the passengers were missing, as was soon made evident by the numbers of inquiries which were made concerning them by people who came down to the landing-stage from various places of business; for the report of the disaster had spread quickly through the town, and everyone who had not appeared at his office or shop that morning was supposed by his friends to have been on board the unfortunate ferry-boat.

Kershaw had taken the precaution of sending a

telegram to his mother to assure her that he was safe; but he had not yet communicated with Crosby & Co., and when he realised that he could do no more by remaining in the waiting-room, he pulled on his damp boots, buttoned up his overcoat, thanked the people who had helped him, and made his way up the floating bridge to Water Street and the office.

There was exceedingly little business done at Crosby's that day. The whole office was in consternation concerning the fate of the junior partner and his son, and to each and everyone of the fifteen clerks, Kershaw repeated his story of the collision. Twice he was called into Adam Crosby's private room, and on the second occasion he was subjected to a close cross-examination.

"You are sure that Mr. Venner was on board?" questioned the head of the firm, as he sat with his head in his hands, his elbows resting on the table.

"Absolutely certain, sir," returned Kershaw. "He said good morning to me and remarked upon the fog."

"I cannot imagine his reason for crossing by so early a boat," reflected Mr. Crosby.

"He intended to go to his lawyer's on his way to the office," pursued Kershaw. "Perhaps you don't know, but he made his will and signed it last night, and he was bringing it over to leave it with Mr. Trimble."

"His will!" exclaimed Mr. Crosby, with a start. Then to himself he muttered, "What business had he making a will without my knowledge?" Looking up, he added, "You say you saw him on board. Was he anywhere near you when the accident happened?"

Frank Kershaw hesitated for an instant, wondering if it would be wise to tell his employer of the strange man who had violently attacked his partner in the moment of the disaster. He quickly resolved to reveal all he knew.

"Yes, sir," he said, "he was quite near me. Just after he had handed his will to Martin, a stranger went up to him and accused him of sending innocent men to sea in rotten ships. He looked like a seaman. I saw him draw his knife, lifting his hand to strike as he forced Mr. Venner to the side. It was then that the ferry-boat ran foul of the anchored ship. I don't know if Mr. Venner was struck, but I saw him fall overboard. Martin must have been thrown into the river too, but in the fog I couldn't see anything very distinctly."

Mr. Crosby stared vacantly in front of him. His face was more than usually sallow, his fingers twitched nervously.

"A seaman!" he gasped hoarsely, clutching at his thin white hair with his two skinny hands. "A seaman, did you say?—a seaman—with a black beard—and with rings in his ears—and an indigo anchor on his left hand?"

Kershaw moved uneasily. There was something forbidding about his master's agitated face. Cunning, duplicity, cruelty seemed to be indicated in every line of it.

"I did not see that he had earrings," Frank answered; "but your description of him answers to what Martin told me of the man's appearance."

“Martin!” cried Mr. Crosby. “What does Martin know of him? Martin has never set eyes on the scoundrel. For the past five years Jansen has been in prison. He was only let out last week.”

“Jansen!” repeated Kershaw. “Well, that may or may not be the fellow’s name, but Martin saw him two nights ago in Orfew’s coffee-house writing a letter, and recognised him on the *Gem*.”

At mention of the letter, Adam Crosby collapsed in his chair, shaking as with a palsy. What was his reason for his evident dread of the man Jansen? With one trembling hand he signed to Kershaw to quit the room.

“That will do,” he muttered indistinctly. “You have told me enough—more than enough.”

Frank Kershaw withdrew, and went back to his desk. He tried to work, but the attempt was useless. His brain was too excited, too much disturbed by the haunting remembrance of what he had gone through that morning, to concentrate itself upon the details of the office routine. He sat restless on his high stool, wondering what had become of Martin Venner and of Martin’s father, trying to interpret the mystery of Adam Crosby’s dread of the man Jansen, and again enacting in mind all that had happened on the ferry-boat in the fog. At the sound of every approaching footstep along the corridor outside he started and trembled with apprehension, believing that some messenger was coming with the news that Martin was found. But no news of Martin came,

nor of Mr. Venner, and of the mysterious Jansen there was no word.

During the days that followed, the river police and various longshore boatmen made diligent search for victims of the accident. Some bodies were recovered and identified, but at the end of a week four of the unfortunate passengers still remained unaccounted for, and among these who were missing Royden Venner and his fifteen-year-old son were numbered.

After a respectable interval of time, Mrs. Venner applied for payment of her husband's insurance; but she was politely reminded that there was no proof of his death, without which the sum for which he had been insured could not be paid. It was pointed out to her that it was quite within the range of possibility that he had been picked up by some outward-bound ship, and that in that case she might still hope to hear of his being alive.

It was a faint promise upon which to rest her hopes. No one really believed that Royden Venner had been picked up alive. If that had been so, people argued, the fact would have been known and duly reported by the pilots, without whose aid it was unusual for any ship to leave the Mersey. Two circumstances supported their disbelief. One was that Royden Venner could not swim, and that, therefore, it was impossible for him to help himself by making his way to a ship, had one been visible in the dense fog. The other circumstance was the rumour that at the very moment of the disaster

Mr. Venner had been violently attacked by an unknown enemy, who, assisted in his evil purpose by the fog, had drawn his knife and stabbed him before flinging him backward into the river.

Frank Kershaw was the only witness of the assault, and, since his evidence was not corroborated, it was not generally credited, in spite of the fact that marks of blood had been discovered on the deck and outside the bulwarks of the ferry-boat at the spot abaft the starboard paddle-box where the attack was alleged to have been made.

Listening to the many conjectures which were advanced by his friends concerning Martin Crosby, Frank Kershaw gradually abandoned all hope of ever seeing his companion in life again. Martin was a swimmer, it was true, but what chance had any swimmer in a swiftly flowing tide such as was running out on the morning of the accident? Having been swept past the anchored vessel upon which many others of the passengers had climbed, what possibility was there of his discovering another ship and gaining a foothold upon her decks? There did not seem to be the remotest chance of his rescue.

And so Frank Kershaw, like everyone else in Crosby & Venner's, was forced to believe that Martin was dead.

On a certain morning he had occasion to take a bundle of letters and telegrams into Adam Crosby's private room. Mr. Crosby was in a particularly bad humour that morning. He was fretting under the inconvenience of his junior partner's disappearance.

He frowned as he took the telegram from the top of the bundle and opened the envelope.

“Wait. There may be an answer to this,” he growled.

Kershaw watched him as he read the message, and saw his face grow deathly white.

“No. There is no answer,” the old man muttered feebly. “You may read it.”

Frank picked the telegram from the table and glanced at the words written upon it. The message was brief, but it filled him with unspeakable astonishment :

“I am on board the *Albatross*.

“MARTIN VENNER.”

For many moments he was as one struck suddenly dumb. Then, when the full meaning of the message flashed into his brain, he spoke.

“The *Albatross*!” he exclaimed. “Then he will never come back! He is as good as dead!”

Adam Crosby leapt from his chair with fiery anger burning in his evil brown eyes, and his thin hands stretched forth like claws to clutch at the boy in front of him.

“What do you mean?” he cried.

Kershaw did not reflect before he answered impulsively—

“You have planned that she shall be scuttled. Already you are counting on the insurance money that you will claim when she is reported lost. And now your partner’s son is aboard of her, and it’s too late for you to put a stop to the fraud or to prevent the ship from being purposely wrecked!”

CHAPTER V.

AN OCEAN WAIF.

“LUFF a little, boy!”

“Luff a little, sir.” Frank Kershaw repeated the order in seaman fashion, moving the spokes of the steering-wheel, and glanced aloft to watch the effect of his action in the wind’s fuller pressure upon the sails.

The skipper smiled at the boy’s evident pride in his work, and strode forward along the weather side of the deck and paused at the break of the poop to look out across the grey sea that was barely more than ruffled by the light breeze from the south-west. The brig heaved gently on the Atlantic swell. In the western sky faint gleams of sunlight pierced the leaden clouds, and in the ruddy glow that marked the position of the sinking sun he descried a tiny speck on the horizon.

“Sail ho! on the starboard bow!” came a cry from the fore-castle head.

The skipper took out his pipe and tobacco pouch, and returned aft to the binnacle, where he stood quietly regarding the boy at the wheel, while he slowly loaded his pipe.

“Well, Frank, my boy, how do you like it now?” he presently asked. “This is better, ain’t it, than sitting on a ’igh stool a-chawing of your pen in Crosby & Venner’s office?”

Frank nodded. "Yes, sir."

The master struck a match and lighted his pipe.

"You can drop the 'sir' when none of the hands are near," said he. "It's quite right for you to be respectful to your officers, but I spoke to you then as your father, not as your captain." He crossed the deck to the lee side and dropped the extinguished match overboard. Captain Kershaw was scrupulously particular about the cleanliness of his ship, and it was one of his rules never to drop a dead match on the deck or leave tobacco ash or any other refuse lying about.

"You ain't dying to be back again in Water Street, then?" he pursued.

"Not likely," returned Frank. "I wouldn't be back for anything, now that I know what life at sea is like. And, of course, being on the *Mary Brown*, and serving under my own father, instead of a strange captain, I'm well off. It's as good as a yachting cruise."

"The *Mary Brown* ain't exactly a yacht," resumed the skipper, "but she's got an honest British crew aboard 'er, and that's more than you'll find on all ships sailing out of Liverpool in these days. Yes, you're well off as things go in fair weather. But I'd say that any craft you might board would be better than an office like Crosby's. You'd never have gone there if I'd been ashore at the time. Anyone in the shipping trade would have told you what sort of a character they bore, if you'd only asked 'em. Luff again!"

He took half a dozen strides forward and then aft again, puffing at his pipe.

"I shall always be glad that you'd the pluck to tell old Adam Crosby what you thought of him when you found out about the *Albatross*," he continued. "But you'd have been safe to say a good deal more, knowing you was bound to get the sack for opening your mouth at all. You might have reminded him of the *Queen of the Seas* that foundered in calm weather, and was insured to double her value. He'd no need to be reminded of the *Albatross*. I reckon he won't forget her in a hurry, knowing that young Venner was aboard of her when she went down."

A bright, rosy light shone in Frank's face. His father turned and glanced over to the westward to see that the sinking sun had penetrated the curtain of sullen clouds, shedding a glittering path of red and gold across the sea. The sails of the distant ship stood out black against the full light like a solitary bead on the thread of the horizon line.

"Yes," resumed Captain Kershaw, "it was one of the queerest things that could have happened, young Martin getting picked up by the *Albatross*. 'Twere like a judgment on old Adam, who had sent so many seamen to their doom. I reckon he'd have given a lot to be able to call the ship back, eh?"

"He tried his level best to do so," nodded Frank. "The telegram that Martin sent to the firm to say he was aboard the *Albatross* was handed in at a place called Stornoway, and Adam telegraphed a reply.



“WHAT DO YOU MEAN?” HE CRIED.—Page 37.



He telegraphed three or four times, but never got any answer, except that no such barque as the *Albatross* had ever been in the place."

The skipper pressed down the tobacco ash in the bowl of his pipe with a horny forefinger.

"Stornoway?" He repeated the name questioningly. "That's an important fishing station on the west of the island of Lewis that we sighted three days ago. A ship bound for the Baltic might well touch there, but if she never was there, how d'you suppose the telegram was sent?"

"That has puzzled me a lot," said Frank. "I can't make it out. For if Martin was ashore, or anywhere near shore, you may be sure he'd have made his escape from a ship that he knew to be doomed. I didn't credit his suspicions at first, but it seems he was right, seeing that she was posted 'overdue' at Lloyd's a fortnight ago, and hasn't been heard of since."

Captain Kershaw went forward to the deck-house, put his hand within the doorway, and brought out his binoculars, through which he intently examined the far-off ship. He was thus engaged when eight bells sounded, and the second mate, having given orders for the port watch to be called, strolled aft to the poop.

"Briant," said the captain, handing his glass to the second mate, "d'ye see anything queer about that craft yonder?"

Briant altered the binoculars to his focus and levelled them at the distant ship.

"Well, sir," said he presently, "she do look queer

somehow, with close-reefed tops'ls in a light air like this. And she's not drawing. She's off the wind, and nobody don't seem to be lookin' arter 'er."

"That's the point," nodded Captain Kershaw. "Nobody is looking after her. Something's gone wrong aboard of her." And, taking the glass which Briant returned to him, he stood for a long time beside the mizzen shrouds peering intently at the strange ship, not taking his eyes off her until the mate came up from below, when he gave orders to alter the course and bear down upon the stranger.

Frank Kershaw, relieved at the wheel, went forward to the forecastle, where, notwithstanding the fact of his being the captain's son, he was berthed among the crew. As he turned to enter the cuddy scuttle, he looked across the sea towards the ship which had so excited his father's curiosity; but the sun had gone down, and he could perceive nothing but an indistinct speck against the bank of steel-grey cloud.

When, four hours afterwards, he returned to the deck with the first dog-watch, the winter twilight had deepened into darkness. From the forecastle head he could see no sign of the stranger. He overheard one of the men remark that it was queer she showed no lights, and that he wished the moon would rise and let them get a sight of her.

Frank was in his bunk from six o'clock until ten, when he was aroused from a deep sleep by hearing three loud raps on the scuttle, followed by the familiar cry—

“ All starboard watch, ahoy! Four bells! D’ye hear the news, there, sleepers? ”

One of the seamen responded with a drowsy “ Ay, ay,” and Frank tumbled out of his bunk and reached for his clothes. The cuddy was as light almost as day. Through the cross-bars of the skylight over his head he could see the full moon racing across a gap among the scudding clouds. He pulled on his long sea-boots, buttoned his thick coat over his guernsey and muffler, drew his cap down about his ears, and climbed upward to the forecastle deck. The wind blew chill from the north-west, and there was a thin coating of hoarfrost on the planks and rigging.

The barque’s sails, he noticed, were set as they had been before he went down for the watch below, although braced round on another tack. All was impressively silent but for the straining of sheets, the monotonous creaking of blocks, and the swishing murmur of the spray sent off from the vessel’s bows as she met the Atlantic rollers. The moon’s light on the sea formed a wide, glistening path. He strode to the lee side, and stood there resting his arms upon the cold, frosted rail, watching the play of the waves in the silvery radiance. His messmates below were in no haste to quit the warmth of their cabin, and it was not his duty to go aft until the man at the wheel was relieved.

While he waited, a strange, startling sound reached his ears, breaking sharply upon the midnight silence. It came from far across the sea, from out the darkness

—the quick, insistent barking of a dog, ending in a long-drawn, dismal whine. Such a sound coming to him in the desolate loneliness of the ocean had in it something of supernatural significance, something weird and uncanny, which might well send a shiver through his frame.

“D’ye hear that, sir?” he cried. The mate strode past him. “D’ye hear that, Mr. Wilkinson—a dog barking?”

“Ay, we’ve heard it on and off for the past hour,” returned the mate. “It’s some cur of a dog aboard a vessel to windward of us.”

“I suppose it’s the same craft that we saw before sundown?” remarked Frank, as the barking was renewed yet more insistently.

“Ready about!” cried Captain Kershaw from the poop, and the men of the starboard watch, who were now on deck, hurried to their stations.

In the process of tacking ship, Frank helped in the work of raising tacks and sheets, letting go and hauling. But when all was snug and quiet again and he was idle, the dog’s barking, louder now than before, drew his attention, and he looked out across the sea in the direction from which it came.

Less than a mile away, he dimly discerned a ship with a glint of moonlight on her forward canvas. He was still only a novice in seamanship and in knowledge of the behaviour of ships at sea, but even the little that he knew told him surely and unmistakably that there was something unusual about the stranger.

She carried no lights. She seemed to be making no way ; her sails were swaying randomly in the breeze, untended, neglected. The *Mary Brown* was bearing straight towards her as if to cross close under her bows.

Frank went aft beyond the mainmast and climbed the high bulwark under the break of the poop. Leaning over, he watched the strange ship, wonderingly, listening the while to the impatient barking of the dog. When at length the two vessels came within hailing distance of each other, he heard the mate's voice calling aloud—

“ Ahoy, there ! What ship's that ? ”

There was no response. The call was repeated, and still no answer came.

“ She's derelict ! ” Frank heard his father say. “ Get out the quarter-boat and we'll board her. ”

Derelict she indeed appeared to be. There was no sign of human presence on her decks. The only sign of life upon her whole structure was the form of a large dog perched at the extremity of her prow, barking wildly, eagerly. The animal seemed to be upon the point of leaping into the waves. The shadow of the *Mary Brown's* sails obscured it for a space, and then a gleam of moonlight flashed upon the vessel's figurehead of a white bird with outstretched wings. Frank Kershaw climbed up to the poop rail, against which his father and the two mates were standing.

“ It's the *Albatross* ! ” he cried. “ Father, it's the *Albatross* ! ”

The second mate and his crew were not long in clearing the quarter-boat. When she was ready to be lowered from the davits, Frank followed the men on board of her, taking with him a couple of lighted lanterns. The order was given to lower away, and the men took to their oars and bent to their work of pulling across the intervening space of sea, steered by the second mate. Frank watched the ship drifting helplessly, heaving lazily on the ocean swell.

“You’re quite right, Kershaw, my lad,” cried Briant, as they came round under the vessel’s port bow, upon which the pale moonlight shone. “It’s the *Albatross*, sure enough. There’s her name, see !”

He steered the boat along the barque’s dark hull ; the carpenter stood ready in the boat to catch with the boat-hook at the main chains.

“Climb aboard of her, Frank,” ordered Briant, when they were close alongside. “Look out for that blooming dog, though. It’s fairly mad, I should say, by the row it’s making.”

Frank scaled the ship’s side, caught at the shrouds, swung a leg over the bulwark, and looked down upon her deck. The dog leaped up at him savagely, its eyes and teeth glittering wildly in the moon’s light. It was a brown retriever. Frank recognised it as the same that he and Martin Venner had seen when the *Albatross* was in dock. He now threw it a piece of ship’s biscuit which he had brought with him. The animal, seizing it voraciously, ceased barking.

“There’s nobody here, sir,” Frank looked back to

inform Mr. Briant, "only the dog. The deck hasn't been cleared of the snow that fell three days ago. Will you pass up one of the lanterns, sir?"

The second mate himself climbed up with the lantern. The dog growled threateningly as he dropped upon the deck, but Frank silenced it with a second piece of biscuit.

"Queer!" ruminated Briant, casting a quick, critical glance fore and aft. "There's nothing wrong with the craft that I can see, and yet her hands seem to have deserted her!"

Frank observed a beaten track of the dog's footprints along the snowy deck. It ended at the foot of the poop ladder. He strode in its direction, but the dog ran excitedly in advance of him, and turned, barking and snarling, to guard something that lay in the dark shadow. Briant advanced a few cautious steps, casting the level rays of his lantern along the snowy deck and upon the dog and the thing that it was guarding.

The lantern light shone upon the back of a man's white hand, in the fingers of which a revolver was gripped, and then upon the man's lifeless face and pointed red beard.

Frank Kershaw's eyes were fixed upon that livid dead face that was marked by an ominous bullet hole in the forehead. He drew back in horror and pointed at it.

"Look!" he cried, in a trembling voice. "It is Captain Teach!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE DERELICT.

“IT’S Captain Teach!” he repeated, in an awed voice that was hardly louder than a whisper. “And he’s dead—stone dead!” He went nearer to the ghastly thing that lay so ominously still and rigid on the snow-sprinkled deck, and stared at it fixedly, yet timidly, as though to make certain that there was no lingering life in it. Briant held the lantern aloft, and bent over to search the dead man’s features.

“Dead!” he echoed hollowly. “Ay, there’s not much doubt about that, my lad. That’s a pistol shot in his forehead, look you. I lay he never done it wilfully with his own hand, neither. There’ve been foul play.”

From the body he looked up at the poop rail. “By the way he’s lying, I’d say he was standing forward on the poop, there, when he was fired at by someone here on the maindeck. He must have fell over the rail just as we see him.”

A savage snarl from the retriever interrupted his conjectures.

Frank tried to allure the animal away with coaxing words; but it would not budge. Briant stepped back out of danger, and as he did so, trod upon something soft. He turned his lantern light to see what it was.

“Lor’ lumme!” he exclaimed. “Look at all the dead

rats lying round! The dog's worried 'em, I suppose." He glanced in the direction of the main shrouds. "Where's Dewar?" he inquired. "Why don't he come aboard?"

Frank scraped the snow aside with his foot, and disclosed a ruddy stain on the planks, trending towards the scuppers in a thin, dark line that was unmistakable.

"I wonder what they shot him for?" he questioned, still regarding the dead captain. "He must have been lying here in the same position for three days, at least. It was on Sunday night that the snow fell, you remember, sir; and there's a sprinkling of it on his coat, see! The blood on the deck must have been dry, or else frozen, before the snow covered it."

"That's certain," agreed Briant, drawing back yet farther from the snarling dog. He flashed his lantern light into the deeper shadows of the bulwarks, and crossed the deck into the darkness cast by the half-furled mainsail. "Seems to me there've been some sort of a free fight aboard her," he conjectured. "There's another body over there near the galley door, look you! Where can the ship's company have got to, I wonder? I'm fairly puzzled; never was more puzzled in my life."

Frank glanced searchingly fore and aft, trying to find some explanation of the mystery.

"It looks as if they had gone off in the boats, sir," he said. "The quarter davits are empty. "I don't see any boat aboard except the heavy lifeboat. Perhaps they were in too much of a hurry to launch it."

"They've certainly made haste," nodded Briant, "for one of 'em has dropped his hat here, and hasn't had

time to pick it up before getting into the boat." He kicked a hard felt hat aside, and it rolled down the slope of the deck to Frank Kershaw's feet. It was a bowler hat. A shaft of moonlight showed that it had a crimson silk lining, and that it was new. Frank thought it an usual sort of headgear for a seaman to wear. Something about the shape of the hat made him think of Martin Venner. He picked it up, and was about to examine it more closely, when a voice coming from behind startled him.

"Found anyone aboard, sir?"

It was old Dave Dewar, the carpenter of the *Mary Brown*, who hailed the second mate. He had climbed up from the boat, bringing with him the spare lantern, and now he strode aft to where Mr. Briant stood in amazed perplexity, looking down at the second body he had discovered.

"No," Briant answered, "I reckon the crew've all done a slope in the boats; unless some of 'em are skulking down below. There's been ructions. They've done for the skipper, anyhow, and this other chap that's lying abaft the deck-house."

The old carpenter, who was a Scotsman, and unwilling to take things for granted, swung his lantern in front of him, and went about the maindeck to investigate the condition of the ship on his own account. Briant and Frank Kershaw followed him closely, searching in every dark corner where a man might possibly hide. Presently they returned to the deck-house.

"Are ye sure that this one isna alive, Mr. Briant?" the carpenter inquired, going down on a knee and

taking hold of the shoulder of the man who lay with his legs inside the galley doorway, and his head across a bent arm. He gave the man a shake, vigorous enough to awaken him had he been merely asleep. But there was no responsive movement in the inert form. Dewar gently, but firmly, turned him over on his back and peered into his face, that had a fearful wound across it.

“Ay, I doubt he’ll no waken again,” he ruminated. “Poor chap, it’s this wound in his face that has done for him.”

“Looks like a foreigner with that there long yellow beard,” suggested Briant—“one of Crosby’s Dutchmen, I should say.”

“Ay, like enough,” agreed Dewar, “and a fine-looking man he is, too. Six feet in height if he’s an inch. And look at the shoulders of him, and the arms! He’d be the cook, I’m thinking.”

“More like a fo’c’stle hand,” remarked Kershaw, observing the dead sailor’s horny, work-worn fingers, discoloured with tar.

Dewar led the way along the waist to the forecastle. But a few yards beyond the fore hatchway he came to a sudden halt. An exclamation of horror and astonishment escaped him as a vast crowd of rats scampered athwart his path. He turned his lantern light to discover where they came from in their squeaking, scrambling procession.

“Save us all!” he cried. “D’ye see what they’ve been at, sir?”

A great grey rat, bolder than its fellows, remained behind. It was impudently gnawing at something

that gleamed white in the moonlight. Frank Kershaw saw that the thing was a man's leg and foot which protruded from under a stretch of tarpaulin.

Dewar dragged the tarpaulin aside, and revealed the unsightly corpses of three seamen.

"Somebody has been good enough to cover these," he remarked grimly. "But they'd hae been kinder to cast them into the sea."

"That's a job that we shall ourselves have to undertake," nodded Briant. "I wonder how many more there are. The whole ship's company seem to have been killing each other."

"It looks for all the world as if a crew of pirates had boarded the *Albatross*," suggested Frank; "only, of course, there aren't any pirates in these days."

The carpenter shook his head.

"A pirate would hae taken possession of the ship," said he, "or, at least, have broached the cargo. No; I'd say, myself, that it's a case of mutiny."

"Mutiny, and nothing more nor less," agreed Briant. "But whatever the meaning of it, here's the barque drifting, a helpless derelict, and we've found her and may do as we like with her. I'll go bail our old man will claim a tidy bit by way of salvage." He glanced over the side to where the *Mary Brown* stood by, with her head-sails aback and her green starboard light shining like an emerald against her black hull. "I reckon he'll be wondering what has become of us. We'd best get back and report. It's lucky we're only two days out from land. I expect he'll think it

worth while to put a scratch crew aboard to work her into the nearest port."

"Ay," said the carpenter. "That'll be Stornoway."

Briant supposed that there was no harbour more convenient than the great fishing station on the Lewis, unless, indeed, the skipper should prefer to make for Stromness, in the Orkneys.

The carpenter's mention of Stornoway reminded Frank Kershaw of Martin Venner's telegram, which had been despatched from that place, informing Adam Crosby that he was on board the *Albatross*. The telegram could hardly have been a hoax. Had Martin gone ashore at Stornoway? Or had he been on board the *Albatross*, in the midst of the grim tragedy which had been enacted on her decks?

While Frank was putting these questions to himself, Mr. Briant had gone to the side and hailed the men waiting in the boat.

"Lay aboard here, Gregson," he ordered, "and take charge of this here hooker while I go back to the ship."

Gregson quickly mounted by the chains, and swung himself on deck. He was a smart, able-bodied young fellow, who looked more like a man-o'-war's man than a merchant seaman.

"Strike me!" he exclaimed, staring at his three shipmates in surprise, "ain't there no 'ands aboard?"

"Only a snarling cur of a dog and a crew of dead men," returned Briant.

Gregson drew back. "What are they dead of—the plague?" he questioned. "Is it yaller Jack?"

“No, you needn’t be afraid of infection,” the mate assured him. “Dewar and Frank will stay along of you until we see what Cap’n Kershaw intends to do with the craft.” He turned towards the poop. “I wish we could get rid of that dog,” he added. “I ought to have a squint into the cabin before I go, and get hold of the ship’s papers.”

The retriever still kept stubbornly to its post over the dead body of Captain Teach, and would permit no one to go near to the short companion ladder that gave approach to the raised poop. While the three men engaged the animal’s attention, Frank, taking a lantern, climbed the starboard bulwark and made his way along it to the poop. He got over the rail and took a quick survey of the short deck as he strode across to the companion. The sliding doors on both sides were shut, and he could not open them. He went to the skylight, which was also closed. Sweeping the thin layer of snow from between the tarnished brass bars, he tried to look down into the cabin below; but the glass was too dim for the light to penetrate. As he moved away he heard, or fancied that he heard, a slight sound as of the scampering of rats across the table beneath. He listened for a repetition of the sound, but all was silent now, and he got up from his knees and went to the rail overlooking the deck.

“The cabin’s locked up, sir,” he told Briant, “but there doesn’t seem to be anyone in it. I think we might burst open the door with a belaying-pin.”

“Better wait until daylight,” nodded the second

mate. "If there's no one aboard needing help, we can't do any good."

He gave some instructions to Gregson and Dewar before going down into the boat, and presently the rowers were seen pulling in the direction of the *Mary Brown*. By this time a thick cloud had drifted over the moon, and all was black darkness upon the sea, saving only where the lights of Captain Kershaw's ship shone dimly through the gloom, and cast their green and yellow reflections on the waves.

Frank returned to the maindeck.

"Aren't we going to try to get into the cabin?" he asked of his two companions.

Neither answered. Dewar was endeavouring to throw an improvised lasso over the dog's head, and Gregson was examining a bowler hat he had picked up.

"Not 'alf a bad 'at, this," said he. "It's nearly noo. Wonder if it would fit my head?" He removed his own cap and put on the bowler in its place. "No," he went on, "it's miles too small. It's not a man's 'at at all. It must ha' belonged to some kid."

"Let's have a look at it." Frank Kershaw took the hat in his hand and held it in the lantern light. A suspicion as to its ownership flashed into his mind; a suspicion which was verified when he discovered the initials "M. V." roughly written in ink on its inner white leather band.

"Why, it's Martin Venner's hat!" he cried. "And it's true that Martin has been on board the *Albatross*—even if he's not now on board!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE FIGURE IN THE DARK.

YET how could Martin have got on board this ship? How was it possible?

The last that Frank Kershaw had seen of him was in the moment when, in the fog on the Mersey, the ferry-boat had heeled over in her collision with the anchored ship. Martin had been flung over into the outgoing tide, and was believed to have been drowned. Frank had seen him fall, but nothing more was known of him, and all hope of his ever reappearing had been abandoned, until many days after the accident, when the telegram from Stornoway had come to the office in Water Street, with its inexplicable message:

“I am on board the *Albatross*.”

The message was genuine. Of that there could now be *no faintest* doubt. But how could the perplexing mystery be explained—by what means or singular circumstance had Martin been rescued from his peril, and brought upon the deck of this particular ship? The *Albatross*, as Frank well knew, was supposed to have left the river at least a dozen hours previous to the happening of the accident to the ferry-boat, and to be out at sea, miles and miles away from the scene of the calamity. Was it possible that she had not gone out across the bar after all? Was it possible

that, having been warped out of the Salthouse Dock, and towed into midstream, she had, unknown to her owners, dropped anchor and remained there until the following morning, to be detained still further by the fog? If this was so, then it was conceivable that she had anchored so near to the track of the ferry steamers that her distance from the scene of the accident was not greater than Martin Venner could swim, with the help, perhaps, of a lifebuoy or a floating spar.

This was the only explanation at which Frank Kershaw could arrive. And believing, by the token of Martin's hat found on the barque's deck, that Martin had indeed been on board very recently, he began to question with himself what had happened to him. Had he gone off in one of the boats? And if so, what was the intended destination of his companions? The nearest land was many leagues away, and it was difficult to understand what motive had prompted the men to desert their ship, leaving their captain and at least four others of the crew lying dead upon her blood-stained decks.

That there had been a mutiny on board the *Albatross* it was plain to see. But who were the mutineers? And what was the cause of the mutiny?

"Blest if I can make head or tail of this 'ere business!" observed Gregson, as he turned away after watching the boat disappear in the darkness. "There've been a lot of fighting and bloodshed, and you may well say there've been a mutiny."

“Mutiny without a particle of doubt,” returned the carpenter.

“But,” objected Gregson, “so far as my learning goes, I’ve allus heard as when a mutiny takes place the mutineers, if they gets the upper ’and, take possession of the ship, and run ’er on their own account. That don’t seem to be the way of it ’ere, do it?”

Dewar tied a last knot in the lanyard by which he had succeeded in tethering the retriever to one of the timber heads.

“No,” he answered. “I allow they don’t seem to have gained much. But we haven’t been all over the ship yet. I shouldna wonder though the mutineers had locked themselves up in the cabin. Maybe they’ve drunk themselves into sleep. Have ye a mind to come below with me, Gregson, and get a look at them? We ought to be able to break in the door somehow.”

Gregson demurred.

“We ain’t armed,” he objected. “What if they was to be lying in wait, ready to shoot us down as soon as we got to the bottom of the companion stairs?”

Frank Kershaw stepped towards the dead captain, and removed the revolver from the clasp of his rigid right hand.

“Here you are, Dewar; here’s a weapon,” he announced, handing the cumbrous revolver to the carpenter. “I don’t know if it’s loaded, though.”

“It’s not of much use if it isna,” returned Dewar.

"Let's see." He examined the firearm by the light of one of the lanterns. "Ay," he nodded. "One chamber has been shot, but the other five seem to have good cartridges in them. And now, come away, my lads, and let us see if we can win into the cabin."

Gregson and Frank followed him as he cautiously mounted the poop ladder and stepped on to the higher deck. The spanker boom swayed over to leeward as they moved aft, and there was an ominous rumble aloft among the head-sails. The barque staggered as a wave broke against her quarter on the weather side.

"The wind's rising," said Gregson.

"Yes, and it's snowing a bit," added Frank Kershaw.

Gregson strode aft to the steering wheel and put his practised hands to the spokes. In a few moments he had veered her to the port tack, to which her yards were already braced. The sails filled and she gave a plunge forward, as a horse that had felt the unexpected stroke of the whip.

"Have a care, there!" shouted Dewar. "Stand by the *Mary Brown*, can't you? We don't want to lose sight o' her."

"All right. I'm keeping a eye on 'er," Gregson assured him, remaining at his self-appointed post at the wheel. "Frank!" he cried. "Lay aft 'ere and see if you can get us a light on this 'ere binnacle. Then we shall know what we're a-doing of."

Frank took his lantern and contrived to direct its rays into the compass box.

"'Ow's 'er 'ead?" questioned Gregson.

"Nor'-east by north," answered Frank.

"Right you are," returned Gregson. "I'll keep 'er at that. If you'll haul in this spanker sheet a bit. What's the old carpenter messin' round about the companion for? 'E'd better by far look to the workin' of the ship, and get the lamps lighted. I lay there won't be no more moon, not until this snow squall's over, and we don't want to get out of sight of the *Mary Brown*. Keep your eye on 'er, boy."

Frank shortened the spanker sheet and secured it, and then glanced over the stern to where the lights of his father's brig showed dimly through the darkened air.

"She's bearing down towards us," he said. "I think I hear someone hailing us. Oughtn't we to lie-to, Gregson?"

"No," the seaman decided. "She'll soon overhaul us. Better keep as we are now that we've got some headway on us. It's safer."

Frank supposed that Gregson knew better than himself, and he left him at the wheel, and strode forward to where the carpenter was endeavouring to force an entrance into the deck-house.

Dewar had thrust an arm through a porthole and had just succeeded in forcing back the bolt when the boy joined him.

"It was fastened on the inside, ye see," said the carpenter, "and that means that somebody has locked himself in—maybe with the rest of the mutineers."

He took the loaded revolver from the pocket of his pilot coat and then quietly pushed the sliding door along its runners.

"Take care, Mr. Dewar!" cautioned Frank. "They may be lying in wait."

Dewar swung his lantern at arm's length above his head, and held the revolver ready. He boldly entered the companion. Frank ventured after him, trembling with apprehension. They descended the stairs. At the foot of them there was a thwart-ship bulkhead that cut the poop in two. Here Dewar paused.

"Onybody below, here?" he called aloud, and listened for an answer. None came to him. He turned into the narrow passage leading forward, casting the light from side to side and searching in turn within the storeroom, the pantry, and a double cabin, which, he surmised, had been used by the second mate. The two bunks with which it was furnished were in disorder, and the coverlet of the lower one was cut, as with a knife, and stained with blood. Some papers scattered on the floor were similarly stained.

Dewar went farther within to open the locker that he saw in a corner of the little cabin. Frank Kershaw accompanied him and stooped to pick up one of the slips of paper, upon which there was some writing; but he discovered at once that the words were in a language that he did not understand, and he let it fall to his feet. He was about to go out again to continue the search when he started back in sudden affright. Beyond the door, in the dark passage,

he caught sight of a stealthily moving figure that seemed to rise from behind the companion stairs. An indistinct and ghostly looking figure it was; he had scarcely time to distinguish its shape, but was only aware that it was human.

“Dewar!” he cried chokingly—“Dewar!”

The carpenter turned quickly to see the shining barrel of a revolver levelled at him from the open doorway. Then, before either he or Frank could realise what was happening, the door was closed upon them, a bolt was shot, and they were prisoners.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE FACE ON THE PILLOW.

LEFT alone upon the deck, Gregson wrestled with the steering wheel. His hands were cold and his coat was wet with the snow that melted as it fell. The wind blew icy across the sea, whistling in the rigging and murmuring among the sails. Great waves thumped against the vessel's sides and broke in stinging spray across her decks. She leaned over in the stress, and plunged ahead like a startled horse.

The lamp which Frank Kershaw had fixed on the binnacle shed but an imperfect light upon the compass, and Gregson could only guess what course he was keeping, and trust that while he held on he was safe at least from disaster; safe to be closely followed by the *Mary Brown*. It was nothing more than an ordinary winter squall that was blowing, and he would have thought nothing of it if he had not been alone upon the deck with no one to trim the sails or to share his responsibility. But presently the wind increased in force, and the snow began to fall more thickly, enclosing the ship as with a curtain.

"Blame them two skulkers!" he cried. "What in thunder are they up to so long? Why don't they come and give a chap a 'elping 'and?" He cast a rapid glance over his shoulder to see if he could make out

any sign of the *Mary Brown*. For many minutes past he had lost sight of her lights, and he failed now to discover them in the black darkness of the sea and sky.

“A nice kettle of fish, this, I’ve tumbled into, and no error!” he complained to himself. “What the old man was thinking of a-meddling with a derelict, it’s more’n I can make out. ’E’d better by far ’ave left ’er alone, or else waited till daylight. Lumme! I can’t keep this up much longer! It’s more’n I bargained for by a long sight.”

He pressed all his weight and strength against the wheel as a gust of wind caught the ship and she swayed over to leeward.

“Dewar!” he called aloud. “Where are you? Dewar—Frank, d’ye hear? Lay aft, ’ere!”

There was a dull report of a distant gunshot. For a moment he supposed that it was the foretopsail breaking away. He looked anxiously aloft, thankful that the sails had been close reefed before he came aboard. Suddenly the sails and rigging and spars became more clearly visible in a flickering gleam of reflected light. With his strong hands still gripping the spokes of the wheel, he turned half-round and faced the weather. Far to the windward he saw the trail of a rocket arched across the sky, and a succession of blue balls of fire slowly descending.

“Ah!” he cried. “I made sure they’d show a flare, sooner or later. That signal’s got to be answered.”

In his desperation he abandoned the wheel, regard-

less of the consequences. The ship at once fell off, and there was a noise as of rattling of volleys of musketry among her head-sails. She staggered and trembled, and began to pitch helplessly.

He caught at the lantern and wrenched it away from the binnacle, and ran with it towards the lee shrouds, intending to climb up and display its light from the mizzen crosstrees. As he passed by the companion he faintly heard his name called from down below, "Gregson! Help! Help!"

It was Frank Kershaw's voice that called impatiently, and it was accompanied by the sound of violent kicking against a bulkhead or a door.

Gregson halted. He saw that the door of the companion was open, and he approached it. He held the light in front of him, and stepped timidly, hesitatingly, within. At the top of the stairway his foot struck against something soft. He stumbled over it, and would have fallen headlong down the well if he had not caught with his free arm at the rail. Recovering himself, he drew back and gazed searchingly upon the floor. The thing over which he had stumbled resolved itself into the indistinct form of a man, who crouched there as if about to spring upon him. He saw a revolver pointed at him, held by a shaking, black hand. Behind the hand a pair of bleared eyes glared at him, threateningly, from a black face.

Uttering an exclamation, Gregson darted forward and seized the negro's wrist with such a grip that the fingers loosened their nervous hold of the revolver,

which fell beyond the door and went skating down the incline of the deck. "Where might *you* have sprung from, I'd like to know?"

The negro collapsed in a heap in the corner by the flag locker, and lay there shivering and speechless, his teeth chattering, his trembling hands thrust out to ward off an expected blow.

Gregson bent over him, flashing the light upon him.

"Ain't you got no tongue in your 'ead?" he demanded to know, propping the lantern against the rail. "What have you been and done with the crew of this 'ere ship?" He prodded the black bundle of humanity with the toe of one of his wet sea-boots. "Ger up, you blistering son of a gun!" he cried, "and tell us what you've been up to. Is it mutiny—mutiny and murder? I lay it looks like it, anyhow. Where's my two pals that went below, a bit ago? Where are they? What 'ave you done with 'em?"

The negro, hearing the strange voice, struggled to his knees and stared at Gregson in blank amazement. Presently, a look of intelligence came into his face. He caught at the hem of the seaman's dripping coat.

"I gone done no harm," he pleaded tearfully. "You no kill dem pore nigger, eh?"

The ship gave a heavy lurch, her loose sails and swaying spars renewed their clamour. A great sea crashed against the side, and broke in a sheet of foam across the deck. Gregson looked over his shoulder fearfully, and moved to go back to the wheel. Then he hesitated and grabbed at the negro's extended arm.

“Lay out on deck, 'ere, and lend a 'and at the wheel!” he commanded. And he dragged the man to his feet by main force, and pushed him out in front of him along the lee side of the poop. “Take a 'old of the spokes, now,” he ordered, “and be ready to 'aul over when I gives you the word.” He planted the negro at the lee grating, while he himself stood at the weather side of the wheel! He gripped the oscillating spokes and waited for his chance when the vessel should bear round under stress of the next blast of wind, then—“Over with 'er!” he shouted.

After repeated efforts, and with the help of the negro, he at length succeeded in steadying the barque with the wind on her quarter.

“Now keep 'er at that,” he ordered, “while I show a flare to that there brig that fired off the rockets a bit ago.”

He was leaving the wheel when the negro cried excitedly—

“You no go! Me no sailorman, me cook; no sabey them sailor work!”

“What!” exclaimed Gregson contemptuously, staring at the cook through the darkness. “You dunno 'ow to steer? What's the good of you? Go and fetch my two pals up on deck, then, if you know where they are; and look smart about it, d'ye 'ear?”

The shivering cook shambled along the deck to the companion, but before entering, he searched about for his revolver, which he found in a pool of sea-water. Taking possession of it, he caught up Gregson's lantern, and went slowly and wonderingly down the stairs.

He turned the handle of a door and entered a large cabin, stepping very cautiously across something that lay upon the floor, covered with a blanket. He placed the lamp on the middle of the table, and with his hand still resting upon it, stood listening. The sound of heavy breathing came to him, followed by an uneasy cough. He caught at the handrail to steady himself as the ship heaved, and by its aid made his way to the door of the captain's stateroom, opened it, and went within. He drew aside the curtain of a bunk, and put his black hand upon the white coverlet.

"That you, Nep?" came a feeble, boyish voice from the pillow. "I've been asleep, have I? I feel a bit better. Who's that at the wheel? 'Tisn't the mate, is it?"

The black cook shook his head.

"The mate him dead," he answered.

"Dead!" A dirty, work-worn hand gripped the edge of the bunk. "Then our last hope's gone!" There was a pause, then the young voice continued nervously, "Listen, Nep! Listen! There's someone at the wheel. Who is it? Have Rossi and his gang come back?"

"No." The negro spoke in a tone of relief. "Them no come back. Them other sailormen come aboard, all same them drop from sky. Me no see ship; no see boat; no sabey where them come from."

The boy on the bed moved painfully.

"That's queer," he murmured. "I don't understand. Some men have boarded us, you say—strangers? and you don't know where they came from? But they

must have come in a boat, somehow, from off some ship. Was there no ship in sight when you went on deck to fetch the pannikin of water for the mate?"

"No," the negro answered. "Me see no ship for true."

"You ought to have gone up when the dog was barking," the boy complained. "He doesn't bark like that at the rats. There must have been something else—some ship in sight—for it to kick up the row it did. What are the men like? Have you seen any of 'em? Are they British?"

The cook nodded. "Yes, them British, for true."

"That's a good job. They won't do us any harm in that case. How many are there of them?"

The negro answered that there were three, and explained that it was one of them who was at the steering wheel.

"I should have thought that there was a whole ship's company by the noise they're making," the boy remarked weakly, as the sound of hammering and shouting reached him. "What are they singing out for help for? Are we sinking?"

Frank Kershaw's renewed cries from the forward cabin, and Dewar's kicking at the door, reminded the cook of the errand on which Gregson had sent him. He dropped the corner of the bed-curtain, and, taking the lantern, stole out into the passage-way to the door of the second mate's room.

Dewar and Frank heard him cautiously turning the lock, and they charged the door, violently flinging it

open, and sending the negro flying against the stairs. They ran past him, and, without waiting to explore further, fled up the companion to the poop-deck.

Gregson greeted them with a volley of fore-castle growls for their neglect of him.

"The *Mary Brown's* been signalling of us," he told them, "and we've got to answer 'er if we don't want to be lost. See if you can lay your 'ands on something to burn as a flare and let 'em know our bearings. She's miles to windward of us, and we can't go over on the other tack and foller 'er. We've not got 'ands enough to do the work. That nigger ain't no good. Where is he? 'E'd a light in the cabin a bit ago. I seen it shining through the skylight."

"Nigger!" echoed the carpenter. "Was it him that locked us in the cabin?"

"Like enough," returned Gregson. "I reckon he thought you was the mutineers come back to finish their work. I sent 'im below to fetch you."

The wind was blowing less fiercely now, and more steadily. The snow was falling in heavy, feathery flakes, making the decks sloppy. Dewar and Kershaw went forward together, and into the galley. There they found a jar full of fat, which they emptied into a frying-pan. To this they added a quantity of dry oakum and some paraffin oil, and they set a light to it, holding it in an exposed position forward of the mainmast, so that the leaping flames and their reflection on the sails might perchance be seen from the *Mary Brown*.

They were thus occupied when the cook appeared upon the poop, carrying a sou'-wester and oilskins and a pair of high sea-boots. He himself was protected from the weather by a blanket which he wore as a cloak over his ordinary clothes.

"Cap'n Teach, him no fit to wear dem again; him dead," he said, throwing the things down on the grating at Gregson's feet. "Me hold them wheel, you put 'em on one time."

Gregson nodded his thanks, and relinquished the wheel while he donned the oilskins, carefully surveying the surrounding sea meantime in search of an answering signal from the *Mary Brown*.

"I doubt the air's o'er thick with snow for them to see anything," remarked the carpenter, coming aft, and noticing that the negro was now at the wheel. "We're sure to be get picked up in the morning, though. It wants but another couple of hours until daylight."

"It'll be a bad job for the lot of us if we don't get picked up," returned Gregson, again taking the wheel and springing his luff. "I've not the ghost of a notion where we are, except that we're in the nor'-west Atlantic. 'Ow's 'er 'ead, Dave? 'Ave a squint at the compass."

The carpenter managed to strike a match, which he shielded under his opened coat, and held in front of the binnacle.

"East nor'-east," he reported, "and that's just directly opposite from the course the *Mary Brown* was making."

“That can’t be ’elped,” said Gregson. “We should be sure to ’ave a accident if we was to try to go about. We can only keep on the same tack and trust to luck. She’d be easier if we was to furl that mainroyal, though. I’ll go aloft and see to it if you’ll take the wheel for a bit. And cookie,” he added, turning to the negro who stood shivering in the shelter of the carpenter’s ample person, “you can lay along and get us something hot to eat. Light the galley fire, and fry us a few rashers of bacon, and make a pot of coffee.”

Gregson had taken upon himself the duties of master, notwithstanding that Dewar was old enough to be his father. But although assuming the command, he was conscious that, as the only able seaman on board, he would also have to undertake most of the work among the sails.

While Gregson was aloft, Frank Kershaw made himself useful by lighting the binnacle lamps, and hanging out the side lights. Glancing in at the companion, where one of the lanterns still glimmered, he saw by the timepiece above the stairs that it was four o’clock, and he went forward and struck eight bells, wondering, as he did so, how long the periodical ringing of that bell had been neglected.

As he passed the galley, he discovered the cook in the act of removing from the doorway the body of a dead man that lay there. The negro looked up from his gruesome work.

“Who killed him?” questioned Frank, with a

shudder, as he caught sight of the dead seaman's bearded face with a fearful wound across it.

The negro answered him quietly, "*Me* kill him."

Frank drew back. "*You* killed him!" he exclaimed, in horror. "What for?"

The cook stood up to his full height, which was little short of six feet. He pointed one of his black fingers downward at the snow-sprinkled body.

"Him berra bad man," he said. "Him stand jus' here, him shoot Cap'n Teach dead. Me kill him one time."

"What was it all about? Tell me," urged Frank.

The negro retreated into the galley out of the driving snow.

"Ah, me no can tell," he answered evasively. "Me no can think. Them sailorman make war palaver. Me no sabey what them say. Them no speak English all same me and you."

"Oh," reflected Frank, "it was the foreigners who were at the bottom of it, was it? What has become of the mates? They were British. And the boy that was aboard, too, where's he?"

"Them mate!" echoed the cook, warming his shrivelled hands over the kindling fire. "Him in cabin. You go down there, you see him; them boy, too."

The boy, too! Was Martin Venner on board, then? Frank Kershaw caught his breath. Why had he not gone into the cabin before? Bending before the swirling snow, he ran aft along the deck, mounted the ladder to the poop and crossed to the companion, where he snatched up the lighted lantern and went downstairs.

He pushed open the door and entered the cabin. The table was covered with a white cloth, upon which were the remains of a meal; the floor was littered with papers, books, nautical instruments, and the contents of drawers and lockers, which had been roughly opened and rifled. In the midst of this confusion there was a sofa cushion, and upon it there lay the figure of a man, partly covered with a blanket. At first sight of him, Frank thought that he was alive and awake, for his eyes were open wide.

“Are you the mate, sir?” he questioned. But the mate did not answer, nor did his glassy, staring eyes show any sign of life. Frank reverently took off his wet cap and went farther into the room, searching for his long-lost comrade.

“Mart!” he called aloud. “Martin, are you here?”

He had paused beside the half-open door of one of the staterooms. From within there came the sound of heavy breathing, and a faintly spoken “Who’s that calling Martin?”

It was a boyish voice, and Kershaw’s heart beat quicker at hearing it. Had he found his old school-fellow at last?

“Mart!” he exclaimed, catching eagerly at the curtain, from behind which the voice had reached him. He drew the curtain aside, held up the lantern and illumined the pale face on the pillow. But immediately he stepped back with a cry of disappointment. For it was not the face of Martin Venner.

CHAPTER IX.

WHAT WAS FOUND IN THE FORECASTLE.

THE boy in the bunk raised himself on his elbow and threw back the blankets that covered the working clothes in which he had slept. He was hardly more than thirteen years of age, but his tangled fair hair, and the expression of pain and hunger on his face, made him look older. He sat up and stared inquiringly at Frank for many silent seconds. Then he slowly put forth his hand and pointed at his visitor.

"I've seen you before," he muttered vaguely. "You belong to Liverpool. Your name's Kershaw, isn't it?"

Frank regarded him with slowly awakening recognition.

"Yes," he nodded. "And your name is Joe Parry. You used to be an office boy in Fenwick Street."

Joe Parry turned over and slipped down from his bunk with an alertness that was surprising in an invalid. But when he stood up in his stocking feet, he tottered, and was obliged to hold on by the bulkhead to support himself, and his face went a trifle paler. His unbuttoned vest disclosed his coarse, yellow flannel shirt, which bore a large stain of congealed blood upon the breast.

"You ought not to get out of bed," Frank warned him, believing him to be very ill. "You're badly hurt."

"I know," returned Joe. "It was a shot from Rossi's revolver when he was firing at the mate. I'm weak, and I've got an awful pain in my inside; but I can't stay here any longer. It's my watch on deck, do you see. I heard eight bells go, ever so long since. Besides," he added confusedly, "I've no right to be here in the captain's berth." He sank upon the flap seat and tried to reach his sea-boots from the floor. "I wish Billy Neptune would come and help me on with my boots," he faltered, sitting back, exhausted.

"Let me do it for you," Frank offered, going down on his knees. "And tell me—where is Martin Venner? Do you know?"

"Martin!" repeated Joe. "Do you mean him that came aboard of us as a stowaway, and never showed up until we were out at sea? He went off in one of the boats along with Rossi and the rest of them. They forced him to go with them. Goodness knows where they are now. We've been alone three days, the cook and me, and neither of us has been on deck except once, when Billy went up to get some water. The mate was left on board, too; but he died last night. That's him lying on the cabin floor."

Frank tied the laces of Joe's boots and stood up.

"Was Rossi the ringleader of the mutiny?" he questioned.

WHAT WAS FOUND IN THE FORECASTLE 77

"Mutiny, do you call it?" said Joe. "Well, I don't know whether that's the right name for it, but it was awful while it lasted. Yes, Rossi was at the head of it—Rossi and the other chap. Could you give me my overcoat, please?"

Frank helped him on with his overcoat, but assured him at the same time that there was no need for him to go on deck.

"I want to see your shipmates," Joe told him. "I'm in charge of the barque, you see, now that all the crew except Billy have gone, or been murdered. And I must make sure that everything's all right. I feel a bit better now, too."

Frank followed him through the alley-way, and helped him to unbolt the door leading out on to the upper deck.

They went aside to look at the dead body of Captain Teach, and were staring at it timidly by the lantern light, when Gregson jumped down from the main shrouds.

"Hello, young nipper!" he exclaimed, at the sight of Joe. "Where might you 'ave sprung from?"

"Found him down in the captain's cabin, sir," explained Frank, speaking as if he already recognised Gregson as the skipper.

"That ain't no proper place for a ship's boy," growled Gregson. "Take 'im for'ard to the fo'c'stle, and I'll 'ave a yarn with 'im in the morning. You'd best turn in, both of you, and be ready to take a spell on deck at daylight."

The dog yapped excitedly, as the two boys went by it. Joe turned aside and spoke to the animal.

"Come on, Brian, old boy," he said. "Come along to your kennel." And, seeing that it was tied up, he unfastened the rope. The dog pranced about him in the snow, and would have knocked him down in its joy if Frank had not caught his arm and supported him.

With difficulty, the two boys made their way along the slippery deck that heaved lazily with the motion of the ship. The dog ran in front of them, sniffing about eagerly, and uttering a low growl when it came to the tarpaulin under which the three dead seamen lay.

Joe Parry, in spite of his bodily weakness, could not pass these three corpses without halting to look at them. At his bidding, Frank pulled aside the heavy covering and held the light aloft.

"That's Tom Lewin," whispered Joe, pointing to the first one. "He was third mate. The one in the middle is Bob Melling, an A.B. that signed on in place of one of the foreigners that stopped ashore ill. The third one's Alf Daunton. It was him that discovered Rossi's plot, and was stabbed in the back by Jacob Hansen, as he came out of the cuddy. They were all good seamen, and all British."

Joe staggered, overcome by the ghastly sight of his dead shipmates. Frank caught him in his arms, and led him to the forecabin. Frank was trembling from head to foot, as he approached the door;

trembling with the cold, but also with nervousness, born of horror and dread, and fearful apprehension. The wind whistled weirdly in the rigging, driving the snow into deep wreaths against the lee bulwarks. The swaying yards and the straining cordage made hideous noises aloft, and the high waves struck the ship with blows that echoed through her fabric, breaking in hissing spray that mingled with the snow. His surroundings were enough to make a strong man quail, and Frank Kershaw was only a very ordinary boy, with no pretensions to be brave or stout of heart, and it was no wonder that he trembled.

The lantern light flickered fitfully as he pushed open the door. He stepped over the threshold. From the darkness far within there came to him a low, long-drawn moan that was awful to hear.

"What's that?" he cried, drawing back and gripping Joe Parry's arm. "Listen! Do you hear it?"

The moan died away into a sound that was like a stifled sob.

"It's only the wind in the hawse-pipe," Joe assured him. "Go on a couple of steps, and then turn to your right."

Frank advanced slowly, swinging the lantern low, so that its rays shone along the floor. Something glistened in his path a few yards away from him. It was as though a second lantern were burning there, flickering dimly on the floor. He drew back.

"There's someone here!" he muttered fearfully. "It's not Gregson; it's not Dewar, nor the black cook!"

"But there's nobody else on board," returned Joe.

"Listen! Listen!" whispered Frank, and his right hand shook so violently that the loose glass in the lantern could be heard rattling against its frame. "Listen!" he said again.

The moaning sound was repeated, growing from a subdued sigh, fuller and more distinct, until it became a thrilling, despairing cry of human suffering.

Joe Parry, now as seriously alarmed as his companion, leaned against the bulkhead, shivering. His teeth chattered, his quick, uneven breath showed like puffs of smoke in the lantern light.

Frank dared to go forward a step, bending over to look at the thing that was shining on the floor. He saw that it was a tumbler of clean water, with a film of ice at the rim. His eyes travelled beyond it, and discerned what looked like a human body, bound round with ropes, the arms pressed close to the sides. He turned the light fuller upon it—upon a boy's haggard face that was white as the snow outside. He started back. The lantern fell from his hand. There was a clatter of breaking glass. Then all was black darkness.

"Heavens!" he cried aloud. "It's Martin Venner!"

CHAPTER X.

A CRY FROM THE UPPER DECK.

“IT'S Martin Venner!” he repeated, in an awed and trembling whisper. He staggered back to the doorway quickly, as if the sight that he had seen had brought to a climax the fear that had been steadily growing within him since the moment of his setting foot upon this ship, with all its sinister signs and unexplained tragedy. “Stay where you are, Parry!” he stammered. “Stay till I go aft and fetch another light!” And then he stole out.

Joe Parry listened to his retreating footsteps that sounded dully along the snowy deck, scarcely audible amid the souging of the wind and the ceaseless complaint of ill-set sails and loosely secured spars. He waited shivering in the deep darkness, listening intently for some sound which might tell him that Martin Venner was still alive. But all was silent, ominously silent now, within the fore-castle. He moved forward a few strides, with his back against the bulkhead, feeling his way nervously. Then he went down upon his knees, and crept cautiously towards the spot where, for a brief moment, he had caught sight of Martin Venner's deathlike face.

His fingers touched a coarse cloth garment—the sleeve of a coat—and he felt along it until he caught

at a cold, thin hand. It sent a shudder through him, and he drew back, shaking violently from head to foot.

At the doorway the snow swept in with a chilling blast. He was about to make a dart along the narrow passage, to escape from this gloomy place, that separated him from his living companions by the whole length of the ship, when he observed a light shining along the deck and travelling towards him, and presently he heard Frank Kershaw's voice.

"He's the son of one of the owners," Frank said. "We heard him groaning and saw his white face. I believe he's still alive."

"But what's 'e doing all alone there in the fo'c'stle when 'e might 'a been aft in the cabin along of the other boy?" questioned Gregson.

"He's tied up with ropes," returned Frank. "I believe the mutineers have left him there to starve to death. And they put a glass of water just beyond his reach, so that he could see it, but not get a drink from it."

Gregson quickened his stride, and boldly entered the forecastle, directing the lantern beams into the darkness, as Kershaw had done, until they rested upon the motionless figure lying at length upon the bare boards of the deck.

"Dash me!" he cried, going down on his knees. "There've been some foul work done aboard this ship, and no mistake. Lay hold of the lantern, boy, while I untie these 'ere ropes. *Lumme!* It's no wonder the kid couldn't get up and go aft to the cabin. The man as tied these knots didn't intend 'em to

be unfastened in a 'urry!" He unbuttoned his oilskin coat and took out his knife, and cut the strands. In silence he thrust his hand under the breast of the boy's jacket. He glanced across at Kershaw, who was also kneeling.

"I reckon we're too late," he said gravely. "I can't feel 'is 'eart beating, and 'e's as cold as ice. We 'adn't ought to give 'im up yet, though; not without 'aving a good try to bring 'im to. Lend me a 'and 'ere, Kershaw, and let's carry 'im along to the cabin and give 'im something 'ot to drink."

With Frank's assistance he heaved the unconscious boy upon his shoulder, and carried him out through the driving snow. Joe Parry and Kershaw went in advance, lighting the way to the after cabin. There they found Billy Neptune, the black cook, awkwardly opening a tin of condensed milk. On the table there was a mighty pot of hot coffee, and near it a covered dish of fried bacon, which Billy had prepared for Gregson's breakfast.

Gregson seemed not to notice the fragrant food as he glanced round the cabin in search of a couch upon which to deposit his burden; but he did not fail to observe the body of the dead mate of the *Albatross* lying athwart the floor.

"We shall 'ave to get the carpenter to read the Burial Service in the morning," he grimly remarked, as he gently lowered Martin Venner from his shoulder, and at once proceeded to undress him. "Pass me a cup of that coffee, and let's see if we

can get 'im to drink some of it. And, Darkie, whatever your name is," he added, addressing the negro cook, "fetch us a basin of 'ot water, and look smart about it. I dunno much about this sort o' business," he said to Frank, "but I reckon the first thing to do is to make 'im warm, eh?"

"Yes," Kershaw agreed; "if you can make him breathe at the same time. What about his heart? Can you feel it beating?"

Gregson shook his head gravely.

"I can't 'ardly feel anything at all with my fingers like icicles," he answered.

Frank went nearer and put his ear to Martin's bared chest.

"There's a sort of fluttering inside him, but he's awfully cold," he announced, putting his arm under his companion and gently raising him. "Try to pour some of the coffee between his lips while I hold him up."

The negro approached them with a cup of the coffee, into which he had stirred a spoonful of condensed milk. He stared in astonishment at the unconscious boy on the couch.

"Him no dead," he declared; "me sabey berrah well him no dead. Where you gone find him?" he questioned Joe Parry. "How him no go in boat, all same them men what go?"

Joe Parry pushed him aside.

"Go and fetch the kettle of hot water," he ordered. "Never mind where we found him."

With almost womanly tenderness and patience

Gregson applied such simple remedies as his limited knowledge suggested. He could force only a few drops of the coffee between Martin Venner's pale lips, but he had seen men who had been rescued from drowning brought to life by means of artificial restoratives, and he believed that the same means might act with the desired result in the present case. He applied pressure to Martin's ribs, and worked at the boy's arms to promote breathing; put bottles of hot water to his feet and under his armpits, and then again tried to make him drink some of the warm coffee. It was a long time before he saw any change, but at last there came a faint flush into the haggard cheeks; the nostrils quivered, there was an almost inaudible sigh.

"Them boy him no dead!" cried Billy Neptune, leaning over Gregson's shoulder. "You give him drink one time, you see for true him no dead."

Kershaw held the coffee-cup to Martin's lips, tilted it, and saw a slight movement in the boy's neck, which told him that the warm liquid was being gratefully swallowed. Then Martin Venner slowly opened his eyes and stared about the dimly lighted cabin blankly, as if everything were strange to him.

Gregson looked up at the skylight, through which the steel-grey glow of dawn was creeping. He took the filled cup which Billy Neptune pushed towards him, drank it empty, snatched up a ship's biscuit, and silently quitted the cabin.

When he reached the deck the dawn light was

spreading across the sea, the snow had ceased to fall, and the wind had quieted down to a fresh, cold breeze.

"D'ye make out any sign of the *Mary Brown*, Dave?" he asked of the carpenter, who stood at the wheel, with the frozen snow caked into ice on the weather side of his grizzly head.

"Never a sign," answered Dewar; "but we might get a sight o' her if one of us were to go aloft presently, when the light's a wee bit stronger."

Gregson nodded.

"Slip below into the cabin and get something to eat," he said. "I'll take the wheel. And send young Kershaw up with a spyglass, if 'e can lay 'is 'and on one."

Frank Kershaw was quickly on deck, and, in obedience of Gregson's order, he climbed the lee ratlines up to the maintopmast crosstree. From that position of vantage he scanned the watery plain in eager search of the *Mary Brown*. But the light was yet too feeble to enable him to discern any break upon the vast stretch of leaden-grey sea. He waited, clinging with an arm about the mast, that swayed lazily to and fro with the motion of the ship; waited aloft in the icy wind until the veil of the passing night grew fainter and fainter, and the light of the new dawn touched the restless waves with silvery gleams. Then again he searched the desolate expanse, first with his own clear vision, and again with the aid of the captain's binoculars. But no solitary speck could he discover, which might even for an instant be mistaken for the form of a

ship. The *Mary Brown* had disappeared as completely as if she had been engulfed by the hungry sea. He believed that she had been following all night in the wake of the *Albatross*, but he realised also that Gregson had held on, steadily sailing before the wind in an undeviating course, and that, since she had displayed no lights, she could not possibly have been seen and followed through the snow-thickened darkness. He knew for a certainty that his father would not desert him, and yet—where was the *Mary Brown*?

Gradually the eastern sky took on a deeper rosy flush, and by the fuller light that crept across the wave-swept sea he searched yet more eagerly. To the west and south a steel-grey curtain of mist still obscured the distant line of the horizon. Perhaps the vessel he sought was hidden in that gloom, but he could make out no slightest sign of her. In the northern sky a range of mountainous snow clouds reared their flossy summits, tinged with pink.

He descended a few rungs of the rigging to command an uninterrupted view of the sea under the foot of the foretopsail. As the ship rose upon the ocean swell he caught a glimpse of the sea beyond her bowsprit; then, as she plunged into the next furrow, the sail again intervened. When she reared once more he descried in the far north-east what at first looked like a rift in the clouds showing the brighter sky beyond. He fixed his gaze upon it through the glasses, and it assumed the

shape of a ship in full sail, with her spreading white canvas rising high above her unseen hull. Could it be the *Mary Brown*? He could not distinguish the separate sails. The whole mass was one unbroken triangle of pure whiteness, rising out of the sullen sea, its broad base tapering to a tall pinnacle. It was too high, too large to be a ship. No; it was not a ship. He thought that it might be an iceberg, drifting downward with the current from the frozen north. Yet he was not sure.

He decided to go down from his perch and climb the foremast, whence he could get a clearer lookout.

Slowly he descended the rigging, which was caked with frozen snow. He paused when he reached the maintop, and stood upon its platform blowing his stiff, cold fingers. As he turned to get his foot upon the lower rigging, he glanced down to the forward deck. It was carpeted with snow, but the whiteness was now sprinkled over with innumerable moving black objects, that scrambled as in a panic towards the scuppers. Frank had never in his life seen so many rats. And they all seemed to be swarming out of a gap in the hatchway, as if some danger were behind them, chasing them from their security in the hold.

While he watched them he was startled and thrilled by a cry from the upper deck—a cry of alarm that was unmistakable.

“Gregson! Gregson! She’s sprung a leak! We’re sinking fast!”

CHAPTER XI.

MR. ADAM CROSBY IN A TIGHT CORNER.

“COME in!”

The office-boy — Frank Kershaw’s successor in the Water Street offices—pushed open the door, and, still holding the handle, announced—

“A person of the name of Hislop wishes to see you, sir.”

Mr. Adam Crosby balanced his half-smoked cigar on the edge of the mantelpiece, near which he was sitting in his easy-chair, with his little legs stretched out in front of him, his feet on the fender. He swung round and stared at the boy through his gold-rimmed eyeglasses.

“Hislop?” he repeated questioningly. “I don’t know the name. What’s his business?”

The office-boy shook his head.

“He won’t say, sir. He says it’s very important, and that he must see you personally.”

Adam Crosby stood up, and took his cigar from the mantelpiece, and puffed at it slowly, meditatively.

“Well,” he nodded, “show him in.”

He crossed to his writing-table, and caught up a pen. Whoever his visitor might be, and whatever the reason of his visit, it was expedient that he

should be impressed by an appearance of busy pre-occupation on the part of the head of the firm.

It happened that Adam Crosby was not at all busy that afternoon. The affairs of Crosby, Venner, & Co. had indeed become unusually depressed during the past few weeks, and the depression, it must be owned, was not so directly due to the "bad times," of which so many commercial people grumbled, as to the circumstance that for some unaccountable cause the trade which had formerly flowed with unbroken regularity through this old-established shipping office had of late been deflected in its course, to the benefit of younger and more alert competitors.

Mr. Crosby himself could not explain why his business was going away from him, or why his old customers neglected to renew their contracts. But people outside, and particularly those who had had direct dealings with the firm, could account for the change in its fortunes by the fact that Mr. Royden Venner was no longer in the office to preserve its commercial integrity. They had taken pleasure in doing business with the house when Royden Venner was there to arrange the terms of charters with his straightforward honesty. But they regarded his senior partner as a grasping trickster, and some even went so far as to call him a systematic swindler. They remembered the case of the *Queen of the Seas*. It was an open secret that the foundering of that ship had been due to barratry, instigated by Adam Crosby, who had pocketed the profits of her insurance,

and they were not yet sure in their minds that the fraud had not been repeated in the case of the long overdue *Albatross*. While they doubted Adam Crosby's commercial honour, it was natural that they should prefer to deal with agents whose honour was above question.

When the person of the name of Hislop was announced, Mr. Crosby was sufficiently sanguine to hope that his important business was connected with some new and possibly profitable commission, and he made a pretence of being deeply occupied with the papers on his writing-table. He would willingly have done away with the tobacco smoke which flavoured the atmosphere of his private room, but as that was not possible, he continued to smoke his cigar, expecting that his visitor would rightly understand that he had recently had lunch. After all, it was an exceedingly good cigar, and its fragrance could not fail to be agreeable to the most scrupulous of business men.

"Show him in," he ordered, dipping his pen in the inkpot, and bending his grey head intently over a bundle of papers, which he diligently fingered, as if in search of some particularly important document.

He was thus engaged when the door opened and someone entered. He glanced up over his gold-rimmed eyeglasses, and suddenly dropped his pen. It was a decidedly shabby-looking individual who confronted him; a young man barely more than twenty years of age. It was difficult at first sight to tell

whether he was a landsman or a seafarer. Perhaps it would have been safe to assume that he was both, for while his clothing was that of an artisan—a rough tweed suit very much the worse for wear—yet there was something about the look of his eyes and his ruddy complexion, as well as about his way of standing, which justified Mr. Crosby's impression that he was a sailor.

“Well—er—Mr. Hislop? That is your name, I think?” said the elderly shipowner. “What can I do for you? You sent in word that your business with me was very important. What is it?”

Hislop took a doubled-up newspaper out of his bowler hat.

“It's about that paragraph in the evening paper that I came to see you,” he began.

Adam Crosby leaned back in his chair and blew a long jet of tobacco smoke from his thin lips.

“Indeed!” he said, contemplating the burnt end of his cigar. “I have not looked at the paper this evening. To what paragraph do you refer?”

The young man glanced nervously behind him, as if to assure himself that the door was shut. He advanced towards the table, and put down his hat. Taking the folded newspaper in his left hand, he pointed with his right forefinger to a particular part of the sheet, and leaned over towards Mr. Crosby.

“That's the bit I mean,” he answered. “If you haven't seen it, perhaps you'd read it now, before we go any further.”

Adam Crosby took hold of the crumpled newspaper, and spread it out in front of him, keeping his eye upon the paragraph which the youth had indicated. He coughed uneasily, and a cloud crossed his sour, clean-shaven face as his eyes fell upon the name *Albatross* in the midst of the print. His claw-like fingers closed tightly upon the page as he read eagerly. And Hislop watched him closely while he read, noticing that his face grew paler and that he ceased to draw at his cigar, biting the end of it so hard that a tiny drop of the brown tobacco-juice stained his lower lip.

The paragraphs which he read were these :

“ A MARITIME MYSTERY.

“ MUTINY ON A LIVERPOOL SHIP.

“ The steamship *Dalmatian*, which arrived in the Mersey at an early hour this morning from St. John's, Newfoundland, reports a singular mystery of the sea. Some five days ago, while on her homeward voyage, the *Dalmatian* spoke the brig *Mary Brown*, of Liverpool, Captain J. Kershaw, outward bound for Halifax, N.S. Captain Kershaw stated that two days earlier, in long. 10° W., lat. 58° N., he sighted what appeared to be a derelict barque. Bearing down towards her, he ascertained that she was not under control, and he sent a boat in the charge of his second mate to investigate. It was then midnight, but there was moonlight. After some absence, the second mate, Briant, returned to the *Mary Brown*, and reported that the strange

barque was the *Albatross*, of Liverpool, which he knew to be overdue. When Briant was on board, the vessel was, to all appearance, seaworthy, but it was immediately evident that a terrible tragedy had been enacted on her decks, presumably as the result of a mutiny. He discovered no fewer than five dead bodies, all bearing unmistakable indications of violence. One of these bodies is believed to have been that of the master, Captain Simon Teach, in whose right hand there was a loaded revolver. All the others of her crew had abandoned her, as was inferred from the fact that her boats were gone.

“Briant left three of the *Mary Brown's* hands on board, namely, David Dewar, the carpenter, Thomas Gregson, A.B., and Frank Kershaw, the captain's son, to take charge of the derelict until Captain Kershaw should send a scratch crew on board to navigate her into the nearest port. He did not consider that there was any risk in doing this, but he had hardly got back to the *Mary Brown* when a heavy snow squall came on, and the two vessels were separated. The *Albatross* carried no lights, and in the dense darkness she could not be seen or followed. Rockets were sent up to attract the attention of the three hands on board of her, but the signals were not answered, and when daylight returned the vessel was nowhere to be seen. It is believed by Captain Kershaw, that although his second mate observed nothing wrong with her, yet the *Albatross* must already have been in a sinking condition when her crew deserted her, and that she must have foundered during the squall. He searched for her throughout the whole of the following day, but discovered no sign of her; neither did he find

any wreckage to mark the spot where she had gone down.

"The officers of the *Dalmatian* kept a close lookout for wreckage, but came upon no trace of the missing barque, and it is feared that she has indeed foundered. Nothing has transpired as to the fate of her survivors who escaped in the boats, and the mystery of the supposed mutiny remains unsolved. It is hardly possible to doubt that mutiny and murder were committed, and until the survivors appear and give an account of themselves it is not easy to acquit them of the obvious suspicion of having taken a guilty part in this ocean tragedy.

"The *Albatross* was a barque of 650 tons, owned by Messrs. Crosby, Venner, & Co., the well-known shipbrokers of Water Street. She was bound for Copenhagen and the Baltic ports with a general cargo, and has been posted as missing since the 13th ultimo. It is considered strange that she should have been discovered so far out of her direct course as the tenth degree west of longitude."

When he came to the end of this account of the foundering of his ship, Adam Crosby was as pale as the paper on which it was printed. His whole body trembled. To hide his agitation he took out his handkerchief and slowly wiped his forehead. Then he turned in his chair, and, regardless of his visitor, stared into the fire.

Hislop dared to walk round the table and approach the fireplace. Standing on the end of the hearthrug, he coughed to attract Mr. Crosby's attention.

Adam Crosby looked up at him with a start, gripping the arms of his chair.

"Well!" he demanded hoarsely. "What do you want?"

A curious, exultant smile played about the young man's lips.

"You've read what the newspaper says," he reminded the old man. "She's lost, you understand. She'll never see port again. You've got your way. Griggs has followed his orders, right enough, and now you can claim the insurance."

Adam Crosby's face became positively green as he listened, staring fixedly at the stranger. His thin lips twitched nervously.

"Griggs!" he cried, bending eagerly forward—"Griggs! What do you know about Griggs?"

Hislop went a step nearer to the fire and leaned an elbow on the mantelpiece. He seemed to derive considerable satisfaction from the old shipowner's discomfiture.

"I know just as much about him as you know yourself, Mr. Crosby," he answered coolly. "And, barring yourself, of course, I know more about the *Albatross* than anyone else in Liverpool." He paused, watching the effect of his words. The effect they produced was curious. Mr. Crosby seemed to shrivel up in his chair to half his ordinary dimensions. He was like a frightened cur, driven into a corner by his tormentor.

"That's a good cigar you've been smoking," Hislop

calmly remarked. "By your leave, I'll take one;" and he put his hand into the box on the mantelpiece and took one out, bit the end off it, and proceeded slowly to light it.

"Yes," he went on, "I know all about it. I know exactly how much money you gave to Jimmy Griggs as a bribe to bore a hole in the ship's timbers when she was out at sea. I know how much she was insured for. Jimmy has done the job smartly, too. The ship's gone down, carrying her secret with her; and nobody will ever know, unless——" He stopped and contemplated the lighted end of his cigar. "Unless I was to blow the gaff on you, Mr. Crosby, the same as Jansen intended to do."

Something very like a groan came from Adam Crosby's white lips.

"Jansen!" He repeated the name in a tone which betrayed how much he feared the man who owned it. "Where is he? Tell me where he is, what has become of him?"

Hislop laughed mockingly.

"Not I," he returned. "I didn't come here to tell you where he is. I came to let you know that I've got the upper hand of you; and that I've got your secret, and could ruin you—yes, Mr. Crosby, ruin you and get you shoved into prison, perhaps even hanged, for what you've done. Ah! you understand, I see. You understand what it means, that I've got you under my thumb. How would it be if I was to go to Lloyd's and tell them about Jimmy Griggs? How

would you feel if I was to go to Dale Street and tell the police how you sent a ship's crew to Davy Jones's? That's putting it mildly. It would be more correct, I reckon, if I was to say you'd murdered them."

Adam Crosby gathered all his remaining strength, and leapt from his chair.

"You scoundrel! You insolent liar!" he cried. "How dare you come here and threaten me like this? I defy you!"

Hislop drew a step back to avoid the old man's menacing, claw-like fingers.

"Defy me!" he laughed. "Oh no, old pal, it's too late for that. You've shown me since I've been in here that what I've said is true. Else, why did you start so guiltily when I named Jimmy Griggs and Jansen?"

Adam Crosby pointed a shaking finger to the door.

"Go out from here, you blackguard!" he cried. "Go out this minute, before I summon the police!"

Hislop did not move, but continued to smoke his cigar with insolent composure.

"Don't you take on as if you'd gone off your head, Mr. Crosby," he recommended. "If you talk loudly like that, your clerks in the outer office will hear you. Sit down and be reasonable. I've not told anybody yet; and I'm quite willing to be squared. D'ye twig? I'm willing to be squared."

Mr. Crosby caught at the suggestion as a drowning man is supposed to catch at a straw. But he did not immediately capitulate.

“Is it money that you want?” he gasped. “Do you mean to levy blackmail upon me?”

Hislop chuckled, conscious that he had won his point.

“That’s about the size of it,” he returned. “What do you say to five hundred pounds to begin with?”

Mr. Crosby looked at him aghast. “Five hundred pounds!” he exclaimed. “But even if I were to agree to buy your silence, I have not got that amount in the office. And—and the bank will be closed in ten minutes’ time. Besides,” he stammered, “how am I to know that you will keep silence?”

“Make it worth my while to shut my mouth, that’s all,” pursued Hislop. “As for the five hundred—well, I’m prepared to wait until to-morrow for the bulk of it. Give me what ready money you’ve got.”

Adam Crosby groaned once again. But he knew well enough that he was in this man’s power, and that the value of his silence was much greater than twice five hundred pounds. There was no course open to him but to yield, and accordingly he went to his safe in the corner of the room, opened it, and from an inner drawer took out two bank-notes.

“Here are ten pounds,” he said. “Take them, and go out of my sight. You shall have the rest in the morning.”

“Straight?” questioned Hislop, thrusting the notes into his waistcoat pocket.

“Straight,” said Mr. Crosby.

CHAPTER XII.

“IF THERE IS TIME.”

“**G**REGSON! Gregson! She’s sprung a leak!
We’re sinking fast!”

It was the carpenter who sounded this call of alarm, as he ran up to the poop-deck. He had been relieved by Gregson at the wheel, and had made his way into the after cabin, where Billy Neptune had saved some breakfast for him, and where the two boys, Martin Venner and Joe Parry, were lying, each on a comfortable couch. Martin Venner had opened his eyes, and recognised the black cook and Joe Parry. He was still exceedingly weak after his three days of starvation and exposure; and his limbs ached from the rasping pressure of the ropes that had bound them. But he was able to drink a cup of coffee and to eat some soaked ship’s biscuit, and he showed some disposition to speak; and probably to question the carpenter as to his manner of coming on board the ship. But the cook bade him lie quiet.

Dewar ate his meagre breakfast quickly, warming his numbed hands on the hot coffee-kettle.

“Weel, I must say this is just about the queerest situation I’ve ever been cast into,” he remarked, more to himself than to the two boys. “I’d like to know the meaning of it all.”

“Martin knows all about it—more than I do,” said Joe, looking across at the carpenter. “If only he could talk, he’d soon tell you how it all happened.”

Martin Venner seemed suddenly to have become wide awake. Weak though he was, he managed to raise himself on his elbow.

“Listen!” he breathed faintly. “Listen! Don’t you hear it?”

“Hear what?” questioned the carpenter. “I thought you were going to tell me about the mutiny, and how your skipper came to his end.”

“Listen!” repeated Martin Venner. There was consternation in his voice. “The water’s coming in! She’s leaking fast. The plug has come out!”

Dewar held his breath. He guessed rather than knew what Venner wanted to tell. He listened. As the ship rolled he heard beneath his feet, under the cabin floor, the lapping of water. Yes, most surely the boy was right. The ship was leaking, and already the water was deep in her hold.

He leapt from his seat and made for the companion stairs. When he reached the deck, he realised that the barque was labouring more heavily on the ocean swell, and that she was deeper in the water than when he had been at the wheel. She was sinking! What had Martin Venner meant when he said that the plug had come out? Dewar hardly paused to ask himself this question. He ran excitedly aft to Gregson, and told him his fears.

“I’d a notion as there was something wrong,” said

Gregson. "What's 'er cargo? Will it keep 'er afloat, I wonder, when she's waterlogged? Where's young Frank? Where's the nigger? Call all 'ands on deck! Open the main 'atchway!"

Frank Kershaw joined them at this moment.

"The rats are leaving her," he told them. "See how they're swarming along the gunwales, and crowding on to the forecastle head! They say that rats always desert a sinking ship."

"Never 'eed the rats," growled Gregson. "What about the *Mary Brown*? Is she in sight?"

"No," returned Frank. "There's not a sign of her anywhere."

"Then we're in Queer Street, and no mistake," said Gregson.

"We ought to have lain to, and kept in her company," ventured Frank.

"You don't understand nothing about it," retorted Gregson. "It wasn't possible to lie to. She ought to 'ave follered us."

He remained at the wheel to keep the vessel steady, while Dewar and Frank went forward to the hatchway.

With considerable trouble they succeeded in removing the covers. Down below they saw the shining water lapping the cargo in the lee-wing of the hold. Dewar made soundings, and found that there were seven feet of water in the bilge. He rigged up the pump tackle, and, helped by the cook, worked at it with desperate energy for an hour. At

the end of that time, Dewar again made soundings, and discovered that, although the water was not reduced in quantity, yet it was not perceptibly gaining upon them, and they continued their labour, while the ship was kept on her old easterly course, driven onward at five-knot speed before a fresh morning breeze.

When the sun's light flashed across the sea, Gregson went aloft to shake out the reefed sails in the hope that he might fetch land before nightfall, and so be able to save the ship and his companions. He came down saying that he had seen no sign of the *Mary Brown*, but that he had sighted what he took to be three icebergs on the port bow. He then took a spell at the pump with Billy Neptune, while Dewar again stood at the wheel.

After striking six bells—which he did merely to keep up the familiar sounds and usages of the sea life—Frank Kershaw went below to get some breakfast and to warn Martin Venner and Joe Parry of their immediate peril; for the water in the hold was steadily gaining upon them, in spite of all the hard work at the pump, and it was almost possible to calculate the few hours during which the *Albatross* could keep afloat.

Martin Venner was sitting up, resting against the cushioned back of the couch. There was a book lying on a table at his elbow, and, as Kershaw entered, he put his finger on one of the open pages, which was covered with writing.

"I've been wanting you awfully, Frank," he breathed, glancing at his chum. "I can hardly believe that you are really here; and I don't yet know how you came aboard. I'm stronger now. I think I could do a bit of work. Do you want me to come on deck and lend a hand with the pump?"

"I'm afraid your help wouldn't be of much account, Mart," returned Kershaw, with a grim smile. "We're sinking. We must have sprung a leak in the squall last night."

Martin Venner shook his head.

"It's that plug," he murmured. "I didn't drive it in tight enough, and it has been forced out."

"Plug!" repeated Kershaw questioningly. "What do you mean?"

Martin leaned towards him.

"I told you weeks ago that the old governor—Adam Crosby—bribed one of the hands to scuttle the ship," he said. "It was a fellow named Griggs. I had a suspicion of his being the man, and I followed him down into the hold. I watched him boring an auger hole through the bilge streaks. He discovered that I was there, and he tried to kill me, down there in the dark. But I got away from him. He'd done his work, though, and the sea-water was spurting into her like a hydrant. She would have gone to the bottom four days ago if I hadn't been able to plug up the hole. And now we're sinking. We're all as good as done for. We're out of the track of shipping, and far away from land." He paused, and tried to

rise, but fell back exhausted. “I shall stick to the ship, Frank,” he went on presently. “I shall go down with her. But you must save yourself—save yourself and get back to Liverpool, and bring down the law upon Adam Crosby, and Griggs and Jansen.”

“Jansen!” echoed Frank, remembering the accident on the Mersey. “He’s dead. He was drowned that morning in the fog.”

“No,” faltered Martin Venner. “No; he was aboard the *Albatross*. It was him who headed the mutiny. Listen! I will tell you all about it—if there is time.” The ship gave a lurch. “If there is time!”

CHAPTER XIII.

MARTIN VENNER EXPLAINS.

“IT’S rather a long story.” Martin Venner opened the ship’s logbook, turning back several pages. “You wouldn’t find it written down here. This logbook hasn’t been properly kept, and there’s a lot of things that have been omitted from it. I suppose the mate didn’t know the meaning of things as I did. At all events, he has only entered the particulars of the ship’s sailing, and I see he hasn’t entered anything at all since last Sunday morning, and it was after that that all the trouble took place. So I’d better tell you from my own point of view, and begin at the beginning.”

Frank Kershaw sat down at the table, and made his breakfast of ship’s biscuit and cold bacon while he listened.

“First of all,” said Martin, “tell me about my father. Did he get back to the office that morning? He wasn’t hurt, was he? He didn’t get knocked into the river when the ferry-boat went foul of that anchored ship?”

Kershaw paused in pouring out for himself a cup of the cold coffee.

“Didn’t you know?” he cried. “Didn’t you see what happened—how that chap Jansen attacked him

with a knife, and—and stabbed him with it, just as the *Gem* heeled over? I don't know whether it was the wound he got or whether he was drowned; but he never came ashore, and his body has not been found."

Martin caught his breath.

"Dead!" he exclaimed. "My father dead!"

Kershaw nodded. "I am afraid so," he answered. "Nothing has been heard of him since the accident, and it is believed that Jansen killed him."

Martin lay back on the couch, covering his face with his hands. He was silent for many minutes—silent except for his tearless sobs. But presently he braced himself to speak.

"You had better take charge of this, Frank," he said. And he drew from his breast pocket a long blue envelope, which was much crumpled and soiled. "It's my father's will, which he handed to me to take up to his lawyer's. Mother will want it. I will trust you to deliver it to her, if you ever get back home."

He lapsed again into silence. When he spoke again, it was to say:

"Jansen saved my life. I had seen him accost my father, but, when the crash came, I didn't notice anything more. I thought the steamer was going down. I caught at a lifebuoy that was near, and, while I held it, I was flung over into the river. I sank deep into the cold stream, but when I came to the surface again I was still clinging desperately to the lifebuoy. I managed to get hold of it in a way I'd learnt at the swimming baths, and I struck out,

not knowing in what direction. Through the fog, I saw the hull of the anchored ship, and I tried to get near to it, but the tide swept me past it. Then I thought that if I could only keep afloat long enough, some boat would pick me up, or that I might see another ship and get on board of it. So I kept on swimming. But I had my overcoat on, and couldn't unbutton it to get my arms free, and I soon grew so tired that I could hardly move. The water was fearfully cold. All my limbs got numb, and I felt as if I was going to have cramp. I don't know how long I'd been swimming about before I gave up; but I had to give up at last, for the fog was so thick I could see nothing, and I believed that I was already out at sea, beyond the bar. All that I could do was to lie across the lifebuoy and wait and pray.

"When I'd said my prayers over two or three times and nothing happened, I thought it was all up with me, and I let go my hold of the lifebuoy. But at that minute I heard a ship's bell ringing, and saw a hand stretched out of the water just in front of me. It was a man's left hand, and it had on it an indigo anchor. The fingers closed on the rim of the lifebuoy, which was drawn away from me. Then I went under, and I didn't remember anything more until I found myself lying on my back across a coil of hard rope, with the sunlight shining in my face and a ship's full-set sails towering above me.

"It was by the strangest chance that the ship happened to be the *Albatross*. I saw her name on

her bell, but I could only guess how I had come to be on board of her, and it was not for a long time that I found out. No one seemed to know anything about me. I asked one of the hands to tell me if the pilot had gone ashore yet; but the fellow was a foreigner, and didn't understand me. Yet I knew that the pilot must have gone off, for I saw that we were far out at sea.

"After a while, the mate came along to where I lay, and he would have it that I was a stowaway. I see he has entered me as a stowaway in the logbook, although I protested that my name was Venner, and that I was a son of one of the owners. The captain, too—Captain Teach—would not believe that I had come there by sheer accident. He seemed to have a strange suspicion of me, and I once heard him declare his belief that I had smuggled myself aboard for no good purpose, and must be carefully watched. And certainly his orders were strictly attended to, for I was watched and shadowed as if I had been a Nihilist. Goodness only knows why."

Frank Kershaw regarded his companion curiously.

"I wonder," he questioned, "if it had anything to do with that letter that you saw Jansen writing in the coffee-house?"

Martin stared across the table in amazement.

"How does it happen that you know the man's name?" he asked. "It's the name that Jimmy Griggs called him; but it's not his true name, or the name he went by on board the *Albatross*."

"It's the name Adam Crosby knew him by, at any rate," returned Kershaw. "Crosby knew him, and had reason to be afraid of him. He knew, too, that it was Jansen who sent the anonymous letter to Captain Teach, warning him that the ship was going to be scuttled."

Martin Venner opened his eyes wide.

"Now I begin to understand," he nodded wisely. "But, of course," he went on after a pause, "it couldn't have been me that Teach was warned against. Jansen could never have dreamed that I should ever be on board the *Albatross*. No; it was Jimmy Griggs that he had in his mind. He must have known all about the crime that was planned, although he swore that he'd never even heard the name of Crosby, Venner, & Co. When I accused him of having accosted my father on the ferry-boat, he declared that I was mistaken. He'd never been on board a Seacombe ferry-boat in all his days, and he knew nothing of the accident. To account for his being in the water and saving my life, he made out that he'd fallen from the yard-arm of his ship; and Captain Teach believed him."

Joe Parry here interrupted the two boys.

"You chaps seem to have a lot to talk about," said he. "I think I'll creep up on deck and see what's going on."

Martin resumed his narrative:

"For a few days," he went on, "I thought that Jansen's account of himself might be true. After all,

I hadn't much to go by, except that he had that indigo anchor on his hand and wore earrings, and had a black beard. And I was so much concerned about being carried out to sea that I didn't pay much attention to anyone else on board. Besides, I was fearfully sea-sick, and lay in my bunk in the fore-castle until we were out of the Irish Sea.

"When I was well enough to go on deck and do a bit of work, we were in the North Channel. I begged Captain Teach to put me ashore; but he said that was impossible, unless I chose to swim for it. We had to give a wide berth to the islands, because of the fog which hung about them. One day, when we were fog-bound and lying at anchor for safety, a fishing-smack came within hail of us. The men were trying to get along by using their sweeps, and they came close under our counter. I thought it would be a good thing if I could get the fishermen to take me to land; but, in the meantime, I had learned something about the *Albatross* that made me want to stay on board of her. But if I couldn't go ashore in the smack, I could at least send a message by her. So I got a sheet of paper and scribbled on it a telegram to Crosby's, saying that I was on board, and, wrapping a half-crown in it, I dropped it into the smack, asking one of her hands to send it for me and keep the change. I don't suppose the message ever got to its intended destination."

"Yes, but it did," broke in Kershaw. "It was despatched from a place called Stornoway, where the

fishing-smack probably belonged to. Adam Crosby allowed me to see it. That is how I knew you'd been rescued, and why I wasn't very much surprised when I found you on board; although Joe told me that you had gone off in one of the boats."

"Not likely!" declared Martin. "I wouldn't have gone away with a crew like that, if I could help it. Besides, they didn't want me. They left me on board, bound up with ropes, believing that the ship was sinking and I should go down with her. It was Griggs that tied me up with the ropes; because I'd found out what he was up to, and he didn't want me to live. I wonder he didn't finish me off with his knife or a pistol. But, though he'd consent to scuttle a ship (for a handsome bribe), yet he drew the line at cold-blooded murder."

Joe Parry re-entered the cabin at this moment, moving painfully on account of his wound.

"It's all right up there," he announced. "Gregson, as you call the chap, is at the wheel, and the other fellow is working at the pump with Billy Neptune. They seem to be gaining on the leak. At all events, they say they don't want any help for a bit."

"That's good news," nodded Martin Venner. "But we're a long way from land yet, and there's not much hope for us." He glanced again at Kershaw, and resumed his narrative:

"Until we had sailed as far north as the Outer Hebrides," he went on, "I'd had a strong suspicion against Captain Teach. I believed, as I told you that

day in St. Nicholas' Churchyard, that he had been bribed by Adam Crosby to play his evil part in the fraud on the insurance people, by scuttling the ship or wrecking her. Lots of things seemed to support that belief. But one morning, when we were fog-bound off the island of Lewis—before the fishing-smack came along—I chanced to overhear a conversation between him and the mate which made me think differently.

“They were in the companion, smoking together, and I was in the pantry reading a tale that Joe Parry had lent to me. Their voices came down to me, and I couldn't help hearing what they were talking about.

“‘I don't like to grumble against my owners, much less against my captain,’ the mate was saying, ‘but I'm bound to say that there's something about this trip that I can't cotton to.’

“‘Yes, but what have you got to complain about, Shimmin?’ the skipper demanded. ‘What's wrong? I take it that the ship herself is as comfortable as any you and I've sailed in together before. And the food's all right, isn't it?’

“Shimmin was the mate's name. He was a Manxman.

“‘Yes, the ship's not so bad,’ said he; ‘what I complain of is the crew, sir. The hands don't pull well together. I can't keep control over them. There's too many foreigners among them, and I'm all my time trying to make them understand plain English. The Germans are not so bad; but that

Dago Rossi is more than I can stand at any price I wonder at your taking him on, sir.'

"'I'm afraid I hadn't much choice in the matter,' said Teach. 'Rossi was recommended to me by Mr. Crosby, the same as Griggs was, and I take it that one ought to try to please one's owners.'

"'That's just the point,' Shimmin resumed. 'You'll excuse my saying so, sir, but I've a notion that you have been trying to please your owners just a trifle too much.'

"'Indeed!' said Captain Teach, in surprise. 'What do you mean?'

"The mate didn't answer for a minute or so; he seemed to be nervous. But at last he said—

"'There's no good beating about the bush, sir, and I may as well out with it.' He coughed, as if some of his tobacco smoke had gone down his throat. 'The fact is, sir,' he said, 'that there's an ugly rumour going round the ship—a rumour that Crosby & Co. don't intend the *Albatross* to reach port, and that she's over-insured.'

"'Ah!' cried Teach, evidently greatly interested.

"'Yes,' said Shimmin, 'and what's more, they're whispering it about the fore-castle that you—you, Captain Teach—have been bribed to run her on the rocks in the Pentland Firth.'

"I heard the skipper get up from his seat and shut the companion door. I thought that he was going to break out at the mate, but, instead of showing indignation, he sat down again.

“‘Look here, Shimmin,’ said he, very slowly, ‘I’m not put out by what you’ve just said; not a bit. You’ve done quite right to tell me this. You’ve done your duty. But, now that you’ve gone so far, you’ve got to go a step farther. You and I have been ship-mates together on a good many voyages, and I take it that you know me inside and out. Knowing me as you do, is it possible that you believe for an instant that I’d be guilty of undertaking a dirty job like the one you’ve mentioned? Do you think that I’m capable of running my ship and my crew into danger just for the sake of a paltry bribe?’

“Shimmin breathed a deep sigh of relief. ‘No,’ said he, ‘it’s not possible, sir. I know you too well to believe you’d do anything of the sort. And yet——’ he hesitated.

“‘Yet what?’ questioned Teach.

“‘I’m not satisfied about old Adam Crosby,’ said the mate. ‘I’m not sure that he hasn’t put somebody on board to do his dirty work.’

“‘No more am I sure myself,’ said Teach; and then he told the mate about the anonymous letter that he had received. While he was speaking, I made up my mind to tell him of Jansen writing the letter in the coffee-house, and I put aside my book. But, by the time I got to the top of the companion stairs, the skipper and the mate had both gone out on deck, and some of the hands were about, so I lost my opportunity.”

Martin Venner shifted his position on the couch.

“The conversation that I’d overheard convinced me at least of one thing,” he resumed, “and that was that whatever old Adam Crosby had done, or intended should be done, Captain Teach was certainly not the tool that he had chosen with which to do the evil work. But both Teach and the mate seemed to be certain that a plot had been laid to cheat the underwriters, and that there was some person on board, as yet unknown, who was engaged to do the practical part of the business. Of course, I knew perfectly well that my father could have had nothing to do with such an intended fraud—such a low crime. Nevertheless, I felt that, if the ship should be purposely wrecked and the fraud discovered, my father, as a member of the firm, would be blamed and dishonoured just as much as his senior partner. I resolved, for my father’s sake, to do what I could to prevent the crime from being committed, and, when the fishing-smack came alongside, I no longer wanted to go ashore. I only wanted to save the ship and to save my father’s name from disgrace.

“The smack had not gone away very long before an icy wind from the north-east cleared the fog and showed us the blue hills of the island of Lewis. We weighed anchor. For three days and nights we were kept tacking and tacking about, trying to get into the Pentland Firth. But we made very little headway, and on the third day we were leagues and leagues out of our course, and out of sight of land. It seemed as if some evil fate were working against us, but we had

something worse to encounter than contrary winds; and that was the spirit of mutiny which was steadily growing in the fore-castle.

“It was the foreigners who began it; the foreigners, headed by Jansen and Rossi. And the crisis came suddenly. It grew out of a quarrel between Jansen and Griggs. They were both in the watch below. Griggs was sitting on the edge of his bunk smoking, when Jansen went up to him. I didn't listen at first to what they said; they were speaking in whispers; but presently they raised their voices.

“‘Bah!’ cried Jansen, ‘what good you tink come of it? You earn blenty money. Yes; you rich man when you go ashore in Liverpool and tell about ze ship what zink in a gread storm; all right! But subbose you go down mit ze ship—subbose you drown—what good all ze money in ze world? No good! Now, you lizzen to me. I tell you vonce vat I tink.’

“Then he opened up his scheme to Griggs, just pointing out the folly of scuttling the ship, and then showing how a much better plan would be to seize the vessel, sail her across the Atlantic, and sell her and her cargo in some South American port. And, as he spoke, he threw open his coat and showed a couple of revolvers in his belt. I shuddered with horror when I realised that what he was proposing was that the officers and all the British seamen should be killed. Griggs leapt to his feet and declared that he wouldn't lend his hand to any such black piracy, and then they began to shout at each other angrily,

accusingly, and so noisily that several of the hands came into the cuddy to see what all the row was about. Rossi was among them, and he sided with Jansen so readily that it was clear that he knew exactly the cause of the dispute. The place became a regular babel of broken English, and some of the foreigners took out their knives.

“ I was slipping out of the cuddy, meaning to run aft to the poop and warn the captain of what was going on, when an able seaman named Alf Daunton caught at my arm.

“ ‘ Venner,’ said he, ‘ slip along, quick, and tell the officers to get out their revolvers!’ He pushed me to the doorway, giving me orders as he did so. But one of the foreigners heard him, and, before I could break away, Daunton fell on top of me with a knife in his back.

CHAPTER XIV.

HOW GRIGGS FULFILLED HIS COMPACT.

“I WAS quickly on my feet,” continued Martin Venner, “and, before anyone could stop me, I was telling Captain Teach all that I knew. He drew me down here into the cabin, and I helped him and the mates to load their revolvers.

“But it was of very little use, for, by the time that we went up on deck again, the mutineers had started their work. They had made a rush aft, firing at every Englishman they met. Captain Teach stepped forward to the poop rail, and, understanding how things were, fired a shot over the heads of the men in the waist. Almost before he lowered his hand, however, a tall Dutchman, standing near the galley, returned the shot, and Teach fell forward on to the deck below.

“I wanted to get the captain’s revolver, if he should be beyond using it any longer himself; and I came down the companion stairs and went out on the maindeck by the lower door. One of the foreigners saw me and ran after me, but I escaped beyond the deck-house. I was looking for a hiding-place when I saw that the forward hatch was partly opened. Shots were being fired in free fight. I had no weapon to defend myself with, and I was afraid. Besides, I didn’t think that my help could be any

good. I crept along the deck to the open hatchway, and looked down into the hold. There was no cargo near to the ladder, and, far down, I saw a man with a lantern. I knew him by his cap. It was Griggs. Without questioning what he wanted there, believing that, like myself, he was only hiding from the mutineers, I went down after him into the deep hold.

“When I got to the bottom of the ladder and found myself on the top of some bales of goods, I turned and saw the reflected light of his lantern some distance away from me. Presently he stopped, and got down into an open space that had been left among the cargo, leaving the lantern on the top of a packing-case. I crept towards it, very cautiously, very quietly, and was getting close to it when he reached up his hand and took the lantern as if to search for something down there where he was standing, hidden from my sight.

“Already I had guessed what he was doing, but to make sure, I went nearer still, until I could peep over the edge of the bale of cloth on which I lay at full length. The light was feeble and flickering, but strong enough to let me see quite as much as was necessary. Griggs was bending over with his head against the ship's side timbers, and pressing his chest against an auger which he was rapidly turning with his right hand, boring a hole through the bilge streaks. Even as I watched him, he drew forth the instrument, and through the hole it had made a jet of sea-water spurted inward, hissing and splashing



GRIGGS WAS BORING A HOLE THROUGH THE BILGE STREAKS.
— Page 120.

against the cargo. Griggs snatched up a plug of wood, which he forced into the hole, driving it home with the heel of his boot and stopping the inflow. Then, again, he took the auger, and proceeded to bore a second hole.

“I dared not move or speak, lest, discovering me, he should do me such bodily harm as would make it impossible for me to balk his evil purpose. I was dumbly helpless and incapable. Steadily, vigorously, he bored the second hole. His auger must have been exceedingly sharp or the timbers were rotten, for, while I hesitated to put forth my hand and touch him, the second jet of water was squirting in. I saw him rise and reach forth to take a second plug from where the lantern had rested. There were two other plugs beside it, and, while he was again bending down to stay the second leak, I snatched at them and carried them away, creeping quietly over the cargo to the other side of the ship, trusting that the noise he made in hammering at the plug would prevent him from hearing my movements.

“When I was far enough away, I called aloud, ‘Griggs! Griggs!’ and he started so violently that he fell over the lantern. But the light didn’t go out, and I heard him pulling out the plugs before he scrambled up and over the bales and boxes in search of me. I dodged him, and then lay low until he thought I’d gone upon deck. Then, when he was climbing up, I went to the place where he’d been at work. The water was pouring in noisily, but, by feeling about, I soon found the auger holes and jammed a

plug first in one and then in the other, hammering them tight with a spar of timber that he'd left there.

"When I returned on deck, all wet from the seawater, Griggs was running about shouting that we'd sprung a leak. But the rest of the crew were at first too much concerned with what they were doing to take any notice of him. They had already shot the captain and the two mates and three of the British seamen; and the foreigners were in possession of the ship. Griggs caught me as I climbed over the hatch coaming, and hauled me forward to the fore-castle. There he got a rope and tied it round me, binding my arms to my sides so that I couldn't move. He was tying the last knots when Jansen came in and demanded to know what he was doing with me.

"Griggs replied that he was going to chuck me over the side because I had seen him scuttling the ship.

"'Scuttling her!' cried Jansen. 'Vat you mean?'

"'I mean,' said Griggs, 'that I've bored two holes in her bilge, and that the sea is coming in like water into a bath. She'll sink in a couple of hours.'

"I don't know whether it was their dread of the ship foundering or whether it was their fear for the consequences of what they had done, but certainly they were one and all terribly afraid, and it wasn't long afterwards that I heard them getting out the boats and loading them with stores.

"Griggs came back to me before they pushed off. He brought a tumbler of water, which he put down on the floor just beyond my reach. I saw that there

was snow upon his coat, and, as he bent over me, I knew that he had been drinking.

“‘There, you young whelp,’ he muttered, ‘there’s a glass of water for you when you want it, though I promise you you’ll presently have a good deal more water than you can stomach!’

“He went away, and presently the whole ship was silent. I believed that I was the only person left alive on board.”

An exclamation from Joe interrupted him.

“Where’s all that water a-coming from?” the boy cried. “See!” He pointed through the open door of the state-room opposite to him. The green sea was washing across the porthole, the captain’s boots were floating in a pool of water that had risen through the planks of the floor.

“Tumble up here, you boys!” Gregson’s command sounded through the skylight as they were leaving the cabin.

Martin Venner glanced aft, and saw that the steering-wheel was abandoned.

“What, are you giving her up?” he questioned.

Gregson nodded.

“It’s no use trying any longer,” he said.

Venner, Kershaw, and Parry went to the forward rail and looked down upon the barque’s maindeck. The lee scuppers were on a level with the sea.

Frank Kershaw’s eyes sought the eastern horizon, and rested for a while upon three towering white objects that stood out clear against the leaden-grey sky.

"We're a good many miles nearer those icebergs than we were when I last looked at them," said he.

Gregson had gone down on to the upper deck, and the three boys followed him. He strode towards the heavy longboat that stood supported on its chocks amidships forward of the mainmast, and near to where Dewar and the negro cook were still at work with the pump.

"It won't be a bit of use trying to launch her," interposed Martin Venner. "Can't you see that she's got a great hole in her? She wouldn't float for five minutes!" And he pointed to the boat's lower planks, where the strokes of an axe had made a wide breach. "It was Jimmy Griggs that did that," he said.

Gregson looked ruefully at the boat, and, quickly realising its uselessness, quietly turned away to renew his work at the wheel.

"Come along here, Frank!" cried Martin. "Come, Joe! Bear a hand at the pump with us! It's our only chance, but we shall save her even yet!"

Frank Kershaw had climbed the bulwark to obtain a fuller view of the three objects that loomed white against the sky.

"I made sure they were icebergs," said he, as he took his place beside Billy Neptune and caught at the bar of the pump.

"Sea-birds don't roost upon icebergs," said Martin, in response to Kershaw's remark. "They are islands, with a coating of snow on them, and if we can only keep afloat, we shall be safe before night!"

CHAPTER XV.

A LUNCH FOR NOTHING.

“**H**OW do you do, Crosby? Wretched weather, is it not?”

It was Mr. Edgar Trimble, a well-known solicitor of Liverpool, who thus greeted Adam Crosby as they came shoulder to shoulder in entering a restaurant in Castle Street. Adam Crosby closed his dripping umbrella and handed it to a waiter before removing his overcoat.

“Yes,” he agreed, “wretched weather indeed! I never saw such a continuance of rain in all my life.” He tottered rather than walked into the restaurant and approached a blazing fire, in front of which he halted, resting first one foot and then the other on the fender in the attempt to dry his wet boots.

Mr. Trimble stood beside him, regarding him curiously.

“You are looking seedy this morning, Crosby,” he remarked lightly, although it would not have been less than the truth if he had said, “You are looking exceedingly ill.”

Adam Crosby extended his skinny fingers into the warmth of the fire.

“But I was forgetting,” pursued Mr. Trimble, as he took up a bill of fare from the corner of the mantel-

piece, "you have lost one of your ships, I hear, and there is a rumour of a mutiny. That is quite enough to give you a worried look. She went down with all hands, I am told."

An expression of pained anxiety came into Adam Crosby's pinched and careworn face. "I am afraid so," he murmured. "There don't seem to be any survivors; although it may yet be that some of the crew escaped in the boats and have been picked up at sea. It is a terrible thing to think of the widows and children."

He spoke feelingly, as if the safety of the ship's company were near to his heart and above all considerations of commercial profit.

"The vessel was insured, was she not?" questioned the lawyer.

"Partly so," was the old shipbroker's ready answer. He moved his foot from the fender and turned his back to the fire.

"Ah!" observed the lawyer; "I am glad to know that you will not lose everything." He watched the other's face as he spoke. "But I was hoping—I have even been told—that she was wholly covered by insurance."

"That is quite a mistake," was Adam Crosby's quick rejoinder. "I never insure a vessel to her full value." He told the lie glibly, not suspecting that the man he was talking with had private sources of information, that he already knew the value of the *Albatross* and her cargo, and that he

had a very definite idea of the sum for which the ship and her contents had been insured.

Mr. Trimble did not urge the point. Probably he had sufficiently satisfied himself as to the extent of the little shipowner's veracity.

"You have heard nothing, I suppose, concerning the cause of the alleged mutiny?" he questioned.

Adam Crosby shook his head.

"I don't for a moment believe that there has been any mutiny," he answered. "The crew were most carefully chosen, and they could have had no possible ground for discontent. A more kind-hearted and capable seaman than Captain Teach never commanded a ship. "No; there could be no cause for mutiny, and I firmly believe that the report is a mere hoax."

Mr. Trimble nodded as though the explanation were entirely satisfactory.

"It is a most extraordinary circumstance young Martin Venner being on board the *Albatross*," he presently resumed. "His being rescued in that remarkable way even encourages one to hope that his father may have been similarly fortunate. Indeed——"

He broke off, fixing his eyes keenly upon the man beside him. Adam Crosby gave a peculiar little start, and his face betrayed sudden agitation.

It seemed as if something in the lawyer's remark had disturbed him. What did Edgar Trimble know about Royden Venner? Was it possible that Royden Venner was still alive? The mere thought of this

possibility made Adam Crosby tremble with apprehension. If his missing junior partner should not be dead after all, if he should have been rescued by some outward-bound ship and be brought back to Liverpool to expose the fraud and trickery of the head of the firm, then there was nothing to look forward to but dire and irrevocable catastrophe. Royden Venner had discovered the scheme by which it was designed that the underwriters should be defrauded, and, as a man of commercial honour, he had intended to reveal his knowledge. He would assuredly have carried his intention into effect but for the circumstance of his disappearance on the morning of the *Gem* disaster. And Adam Crosby was fully conscious of the danger which threatened him should his partner come back into active life.

“That is not in the least likely,” he said, in response to Mr. Trimble’s remark. “Royden Venner could not swim, and when the accident happened and he was flung into the river, he must inevitably have perished.”

“But his body was not recovered,” Mr. Trimble reminded him. “And you must remember many instances of men reappearing after being missing even for years.”

Adam Crosby gave an uncomfortable little cough, and abruptly moved away in the direction of a vacant seat at one of the luncheon tables. As he seated himself and nervously took hold of a serviette and spread it across his knees, the person opposite to him

rose, and his chair was immediately seized upon by a stylishly dressed and carefully groomed young man, who took his place at the table and stretched forth his hand in greeting.

“Good-morning, Mr. Crosby,” he smiled.

For an instant the old shipowner stared at the young man blankly. Then his eyes flashed with sudden indignation.

“Hislop!” he cried. “What do you mean? You have followed me in here! What do you want?”

Hislop leaned back in his chair.

“Yes,” he nodded impudently; “you’re quite right about my having followed you here. I’ve followed you all the way from Water Street, and was standing near to you when you were talking with that tall lawyer-looking gent about the loss of the *Albatross*. People seem to be taking a lot of interest in that business, eh?”

Adam Crosby’s face grew purple with suppressed anger.

“What do you want?” he demanded.

“Well,” returned his tormentor, “the first thing I want is a jolly good lunch at your expense, with a good bottle of wine to drink to the health of our friend Jimmy Griggs. After lunch we can stroll together to the bank, and you can get out the balance of the five hundred you’ve promised to pay me, you know. The ten pounds you advanced yesterday didn’t go very far. I’d to rig myself out with this new suit of clothes, and new boots and an

umbrella, and a lot of other things, as well as pay off what I owed the landlady at my diggings in Everton."

A waiter came to his elbow, and, consulting the bill of fare, he ordered a lunch of four courses. "And the same for Mr. Crosby," he added.

Mr. Crosby made no protest, but with a sigh that was almost a groan permitted himself to be his black-mailer's victim.

"I've left my old diggings," Hislop went on, leaning his arms on the table and speaking softly, so that he might not be overheard by his neighbours. "Yes, I've left. It was a rotten sort of place. But I shall not look out for other lodgings. I intend to take up my quarters at that nice mansion of yours in Aigburth. That will suit me a treat. I've always wanted to see what it's like to live like a gentleman and have servants to do what I tell them, and have late dinner, and ride on horseback, and sit in the stalls at the theatre and then drive home in a carriage."

Adam Crosby glared at him furiously.

"What's that?" he exclaimed. "You have the brazen audacity to say that you are going to force yourself into my very house?"

"Certainly," declared Hislop. "Why not? I shall not disgrace you. I tell you straight I can behave like a regular tiptop gentleman when I like. And you can easily make out that I'm your nephew. Rather lucky that you're a widower and have no family, eh?"

Adam Crosby's face had turned from a purple to a ghastly white.

"You scoundrel!" he muttered, between his teeth. His clawlike fingers closed upon the edge of the white tablecloth; his breath came quickly. "You impudent scoundrel!" he cried. "If you dare to come near to my house you shall have a horsewhip about you!"

Hislop smiled.

"There's not a bit of good in your threatening me that way," he said coolly. "You'd better by far take the matter quietly and sensibly. "You know jolly well—you can't help knowing—that I've got you on a piece of toast, so to speak. What would you look like if I was to go to your friend that you were talking with just now—he's a lawyer, isn't he?—and tell him all I know about Griggs? You'd look precious sick, I fancy."

"It would do you no good to tell him or anyone else," retorted Adam Crosby, gaining courage. "You could prove nothing. You don't know but what the ship has arrived in port. You've got no evidence to show that she has foundered. A paltry newspaper paragraph is nothing to go by. Even Lloyd's do not believe that she is lost."

The waiter, bringing two plates of soup, interrupted him.

"You've applied for the insurance money, then?" pursued Hislop, when the waiter had moved away. "That looks as if you'd precious little doubt that

Jimmy Griggs had done his work. But Lloyd's would believe right enough that she was lost if I was to go to them and tell them about Jimmy, and remind them of the other case—the case of the *Queen of the Seas*. Besides——” He took two or three spoonfuls of his soup, and then leaned over. “Besides,” he went on, “there's Jansen. He can prove everything.”

“Jansen!” gasped Mr. Crosby. “Where is he?” he asked, in an eager whisper.

Hislop shook his head. “It doesn't suit me to tell you where he is,” he answered, as if he were capable of producing Jansen at a moment's notice. “Never mind him now. You've got to deal with me for the present, and I see you don't much relish talking business over your lunch. What was your lawyer friend saying about Mr. Royden Venner? He doesn't guess anything, does he?”

Mr. Adam Crosby looked across the table in blank astonishment.

“Guess anything!” he repeated. “What should he guess?”

Hislop met the gaze that was fixed upon him. He put his hand over his mouth and spoke through his fingers in a tone so low that his words could hardly be heard even by Mr. Crosby's sharp ears—

“Why, that you paid our friend Jansen to do away with him.”

CHAPTER XVI.

ROCKS AHEAD!

THE carpenter quitted the pump and took soundings.

“Well done, my lads!” he cried, in a cheery voice, when he returned to the work. “We’re getting ahead of the leak. There’s just a quarter of an inch less water in her since I last measured. Stick to it now, with a will, all of ye, and we may save her yet! But first, Venner, run you aft and pass the word to Gregson, and ask him if he canna put some more sail on her.”

The suggestion was not necessary to Gregson.

“Lay along ’ere, young ’un,” he called, as Martin Venner approached him. “Take a ’old of this ’ere wheel for a spell while I go aloft to the mainroyal. She’ll stand more sail, I reckon, and we ought to fetch one of them islands yonder before she sinks. I took ’em for icebergs when I seen ’em at first in the early dawn, but now that the sunlight’s on ’em, I can make out a patch of green on the middle one that looks like grass, and I reckon they’re made of solid earth.”

“They’re islands, right enough,” Martin assured him as he put his hands on the spokes. “Look at all the birds hovering about them! That’s a certain sign that they are not icebergs. We’re gaining on the leak, and Dewar says we can save the ship if we stick to the pumps.”

“As for saving ’er outright,” Gregson shook his head doubtfully, “that ain’t possible, but if she only ’olds on for another couple of hours, we can run ’er aground and save our lives.” He went to the side to get a clearer view of the islands. “Even if so be we get ashore, we shall not be out of the wood,” he reflected aloud. “There don’t look to me to be much to keep a shipwrecked crew alive on them desolate rocks, and I shouldn’t wonder if all our stores are soaking wet with sea-water.”

Martin’s weak hands gripped the spokes of the wheel.

“Tell me what I’m to do,” he called to Gregson. “I’m not used to steering.”

“Keep her just as she is,” Gregson told him. “If she falls off, put over the wheel a bit, and keep the middle island in your eye, on a line with the bowsprit, as if you meant to run it down.”

Martin obeyed his instructions as best he could, while Gregson went aloft. He succeeded so well in keeping the barque on her course that when Gregson returned it was to bid him to remain at the wheel.

“You’re managing it tiptop,” the seaman said. “Stick to it, while I go forward and relieve the nigger and get ’im to bring up as much food as ’e can lay ’is ’ands on, and pile it up on the deck ’ere, so as we may ’ave a try to take some of it ashore when we run aground.”

Martin remained at the wheel for an hour and more, steering ever towards the middle and largest of the three islands. As the ruddy, wintry sun climbed

to its meridian the round slopes of the land lost some of their snowy whiteness, and assumed an earthy hue, touched here and there with patches of sombre green; and above the topmost heights there hovered a trembling cloud of birds whose clamour came across the sea with ceaseless moaning.

Very slowly did the ship draw nearer. She laboured heavily on the ocean swell, rolling with lazy motion and often refusing to rise, so that the green pursuing waves swept along her sides, threatening to engulf her. And all the time Gregson and Dewar and Kershaw worked at the pump, like slaves at a penal task, while the black cook and young Joe Parry busied themselves in bringing up from below many boxes of biscuits and tins of preserved meat which they rescued from the flooded storeroom.

"Me gone find plenty cartridge for them gun," said Billy Neptune, coming aft to the wheel. "You sabey them good for take away?"

"Do you mean cartridges for revolvers?" Martin asked.

"Yes," nodded Billy, "them allsame Cap'n Teach him lef' in cabin."

"Well, Billy," said Martin, "we might want to have a shot at the birds if we ever get ashore yonder. You might as well put the cartridges and the revolvers all together. Have you found any dry tobacco? We ought to take some for the two men, and some spirits, too, and a few cans of condensed milk."

The negro rubbed his hands together to keep them

warm as he went away along the sloppy deck to disappear down the companion in search of further stores.

Before noon Frank Kershaw took his turn at the wheel, and announced to Martin that the water in the hold had been considerably reduced.

"You might almost think by the look of things that your two plugs had got back into the leaks," he said. "Dewar and Gregson can manage alone for a spell. They want you to take them something to eat."

Martin broached a can of preserved meat and took it, flavoured with a handful of ship's biscuits. The two men were much more hopeful now. The ship was in less peril, and land was near. So far as could be seen of the islands through the binoculars, however, the surf breaking upon the rocks at the base of the cliffs showed no gap, and Gregson feared that it would not be an easy matter to run the ship aground.

"She'll go to pieces like a bottle of glass driven against them cliffs by a sea like this," he said. "D'ye reckon you could do anything with the boat, Dave?"

"I've been thinking o' that," returned the carpenter. "I might even patch it up with a stretch of tarpaulin and a few tin-tacks, but I'll not say that it would be o' much avail."

During the afternoon, while Frank Kershaw remained at the wheel, and Gregson, Martin Venner, and the cook worked at the pump, the carpenter, helped by Joe Parry, occupied himself repairing the boat. He made a better job of it than might have been expected, contriving to bend fresh planks across

the breach, and covering them with tarpaulin inside and out. When he had succeeded to his satisfaction, he got rollers under the keel and arranged a system of tackle by which the boat could be hauled to the side by the winch, ready for launching. Then he and Joe loaded her with stores.

Towards evening the wind fell to a gentle breeze, and the sails swayed lazily, but there was a strong current setting eastward, and the ship drifted slowly towards the islands. She was somewhat lighter on the sea now, for, much to the perplexity, although no less to the delight of her little crew, she seemed almost to have ceased to draw water in a dangerous quantity, and constant labour at the pump was no longer necessary in order to keep her afloat.

Dewar was disposed to give a decent burial to the captain and mate and the four seamen who lay dead upon the decks, but Gregson shook his head at the suggestion.

"Better by far try to save the ship," he advised. "If so be we can beach 'er, or get 'er into shallow water, there's no knowing but what we might do the burying on land. No, get their belongings together if you like—their watches or anything else of value you can find about 'em—so that if we 'ave luck, they can be given up to their families; but we ain't got no time to think of a funeral just now."

At sunset the three boys were on the forecastle head looking across the intervening sea at the islands that loomed grey and desolate a league's distance away. At first it had seemed that they were but

three separate skerries—a high, isolated rock, whose splintered outline with its many spires and pinnacles gave it the appearance of a great Gothic cathedral rising out of the blue sea on the port bow; to the southward, a smaller islet with a rounded grassy top; and between these two sentinels, the long stretch of main island, with its dark precipitous sides ascending to verdant slopes. But as the barque drew nearer still, many detached stacks and smaller rocks appeared, the frowning cliffs revealed their yawning caves and chasms, and thousands of tiny specks, that at first sight had looked like white pebbles in the blackness of the rock, resolved themselves into roosting sea-birds.

Above the islands the air was thick with whirling gulls in ceaseless movement; around the ship the sea was dotted with swimming puffins and kittiwakes, gannets, and fulmars, and as she drifted into their midst they rose from the waves, and many boldly alighted upon her spars. A green-backed bird perched itself on the extremity of the bowsprit and preened its feathers, and along the foretop-gallant-yard a school of puffins sat, like charity children in their black tippets and white bibs; a fearless eider-duck even strutted across the forecastle deck within a few feet of where the three boys stood. Frank Kershaw tried to catch the bird, but it was too quick for him, and he only slipped in the slush of the snow, and fell upon his hands and knees.

Martin Venner was at the forward rail gazing searchingly along the line of surf at the base of the islands.

"Frank! Come and look here!" he cried, and as Kershaw joined him he added, pointing towards the western headland of the largest island, "What do you make of that patch of brown at the foot of the black cliff yonder? You see that streak of snow, shaped like a ship's jib, don't you, with a line of white coming down from it? Well, follow the line down to the water's edge, and you'll see the patch of brown that I mean. It looks to me like a sloping beach of shingle. What do you make of it?"

Kershaw sought in the direction indicated.

"I believe you're right," he nodded; "but what about it? I don't see any boats or people there."

"I don't suppose we're likely to see any people on desert islands like these," returned Martin. "And if there are no people, there won't be any boats, you may be sure of that. No, I was only thinking that if it's a stretch of shingle we might run the ship aground there without smashing her to pieces on the rocks."

"You're always talking about saving the ship," said Frank. "I shall consider ourselves precious lucky if we can save our lives."

"I don't see why we shouldn't try to save the ship as well as ourselves," was Martin's comment. "Anyway, Gregson told us to look out for a place where he can run her aground, and that one's the best that I can discover. You see, we're bound to beach her on the windward side of the land."

Gregson went aloft into the foretop to get a sight

of the strip of beach which Martin pointed out to him, and he agreed that it offered the most likely spot for which to steer. Fortunately the wind was light, and there was no danger of serious disaster. He resolved to trust to the current to carry the ship landward, and before he returned to the wheel, he bade his companions be ready to launch the boat in case they should chance to run upon some sunken rock.

The sun went down and dusk deepened into darkness before the *Albatross* came within sound of the waves breaking against the cliffs and roaring in the hollows of the caves, but presently the moon pierced the thin clouds and shed its silvery light upon the sea.

"Are ye for venturing it, then?" questioned Dewar, seeing the determined look upon Gregson's face, and noticing that he was heading the ship direct for the black shadows of the land.

"It's our only chance, I reckon," was Gregson's grimly spoken reply. "Better be wrecked on the rocks than founder in deep water. It's a 'undred to one against our getting ashore alive; we can only trust to luck. You can swim, can't you, Dave?"

"Ay," nodded the carpenter, "so can young Venner; but Frank's no good at it, he says, and Parry canna swim a stroke. I've served out the lifebelts to the three o' them."

"Right you are," said Gregson. "I'll take young Parry on my back if you'll give a 'elping 'and to Frank, and keep an eye on Venner. The dog'll make for land of its own accord. What about the

nigger? 'E ought to be at 'ome in the water, since e' calls 'imself Neptune."

"That's a name he took from a gunboat in the Benin River," said Dewar. "He's a native of Benin. I discovered that by the tribal marks on his forehead. You've never been on the West Coast of Africa, have you, Gregson?"

"No, and I never want to be," returned Gregson, grimly watching the barque's behaviour, as she drifted slowly towards the frowning cliffs.

"They're cannibals in Benin," the carpenter informed him. "Billy Neptune was one of the warriors who massacred Mr. Phillips's expedition a few years back."

"Sink me!" cried Gregson, in alarm. "A cannibal savage, you say? And are we to chance being shipwrecked on a desert island along of a man-eating rascalion like that?"

"He was on the side of law and order in the mutiny," Dewar reminded him. "He slew the Dutchman that shot Captain Teach."

Gregson spat a jet of tobacco juice towards the binnacle.

"That's in 'is favour," he admitted, "and nigger though 'e is, I suppose we must make room for 'im in the boat."

"Rocks ahead!" cried Frank Kershaw's ringing voice from the forecastle.

Gregson pushed over the wheel.

The barque wore slowly round in obedience to her rudder. The swift, strong current caught her, and

she drifted helpless against a submerged rock that grated along her side, sending a shudder through her whole fabric.

“Lower away the boat, Dave!” commanded Gregson.

From some fancied sense of his responsibility Martin considered it his duty to be the last to leave the ship, and it was not until the boat was floating alongside that he swarmed down by the falls, and then he had thought to fetch the ship’s papers.

Dewar and Gregson took the oars and shoved off.

They were soon under the shadows of the headland, whose higher slopes obscured the moon, and the stretch of beach seen in the twilight was no longer visible. The nearest cliff was but half a cable’s length distant from them. But the boat was leaking badly.

“Lay into it with that baling-can, Joe!” urged Gregson.

Martin Venner stood at the bow holding the lighted lantern aloft and peering eagerly along the waves and giving directions.

“Easy, Gregson,” he cried. “Pull hard, Dewar! There’s some rocks in front of us.”

He bent over the prow of the boat and lowered the lantern so that its light shone upon the water. Suddenly from the blackness of the nearest cliff there was a quick, bright flash.

A moment afterwards, something struck the thick glass of the lantern. There was a shiver of broken glass. The light went out, and then across the water there came the unmistakable crack of a gun-shot.

CHAPTER XVII.

A DOUBTFUL REFUGE.

THE shot sounded sharp and clear above the murmur of the surf, and its echoes crackled like a volley of musketry from the chasms, startling the roosting sea-birds. Martin Venner drew back from the boat's bow, still gripping the extinguished lantern. Gregson and Dewar both halted abruptly in their rowing and looked round into the darkness of the cliffs.

"What's that?" cried Gregson, in a voice of alarm — "a rifle-shot?"

"Yes," answered Martin; "some fellows are firing at us from the beach we're making for. They've hit the lantern, and put it out."

"Best not light it again, then," cautioned Gregson. "It's a good mark for them. What do they take us for, I wonder — smugglers — pirates? You'd 'ave thought they'd come out like decent Christians to 'elp us, instead of firing on us. Pull away, Dave; pull 'ard! We've got to chance it, any'ow. Better be shot than drowned."

The two men bent to their oars, but the boat was heavy and deep and made slow progress, for the water that had leaked into her had risen almost to the level of the thwarts, and the higher waves threatened soon

to swamp her. They were close under the black shadows of the overhanging cliffs, behind which the moon was hidden, and in the darkness it was impossible to choose a landing-place, even if the sinking boat should remain afloat until the nearest point of land was reached.

A second shot was fired. Gregson saw the flash and missed a couple of strokes, allowing Dewar's oar to pull the boat round in a new direction.

"Keep them revolvers dry, Frank," he ordered. "We shall want 'em soon. 'Ow many 'ave we got—loaded?"

"Four," answered Frank, without pausing in his work of baling, "and they're where the water can't reach them."

A high wave swept along the boat's side, awash with her gunwale. Billy Neptune felt its coldness on his hand, and with a cry of fear he leapt to his feet, lost his balance, and fell with all his weight upon Dewar's shoulders. The sudden movement caused the boat to stagger, and the next wave splashed into her. It seemed as if she was about to capsize when a yet higher wave lifted her bodily and flung her forward. Her keel grated upon solid rock, she trembled with the impact and heeled over.

"We're aground!" cried Martin Venner. "Back your oars!"

Gregson and Dewar obeyed his advice, yet with no result. The boat struggled like a living thing to free herself, but each succeeding wave only drove her farther upon the rock, lifting her by the stern bit by bit and forcing her weight before them until she lay

swaying helplessly with her broadside exposed to their irresistible onset.

Kershaw held on to the box of revolvers, lest it should slip overboard, while Joe Parry strove to protect the precious stores from the sea-water by securing the tarpaulin with which they were covered. Gregson used the stout end of his oar as a quant, striving to push off; but his efforts were useless. All that he could do was to keep the boat steady and prevent her in some measure from being ground to splinters.

"I doubt we shall need to swim for it," suggested Dewar, trying to discover how far they might be from the nearest refuge.

"There's not a bit of use swimming for it," said Martin Venner. "No one could climb up the face of a cliff like that, and there's no beach to stand on that I can see—nothing but sheer cliff all around."

"Yes, better by far stop where we are," agreed Gregson. "We shall not sink, any'ow, and we're safe until she breaks up."

"The moon will come out from behind that high rock presently," said Kershaw, "and then we shall be able to see where we are."

"The barque has foundered!" murmured Dewar, peering seaward through the darkness. "We left her just in time!"

Each held on to his own particular part of the swaying boat as the hungry waves dashed against her. The night air was bitterly cold. Gregson took out his pipe and with difficulty lighted it. Dewar

followed his example, while Joe Parry managed to find some biscuits, which he passed round to Martin and Frank and the cook, sparing some for the dog which lay huddled in the shelter of the bow, where it shared the warmth of Billy Neptune's blanket.

In silence they waited until the moon shone above the jagged peaks of the headland and shed a path of silvery light upon the restless waves. By this time the boat, although sadly battered and broken, lay motionless upon its side, stranded upon a table of rock where the falling tide had left her. The rock was thickly covered with a growth of seaweed, whose softness had formed a bed protecting her planks from the underlying snags of granite.

The moon's light now illumined the face of the cliff, revealing its terrible steepness. High above the confused mass of boulders and tide-washed rocks, the immense precipice rose abrupt and sheer, splintered by many fissures and gaping chasms, and crossed by narrow ledges upon which the frozen snow still rested. Nearer to its rugged base, the granite wall was pierced by yawning caves and broken by fantastic arches and detached pinnacles. All was wildly forbidding, inhospitable, offering no solitary place of level foothold.

"Taint much use of our trying to make a landing here," said Gregson, expressing the thought that was in the mind of each of his companions.

"Wait! wait!" advised Dewar. "The tide's going down. There is hope for us yet."

Slowly and almost imperceptibly a long reef of

rocks became visible above the water's surface, forming, as it were, a series of stepping-stones connecting the boat with the cliff. Frank Kershaw got over the side and stood upon the soft bed of seaweed.

"What are you up to?" questioned Gregson. "What do you think you're going to do?"

"I was going to try if I could make my way ashore," returned Frank, "and find a place where we can land our cargo."

Gregson thought for a moment, glancing at the negro, who had fallen asleep.

"Right you are," he said presently, assuring himself that all was safe, "but don't you go alone, nor yet without a gun to defend yourself with, in case them chaps that fired at us are lying in wait. Venner'll go with you. Take care of yourselves and don't fall in and get drowned. When you've found a suitable landing-place, come back."

Martin Venner was quickly at Frank's side. Together they climbed up the slippery slope of the rock and made their difficult way along the reef, now clinging desperately to the tangles of seaweed, now leaping across intervening channels, or creeping on hands and knees across some rounded boulder, until they found themselves at the base of the cliff on a sloping beach of pebbles. The light of the moon was sufficiently strong for them to distinguish each separate stone and pool.

"This won't do," decided Martin; "it's below the tide level, and there's no way up. If we could climb

over into the next bay, perhaps we should find a better place." He looked back at the boat to fix its position in his remembrance, and started to climb the high jagged rock that stood as a barrier at the side of the narrow strip of beach. Frank followed him.

They were climbing for many minutes before they reached the top of the rock and looked over into the next bay. Here the shadows were deeper, but in the darkness of the cliff Martin discovered the arched entrance to an immense cavern.

"The roof of that cave must be a good bit above high-water level," he said, pointing towards it. "I wonder if it goes far in, and if we could make a home in it."

Frank shook his head. "It's not likely," he demurred, "although anything would be better than trusting to the boat. She's sure to go to pieces with the next tide. We ought to have brought one of the lanterns with us."

"I've got a candle and matches in my pocket," Martin told him, as he proceeded to make the perilous descent.

They gained the lower level without accident, although with bruised shins and bleeding fingers. The mouth of the cave yawned in front of them, black and mysterious. The moonlight fell across the threshold and a dozen yards within, showing a floor of mingled rocks and stones and seaweed, with here and there a pool of sea-water left by the retreating tide. The two boys entered together, timidly, and

when they reached the verge of the moonlight Martin struck a match, and, carefully shielding it with his hand, lighted his candle and went farther within, step by cautious step.

They looked up and around them as they went. The vaulted roof was too high for the feeble candle-light to reach it, and the sides were too wide apart to be seen. Frank bent down and picked up a stone and flung it far in front of him, as if it had been a cricket ball. It was many seconds before he heard the stone strike and send back its echoes in sharp reverberation. The sound was quickly followed by the alarmed cries of many birds, and there was a sudden commotion of wings through the darkness as the disturbed gulls flew past to escape into the outer air, their snowy plumage glinting in the candle-light.

“If all those birds can make their home in here, it’s a certainty that we can do the same,” Martin decided.

The floor at the entrance of the cavern sloped upward in a level bed, where the waves had washed and pounded the detached rocks into fine shingle, but farther within, the shingle gave place to ponderous boulders that were difficult to climb and presented many risks of broken limbs.

Martin Venner had mounted to the smooth top of a huge slab of rock, and stood there holding the candle aloft to survey his surroundings in search of a suitable abiding-place for his companions and their meagre store of provisions. Near to him he

saw a wide expanse of flat rock that was divided from him by a deep cleft. Upon its even surface he observed here and there a group of eggs or of broken egg-shells, and all about them the ground was strewn with white downy feathers. He judged by the wisdom of the birds that the place was well above the reach of the tide.

“All right, Frank,” he cried. “There’s a ripping place here where we can make ourselves comfortable. And there’s any amount of eggs, so we shall not starve if Billy Neptune can contrive to cook them. No, you needn’t come up. There’s no use looking any further. We’d better get back to the boat and report progress and fetch the provisions ashore.”

As he turned, his foot dislodged a fragment of rock which rolled down the incline of the slab he stood on and fell with a hollow splash into a dark pool of water. Martin bent down, holding the lighted candle above his head and peering into the fissure at his feet. The water was but a few inches beneath him, and as he gazed upon it the surface was suddenly ruffled and a round black head emerged. A pair of large bright eyes stared up at him. They were the eyes of a seal, but in the dim, uncertain light he only knew that they were living eyes and that they were fixed upon him with a curious, steady gaze that was strangely human. He started back in affright. His foot slipped; he fell. The candle dropped from his fingers, and the cave was in black darkness.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE MAN OF THE CAVE.

“FRANK!” he cried. “Frank! I’m hurt!”
“Where are you?” questioned Kershaw, in alarm. “I can’t see you. How can I find you in the dark?” He scrambled up the rock to where Martin had stood. “Speak!” he cried, “shout, groan, whistle, or make some sound that will tell me where you are!”

“All right, I’m not dead,” returned Martin, from out the darkness. “I’ve only barked my shins. But I can’t get up.”

“Strike a light,” suggested Kershaw. “You’ve got the matches in your pocket.”

“Wait a bit,” responded Martin. His voice came from deep down. “My foot’s caught between two rocks. I can’t pull it out. I’m jammed in most awfully. There’s hardly room to move. All right. I’ve got the match-box now, if I can only get both my hands to it.”

Kershaw waited anxiously, breathlessly. The moments expanded themselves into minutes. At last he heard the scraping of a match, but he saw no glimmer of light. He took up a new position.

“Strike another!” he cried, and after a long interval he again heard the scratching of a match. He went down on his hands and knees and leaned over the edge of the rock. This time he discerned a faint glow of reflected light.

“Are you there?” he called.

Martin Venner’s laugh came up to him with the words:

“You make me think of the office telephone. Can’t you see where I am? I can make out your hand when I look up. It’s your left hand. Keep it where it is and bring your face over it, then you ought to see me. Ah, the match has gone out! Wait a bit!”

He struck a third match, and now Kershaw discovered him wedged in between two jagged walls of rock.

“Give me your hand,” Frank called, and he thrust his arm down into the gap, feeling about with eager outstretched fingers. For a long time he searched in vain, but at last he touched Martin’s uplifted hand and seized a finger-tip, working his body farther to the edge, meanwhile, to lengthen his reach.

“It’s no use,” declared Martin, in despair. “Your arm’s not long enough. You’ll have to go back without me, I’m afraid, and fetch one of the men.”

“What! and leave you here, in a fix like this?”

Martin withdrew his hand. “It’s the only way,” he cried. “I positively can’t get my foot free. I’ve nearly wrenched it out of joint in trying. I can’t even stoop down to cut my bootlace. Perhaps if Gregson were to bring a lantern—— Go on, Frank,” he urged. “I shall be all right till you come back, and the tide won’t come in for ever so long yet. The other chaps are waiting, you know, and all the stuff’s got to be brought ashore before daylight—before the boat is seen by those fellows that fired at us. Do you think you can find your way?”

"Yes, I believe so," answered Frank; "but I'm not going. You can't expect me to desert you."

"Would you rather desert three men and a boy who are waiting for you out there in the dark, in a wretched little boat—waiting for you to go back and tell them of a place of safety where they can lie down and sleep?" Martin Venner spoke pleadingly. "Gregson and Dewar must be fearfully tired after all the work they've done," he added. "And we owe them our lives, you know. We could never have got to land without them. Listen! Did you hear it—a pistol-shot? The islanders are attacking the boat! Go! Go quickly. You've got a loaded revolver in your pocket. Go and help to save the stores! We shall all die of starvation if they're lost!"

Frank Kershaw hesitated, kneeling upon the rock and listening. From without he heard the murmur of the tide and the plaintive call of a bird. Then faintly, above these sounds, there came the sharp crack of a pistol-shot, followed by another, and another. He rose to his feet.

"Good-bye, Mart," he said. "I shall whistle when I get to the mouth of the cave."

Martin heard him clambering down the rock, and then all was silent, excepting that now and again a loose stone, touched by Frank's hurrying feet, would fall noisily to some lower rock. It was a long, long time before Martin's quick ears caught the sound of feet crunching on shingle. He had no need now to listen for a whistle to tell him that Kershaw had found his way out of the cavern, and he turned to consider his own predicament.

His foot was tightly wedged, and his every movement in trying to liberate it gave him pain. He wriggled and twisted himself impatiently, but all to no purpose. If he could only draw his foot out of his boot he might then hope to extricate himself from the cleft into which he had fallen ; but his boot was tightly laced, and it seemed impossible to stoop down to use his knife. He struck another match, and, while it was still burning, dropped it cautiously. It flickered for a moment, and then went out ; but in that moment he had understood his position, and determined to wait until help should come to him.

From afar off he again heard a pistol-shot. Were his friends engaged in a deadly encounter with their unknown enemies ? He dreaded to think that they might all be killed. Even if they escaped, and if Frank Kershaw could not find them, they did not know where he himself was, and they could never come to his help. And if Frank should be helplessly injured in trying to reach the wrecked boat, then there could be no possibility of rescue, and he must remain here imprisoned between the rocks, slowly to die a torturing death. His position was worse now than it had been on board the *Albatross*, when he had been left in the fore-castle, bound about with ropes ; because then he had suffered no pain beyond the pains of hunger and thirst, and the anticipation of a lingering death. But now his barked and bleeding shins, and his sprained ankle gave him agony more difficult to endure, and he was weak and ill from want of food and sleep.

He thought of all the stories he had read of men

who had died in solitude, isolated from all possible help. He wondered how long it would be before the end would come, and if anyone would ever know how he had died.

His knees trembled under him. He thrust out his elbow to support his weight, and relieve the strain upon his numbed lower limbs. This new position was more comfortable. He felt that he could remain in it for hours. But soon the sharp corners of rock pressed too severely upon his elbows, and he slipped down and down. Suddenly he collapsed and fell backward, with a groan. His hands instinctively searched for a support, and one of them caught at something that felt like a round smooth stone. It moved under his weight, and his fingers closed upon it more tightly. It yielded with the pressure and cracked, giving forth a hollow sound as of the breaking of a thick shell, and his thumb sank into it, while the tips of his fingers rested upon a sharp edge that, to his touch, felt like a row of beans. He shuddered, knowing that the thing was not a stone, but a skull—a human skull. His fingers had touched the teeth, and his thumb had thrust itself through the thin, decayed bone of the eye-socket. Some man—some shipwrecked mariner, perhaps—had died here in this cave and left his bones to rot in the darkness. How long ago was it that the poor fellow had ceased to live? What had been the manner of his death? Had he been drowned, and his body washed in by the cruel waves? Had he taken refuge here from some unfortunate ship broken on the rocks, to subsist upon the sea-bird's eggs and the shellfish? And had he,

too, fallen between these same rocks beyond possible help, slowly to perish for want of food—to perish unknown, forgotten by the world, only now to be discovered by a stranger who seemed destined for a similar fate?

Martin Venner thrust the skull from beneath him, and it rolled a few inches, then fell into space, breaking into fragments as it dropped far down upon some unseen slab of rock. The sound that it made sent a shiver through the boy's frame. He felt himself slipping. He tried to rise; and then, to his astonishment and intense relief, he found that his foot was free. Some movement in his position, some unconscious turn of his ankle, had unlocked it. And now, although his whole leg was numb, he could move.

He searched about him with eager hands, trying to find a way by which he might extricate himself. The fissure was narrow, and he thought that by stretching across it from side to side he might climb upward to the place from which he had fallen. He attempted to do so, but the gap widened, and he was forced to climb down again, resolving to wait upon the chance of Frank Kershaw's return.

Leaning in a half-sitting posture against the jagged wall of rock, he closed his eyes and tried to forget his miseries in sleep. But sleep did not come to him.

When again he opened his eyes he was conscious that the cavern was less densely dark than it had been. In one part there seemed even to be a faint glow of twilight. He went down on his hands and knees and cautiously advanced a few short, creeping steps in its

direction. Presently he discovered that he could with safety go farther, and when with great care and much peril he worked his way round a projecting point of rock, he found that the twilight was so strong as to enable him to make out the vault of a wide, natural passage that opened in front of him. Painfully, laboriously, he climbed over the rough intervening rocks. And as he advanced the air became fresher ; he could hear more distinctly the solemn murmur of the sea. The twilight grew clearer. By holding his hand before his eyes he could dimly distinguish the separate fingers. Onward he crept, now climbing, now lowering himself inch by inch down the sloping slabs of slippery rock. He believed that he was returning to the mouth of the cave, although not by the same way that he had entered with Frank Kershaw.

As he proceeded, the bed of the cavern ascended. The light came from above and beyond him, making visible the dripping stalactites that depended like giant icicles from the roof. It was a wondrous cave that he was in, and had he been less agitated in mind he might have thrilled with boyish joy in this adventure among its gloomy corridors and steep ascents, where danger lurked and every trifling sound was magnified in the mysterious hollows and unexplored recesses. But his only thought now was to escape into the outer air, and to join his companions, if they could be found.

Against the blackness of the rock he discerned white specks which stirred restlessly as he drew near them, and resolved themselves into roosting sea-birds. Many

stretched forth their heads and squirted jets of rancid oil at him as he passed too near to them ; others lifted their wings and flew silently away, all in the same direction, towards the light ; and once a great wild swan stood in his path, hissing menacingly, and spreading its wide pinions as if to bar his way. A shaft of pale light fell upon the bird's plumage, giving it a ghostly whiteness.

Martin forced his way past, and came abruptly into a wider vault, whose uneven floor was flooded with silvery radiance. Was it the light of day ? He did not know how long he had been in the cavern, and could not calculate the passage of time. He halted and felt for his watch, remembering that he had not wound it since setting it by the ship's chronometer. The watch now marked twelve o'clock, and was still ticking. He judged that it must be midnight ; and in that case the radiance could not be reflected sunshine, but the light of the moon.

He stood up and went onward more quickly, until beyond a sharp turn he came suddenly into the brightness of the moon itself, shining in a clear sky through an opening in the rock, and a joyous thrill coursed in his veins. He would have run if his sprained ankle and barked shins had not made even walking painful. He quickly recognised that this was not the opening by which he had entered the cave. It was low and narrow, scarcely larger than a church door ; but the other was lofty and broad, and arched like the nave of a Gothic cathedral. Nevertheless, it gave issue into the outer air. He

could feel the fresh breeze upon his cheeks ; he could hear the breaking of the waves, and the mad rattle of shingle as the retreating water drew it down.

He limped painfully as he slowly made his way into the fuller light. Suddenly he stopped and drew back with a sharp gasp ; for he had seen when almost too late that the sea was far beneath him, and that the place where he stood was at a dizzy altitude under the brows of a frowning precipice, from which there was no possible access to the rocks below. If he had taken but one step farther he must have been hurled headlong to certain death. He trembled to think how narrowly he had escaped, and he held on nervously to the gnarled granite wall at his side.

Yet to make sure that there was no way downward to the beach, he went again upon his hands and knees, and craned forward until his eyes were at the brink, and he could look down into the depths. But all was dark and perilous, and his brain reeled in very terror. He could see the glisten of the waves where the moon's light touched them ; but there were no rocks visible, and no sign of a beach could he discover. It seemed to him that the mighty precipice rose sheer out of the unfathomable depths of the Atlantic.

And now, what was he to do ? It was evident to him that he had better have waited at the spot where Frank Kershaw had left him ; for it was clear that he had strayed far away from all possible help. If Kershaw and Gregson should come to search for him, they, too, might lose themselves as he now was lost.

He dreaded the thought of re-entering the cavern; but his only chance lay in trying to find his way back to where Frank would look for him, and he crept in away from the friendly moonlight, and once more faced the awful darkness, creeping, as before, on hands and knees. He had not taken his bearings, and he could only trust to finding his way blindly through the mysterious corridors carved by Nature in the solid granite. He went on and on, not knowing if he was going as he had come. There were no marks, no stones, no interposing boulders that his touch could recognise.

A sense of awful fear came over him; a fear that he was doomed to wander through the darkness for days that were undistinguished from blackest night, until at last he should be forced to lie down in his hopeless weariness to die.

How long he had vainly crept he could not tell. But at last he realised most surely that he had gone astray. For the floor was no longer rent and broken by a confusion of rocks and stalagmites, but was smooth and level. But once again his heart leapt with quick satisfaction at the sight of the moon's radiance. It burst suddenly upon him, shining through a narrow cleft, and sending a silvery shaft of brightness into a vast chamber in which half a battalion of soldiers might have stood. He rose to his feet, and was about to stride forward when the sight that met his gaze made him shrink back with a smothered cry.

Straight in front of him, in the midst of the beam



THE SIGHT THAT MET HIS GAZE MADE HIM SHRINK BACK
WITH A SMOTHERED CRY.—*Page 160.*



of moonlight, he saw the form of a man, leaning as if asleep, with his head upon his folded arms across what looked like a table. His bent figure was in shadow, with the light coming from beyond it, but Martin could see that he wore a long coat, and that his hat was tilted on one side, obscuring his face and neck.

Standing in trepidation, scarcely breathing lest he should awaken the sleeper, Martin glanced round to see if he had any companions. He seemed to be alone. What was he doing here, in this chill, inhospitable cave, with neither fire nor the appearance of food, destitute of human comfort? Was he, perchance, a ship-broken mariner stranded here in this desolate place with no companions but the birds that shared his solitude? If so, then it might be that he would not be sorry to have speech with a human creature. He might even be willing to lead the way down to the sea, where Kershaw and the others were waiting and had food to offer.

Martin Venner ventured to go nearer to him, very silently. The sleeper did not stir. He seemed to be very sound asleep. Martin stole to the farther side of him, intending to waken him with a gentle touch. He drew close to him, and raised his hand to lay it upon the man's shoulder. His shadow moved eerily across the grimy coat that was not of the fashion of these later days. Martin bent over him, listening to hear him breathe. As he did so, he caught sight of the man's moonlit face and hands, and he started back with a cry of horror, for they were the face and hands of a fleshless skeleton.

CHAPTER XIX.

SKELETON CAVERN.

VENNER stared at the dead man, trembling violently. He dared not move to go nearer or to escape from the appalling sight of the fleshless hands, the gaunt, grinning jaws, and empty eye-sockets; but stood there in the faint moonlight with bated breath, while his heart thumped against his sides, and his very hair seemed to stand on end.

As he stared he became conscious that the skeleton's long wrists and ankles were bound with rusty chains, and that the support upon which his elbows rested was not a table, as he had at first supposed, but a large square chest, whose heavy lid was thrown back. The chest was full, and its contents, whatever they might be, were deeply covered with the refuse of sea-birds.

It was clear that the man, while still alive, had been imprisoned in this vast cavern, perhaps without food, and that his last hours had been spent in turning over his useless possessions. How long a time had he been here, estranged from the world, living in this fearful solitude? How long was it since he had died, leaving his body to be pecked at by the wild birds? What remained of his clothing showed him to be of a remote age. He seemed to have worn knee-breeches,

for the lower bones of his legs were entirely exposed, excepting for a pair of low shoes, into which his loose stockings had fallen.

Even as Martin stood there the moon's light moved aside, and a dark shadow was cast upon the skeleton, making it appear less fearful. But as it slowly moved it shed luminance upon the open chest, and for an instant Martin caught the glint of something that shone with dazzling lustre. Then all was dark.

Martin dreaded to remain longer in the close presence of that dead man. Yet where was he to go? How was he to find his way out from this vast cave, with its tortuous corridors and unknown perils?

He went down upon his hands and knees and crept away. All around him was black darkness; no sound reached his ears, saving his own agitated breathing and a faint murmur, which he took to be the breaking of the waves outside. He tried to follow in the direction whence he believed this murmur to come. Slowly he crept along the hard rock floor, but no gleam of light, no lessening of the deep darkness could he see, and he gave way to despair. His knees and hands were sore and bleeding, hunger gripped him, and his eyes were heavy with weariness. He stretched himself out upon the rock, resolving to try to sleep until the coming of daylight. He put forth his hand in search of some smooth surface upon which to rest his head. His fingers touched something that felt like a thin bar of wood, and he gripped it, drawing it towards him. As he did so there was a strange

crunching sound close beside him, something fell with a hollow rattle, a dry, musty odour reached his nostrils, and his hands came in contact with a little pile of loose bones and rotten cloth.

With a cry of horror, he drew back, realising that in his search he had unconsciously returned to the place from which he had started creeping, and that the thing which he had mistaken for a bar of wood was nothing else than one of the leg-bones of the skeleton. In catching hold of it he had disturbed the dead man's balance, and the whole skeleton had fallen over, collapsing into a confused mass of disjointed bones and mouldy clothing.

Trembling in every limb, Martin dragged himself away, stumbling over the uneven floor, but not pausing until he had reached a spot which he knew to be many yards removed from the gruesome remains. There he flung himself down, and lay shivering as he tried to forget his terrible surroundings in sleep.

How long he had lain there he could not have told, nor could he have been sure that he had slept, but many hours seemed to have passed when at length he was aware that in the distant recesses of the cave there was a faint glow of twilight.

He rose to his feet and made his difficult way towards the part where the light was fullest. On and on he went, and at last he discovered that the light had its source in a long, natural shaft that pierced the roof of the cavern. Looking upward, he could see the grey morning sky, and the sight of it

filled him with joy and thankfulness. But his joy was short-lived, for although the light penetrated into the cave, yet it revealed no way by which he could hope to gain the outer air and free himself from his imprisonment. Nevertheless, it enabled him to survey his immediate surroundings and to make out the direction of the main passage in which he now stood.

The floor sloped downward, and in this he was satisfied, for he knew that during his long wanderings he had reached a level high above that of the sea. It seemed to him that he had come into a part of the cavern through which he had previously passed. He tried to remember by which ways he had turned, so that by retracing his steps he might come at last into the narrow cleft where Frank Kershaw had left him. On and on he went, and with each step he became more hopeful.

Suddenly he stopped and stood listening. Faintly at first, but presently more distinctly, he heard the cries of many sea-birds clamouring as if they had been disturbed or as if they were leaving their roosting-places to fly out to the sea. Then, amid the clamour, he heard a yet more familiar sound, which made his heart bound. It was the unmistakable sound of a man's husky cough.

He tried to call aloud, but it was only a very feeble call that came from his parched lips, and he feared that it could not be heard. He clambered over the jagged rocks almost at random, not knowing for certain whether he was approaching or going away from the

lower corridors of the cave. But at length, climbing over a huge boulder, he came abruptly into a flood of daylight, and his face was fanned by the fresh morning air that came in from off the sea.

Down below him he could distinguish a level slope of shingle, dotted over with white birds, that strutted busily about among the pools left by the retreating tide. And yet nearer to him, on a wide, flat slab of rock, he saw a small pile of bags and boxes, which he recognised as being part of the stores which Gregson and Dewar had brought ashore from the wrecked boat.

He was about to let himself slip down the face of the rock, when in turning he caught sight of two men running quickly across the shingle. As they ran there was a loud report of a pistol, and one of them fell.

CHAPTER XX.

JACK HOBSON.

“VENNER’S met with an accident!” cried Frank Kershaw, when, after great difficulty in clambering over the slippery rocks, he at last came back within hail of the wrecked boat.

Its occupants were sheltered from the chill night wind under a stretch of tarpaulin, which they had formed into a tent by raising it on an upright oar. Gregson and Dewar were smoking; the black cook and Joe Parry were asleep in the stern, with the dog between them. Gregson peeped out from under the tarpaulin, swinging a lighted lantern in his hand.

“I was beginning to think that both of you’d met with an accident,” he responded to Frank’s excited announcement. “What’s kep’ you so long? All you was sent for was to find a place where we could stow the food above ’igh-water mark. Ain’t you found one?”

“Yes,” Frank answered breathlessly. “There’s a great cavern yonder. It’s inside the cavern that Venner has fallen down between two rocks. He can’t get out. Come quick, and help him! We shall want a lantern and a coil of rope.”

“Right you are!” Gregson passed the lantern to Frank. “Lay ’old of this, and lead the way,” he said. “But we may as well start to carry the stuff ashore

at once. Come along, you chaps. Darkie, Joe, rouse yourselves, and 'elp get this 'ere cargo landed, d'ye 'ear?" He gave Billy a shove, that caused him to slip off the thwart where he lay and to fall with a splash into the bilge. The sudden plunge into the cold water effectually awakened him, and he struggled to his feet.

"Lay 'old of that there oil-stove and carry it ashore," Gregson ordered, and he set an example to the rest of his companions by hoisting a tin of biscuits to his shoulder.

Each took a burden according to his strength, and, followed by the dog, they made their perilous journey landward, staggering awkwardly as they strove to maintain a secure foothold on the beds of slimy seaweed, and stumbling often into deep pools left by the tide and hidden in the dark shadows.

Near to the base of the cliff and within sight of the mouth of the cavern, which showed black on the moonlit face of the precipice, Gregson called a halt, and rested his load on the top of a slab of rock.

"The tide'll soon be up to the boat, once it turns," he said to the carpenter, "but it'll be nigh daylight, anyway, before it's as 'igh as where we are now. Me and Frank's going into the cavern to 'elp Martin. You and the nigger and Joe might fetch two or three more loads ashore while we're inside."

Dewar dropped his case of condensed milk beside Gregson's tin of biscuits and Frank's bag of miscellaneous provisions.

"Ay, ay!" he nodded, and he signed to the cook

and Joe to accompany him back to the boat. The dog chose to remain beside the stores, where he curled himself up to resume his interrupted sleep.

Carrying a coil of rope and the lantern, Frank Kershaw led the way over the rocks to the vaulted cave. At the entrance he whistled loudly, and listened for Martin Venner's response. None came to him.

"Is 'e far in?" questioned Gregson.

"Yes, a good distance," returned Frank. "You see, the tide washes in here at high water, and we wanted to find a place where we should be safe."

"Lumme!" exclaimed Gregson, glancing in wonder from side to side and high up into the dimness of the roof. "I've read about caves and caverns, but I never 'eard tell of one as big as this. Why, a regiment of soldiers could 'ide in it!"

"Yes," agreed Frank. "I daresay it goes a long way in beyond where Venner and I were before he fell. We couldn't see anything like the end of it."

Farther within he whistled again and called Martin by name, but still there was no reply.

"I expect he has fainted," he decided. "He wasn't very strong, you know, after all the hardship he went through aboard the *Albatross*. And he hurt himself when he fell—perhaps more than he would admit. But I can find the place where I left him," he added, holding up the light so that its rays penetrated the darkness in front of him. "It's at the back of that wall of rock, that we've got to climb over. I'll go first, if you'll hold the light and the rope."

He scaled the slope of the jagged rock and crept to its farther edge, from which Martin had fallen. He leaned over.

"Mart," he called, "are you all right? Gregson's here."

He listened, yet no sound came to him but that of the dripping of water, and he drew back in despair. He went to where Gregson waited and bade the man climb up with him.

They held the light over the yawning fissure and peered down searchingly. Seeing nothing but the bare rock, they tied the lantern to the rope's end and lowered it until it touched the bottom of the crevice. Then Frank himself went down and made search.

"He's not here!" he cried.

"Are you sure we're at the right place?" questioned Gregson.

"Certain," Frank assured him. "I've found one of the matches that he struck. But he's gone, that's a sure thing. He must have managed to climb up, and he can't be so much hurt as I thought."

"You may lay 'e's gone back to the boat," said Gregson.

"But he didn't pass us," Frank insisted, "I'm sure of that. He couldn't go back without our seeing or hearing him. Hold tight the rope, I'm going to haul myself up by it."

He drew himself upward, hand over hand.

"I wonder if he has gone out by another way?" he reflected, when he stood again at Gregson's side.

"As like as not," returned Gregson. "I daresay there's more ways than the one we came in by. Any'ow, there's not a bit of good in our stopping in 'ere. If 'e's not found 'is way out, you may lay 'e's wandering about a-trying to get into the open air, for it's plain 'e ain't much 'urt and can manage to crawl, or else 'e'd be where you left 'im. Pipe your whistle again, and see if 'e don't answer this time."

Frank put his fingers between his lips and blew a shrill, long whistle. Gregson and he both called aloud repeatedly, but only the hollow echoes of their own voices came back to them, mingled with the guttural cries of the disturbed gulls.

On their way out to the open air they continued their search. It seemed impossible that Martin Venner, if he was still in the cave, should fail to hear their frequent calls, and they were content at last to believe that they would presently find him with their companions somewhere between the cavern and the wrecked boat.

As they emerged into the moonlight and came within sight of the place where they had deposited their loads, a dark figure appeared suddenly in front of them, creeping on all-fours across the rocks in the direction of the stores. The dog growled ominously.

"That you, Dave?" shouted Gregson, waving his lantern.

The figure stopped abruptly, and the dog broke into a savage bark.

Frank Kershaw caught at Gregson's arm.

"It's a stranger!" he whispered. "It must be one of the fellows who fired the rifle at us!"

As the stranger turned Gregson's light flashed into his face and upon his blue knitted guernsey. He was evidently a seaman. He rose to his feet, and seemed to draw back with a start of alarm. But if indeed he was alarmed, it was only momentarily, for, scrambling down from the rock, he slowly approached Gregson.

"I take it you're shipwrecked, like myself, mate," he began. "But you're in better luck than I was when I was cast away on this God-forsaken rock, for I see you've saved some food."

He cast a timid glance at Gregson and then at Kershaw as he spoke. Something about them seemed to perplex him strangely.

"Perhaps there's a chance of a bite of civilised grub," he pleaded. "There's not much to feed on here, except mussels and seaweed, and rotten eggs."

Gregson held the light so that it shone more directly on the man's face. It was a pale, woe-begone face, with a stubbly growth of brown beard about the sunken cheeks and retreating chin. There was a large wart on the starboard side of his prominent nose and a wild, hungry look about his eyes. He wore no cap, and his clothing was in tatters. A rent in one of the legs of his coarse trousers revealed a knee that was bleeding from a scar.

"You're welcome to a share of what we've got," Gregson hospitably informed him, "but that ain't

much, and won't last many days. Ain't there no natives on this 'ere island—no 'ouses or anything?"

The stranger shook his head.

"I've not come across any," he answered; "but I've not been able to explore it. No one could climb up these steep rocks, and there's no way round along the beach. Here where we're standing will be under water in another hour or so. I'd advise you to have these things carried up to one of the caves while there's time. If you'll keep that dog off, I'll help you and show you a place that's as good as a house to live in."

"Right you are!" agreed Gregson. "Our mates are bringing up more stuff from the boat yonder, but we needn't wait for 'em. Frank, look arter the dog and keep 'im quiet. 'E don't seem to take to strangers."

"How many are you?" questioned the stranger, edging away from the retriever's vicinity.

Gregson once more took up his tin of biscuits.

"We're six, all told," he answered. "We've just pulled ashore from a barque, that we left sinking beyond the headland, there. Perhaps you saw the craft before she foundered?"

The stranger was bending down to lift the case of condensed milk.

"I never noticed any barque," he returned. "I've been asleep in one of the caves since sundown, and only wakened when I heard some noise or other, like the firing of a gun."

"Oh, then it wasn't you, after all, that fired that rifle at us?" Gregson presumed, with satisfaction.

“Rifle!” The man looked up in surprise. “Where do you suppose that I could get a rifle from?” he asked. “And what should make me fire it off at a shipwrecked crew that were bringing food ashore to save me from starvation? No, mate, I’m not one of that sort.”

He lifted the wooden case to his shoulder and took a second burden in his free hand.

“I daresay the shot was fired by one of your own mates in the other boat,” he suggested.

“There was only the one boat,” Gregson told him. “We came off with all ’ands—brought even the dog along of us.”

The stranger paused in turning to lead the way to the cave he had mentioned.

“I thought you said she was a barque,” he pursued. “How does it happen that she had no more than a crew of six?”

Gregson uttered the one ominous word, “Mutiny.”

“Mutiny!” The other echoed the word with eager interest. “What did you say was the name of her?” he questioned quickly.

“The *Albatross*, of Liverpool,” said Gregson, “outward bound for Copen’agen.”

For an instant the stranger staggered under the weight of his load. He stared curiously from Gregson to Frank Kershaw.

“That’s queer!” he muttered. “She was painted green, wasn’t she? Yes, I thought so. I’ve seen the craft, seen her lying in the Salthouse Dock.”

Gregson smiled in the light of the lantern.

“I guessed by your voice that you belonged to Liverpool,” he remarked. “What might be your name?”

The answer came hesitatingly. “My name? Jack Hobson.”

Frank Kershaw had some trouble in holding the dog. The animal seemed to have taken a sudden dislike to Jack Hobson. Not until the two men had disappeared among the gloomy shadows of the cliff did it cease to growl and struggle. By this time Dewar and Billy Neptune could be seen moving in the moonlight near at hand, with their loads on their shoulders. Frank went to meet them, hoping to learn that Martin Venner was down at the boat. But they could tell him nothing.

When they had deposited their burdens, he left the lantern and accompanied them back to the boat, helping them to bring ashore further portions of the stores that they had saved. Joe Parry had hurt himself in slipping off one of the rocks, and it was not until they were making their fourth and last journey that he came ashore with them. Gregson carried him up to the cave and made a bed for him.

The moon had now moved round behind the headland, leaving the beach in darkness, but with the help of the lantern the four men worked to carry their provisions within the mouth of Hobson's cave, and when they were assured that everything was secure against the rising tide they opened a tin of biscuits and a can of preserved meat, and Dewar served round measured portions of the food, of which all partook

excepting Billy Neptune, who immediately upon being released from work flung himself down and went off into a sound sleep.

Kershaw was disposed to follow the negro's example. After his long day's toil, he was too weary almost to eat. But before he fell asleep he was conscious that Jack Hobson was telling his companions of how he had been wrecked in a brig named the *Julia*, and had saved himself by swimming to land, all his shipmates having perished.

The men smoked. Gradually their voices subsided into an indistinct murmur in Frank's ears. During the night he awoke once or twice, disturbed by hearing the men moving about, seemingly engaged in carrying the stores to the inner parts of the cave. He wondered why they should trouble to do this before daylight, for the lantern had burnt itself out and they were working in black darkness; but he heard the waves breaking noisily near at hand, and he supposed that the tide was threatening to invade their retreat, and that it was perhaps necessary to remove the provisions to a safer position. It occurred to him that there were more than three men at work. He wondered if Martin Venner had come back.

"Mart!" he called once. "Are you there?"

"Go to sleep, young 'un!" he heard Jack Hobson command in a quick whisper.

Soon all was silent again, excepting for the beating of the waves and the rattle of loose shingle as the waves drew back.

He slept heavily until morning.

CHAPTER XXI.

A NEW MISFORTUNE.

WHEN he awoke the outer air was filled with the raucous cries of the sea-birds. He propped himself on an elbow and glanced out at the mouth of the cave. A cold, grey mist obscured the sea, and through it he could distinguish the shadowy shapes of the rocks and the moving forms of many gulls. His companions were still asleep—the black cook with his woolly head nestling against the dog. Gregson lying at full length on his back, with his arm bent under his neck for a pillow; the carpenter curled up under a blanket, with his empty pipe between his lips; Joe Parry in the same position that he had fallen into hours before, with his head resting on a parcel of cartridges.

Frank looked at his watch, which he had not forgotten to wind, and saw that it was nearly eight o'clock. He was cold and hungry, and he resolved to make himself useful to his comrades by preparing breakfast for them. He knew that the materials for the meal had been brought into the cave—an oil-stove, a tin kettle, and a breaker of fresh water, a parcel of tea, as well as one of ground coffee and another of sugar. There was an abundance of condensed milk and a variety of biscuits. He was not sure that the cook had not also brought a ham, although how it

was to be cooked was not evident. Frank reflected that he might find some sea-birds' eggs, and that these if boiled in the kettle would serve as a relish. There was prospect, indeed, of providing a meal quite as good as one to be had in a ship's fore-castle.

He did not know where the stores had been removed to, but he surmised that Gregson had had them carried beyond the screen of a tall boulder that divided the cave into two compartments. He therefore crawled into the dark recesses of the inner chamber, feeling with hands and feet in search of what he expected to find there. But he found nothing. The stores were not there. Neither did he discover any passage through which they might have been carried still farther into the cavern.

Disappointed, he returned to the place where he had slept, resolving to leave the preparation of the breakfast to Billy Neptune, whose proper business it was to attend to such duties.

Gregson was now sitting up, rubbing his eyes and yawning.

"This air makes a chap 'ungry, as well as sleepy," the seaman remarked, nodding to Frank. "A rasher of bacon and a cup of 'ot coffee would suit me down to the ground, after I've 'ad my morning bath among them green waves. Give the nigger a stir with your toe, Frank, and tell 'im to light the galley fire. 'E ought to 'ave been out of 'is bunk hours ago."

He looked about him searchingly. His face showed sudden consternation.

“Lumme!” he cried, jumping excitedly to his feet. “What’s ’appened? What’s become of all our grub?”

Frank regarded him confusedly.

“That’s what I’ve just been wondering,” he said. “Where have you moved it to?”

“*Me* move it!” cried Gregson. “What d’you mean? The stuff was ’ere safe as nails before I dropped off to sleep. And now it’s gone!”

“Why, you moved it yourself,” Frank insisted; “you and Dewar and Billy and that chap Hobson. I heard you at it in the middle of the night.”

Gregson frowned. “None of your schoolboy larks!” he cautioned seriously. “Where’s all our grub gone? *I* never touched it; neither did Dave, nor the nigger, nor Joe. The sea ’asn’t took it, nor yet the birds that are kicking up such a row outside.” He glanced at his sleeping comrades. “’Ello!” he cried. “Where’s ’Obson?”

Frank followed his glance, and realised for the first time since waking that Hobson was absent. In the same instant he realised what had occurred. He caught at Gregson’s arm.

“Wait a bit!” he cried. “I’m beginning to understand. Hobson has tricked us, that’s plain. It was a lie he told you when he said that he came ashore alone. He has got companions on the island. It must have been them that fired the gun at us as we were pulling ashore. And now they have robbed us—robbed us of everything except that bundle of useless cartridges that Joe’s got for a pillow.”

"You may gamble the cartridges won't be useless if I can get a sight of the varmints!" declared Gregson, drawing his revolver to assure himself that it was fully charged. He gave the negro cook a vigorous prod with his foot, and similarly aroused the carpenter and Joe Parry.

Joe sprang up with a frightened cry, and stared wildly into the men's faces.

"You startled me!" he faltered. "I thought it was Griggs and Jansen—and—and I'm certain I heard Griggs speaking. He said, 'Go to sleep, young 'un.' Yes, it was Griggs for certain."

"Griggs!" repeated Frank Kershaw. "It was Hobson who said that."

"Mates," exclaimed Gregson, in sudden consternation, "I see it all now! It's as plain as plain. We've fallen foul of the mutineers. They're 'ere, on this 'ere island. It's them that have played us this trick, the murdering scoundrels! Let me get at 'em!"

He strove to the mouth of the cave and peeped cautiously out, as if he expected to find the mutineers hiding round the projection of the first rock. "Come along, you chaps," he urged. "Ain't you going to lend a 'and to root 'em out and get back our grub?"

"We don't know how many of them there may be," demurred the carpenter.

"There can't be many," Gregson conjectured, "else they'd 'ave wakened us. Why, they didn't even disturb the dog, or you may lay it would 'ave barked."

The carpenter shook his head in doubt.

"It's true that the dog didn't bark," said he, "but then, if the men who stole our food were the mutineers of the *Albatross*, the beast would know them and let them do what they wanted."

"Yes, there's some sense in that, mate," agreed Gregson. "That seems to be a kind of proof that they were the mutineers. And yet, 'ow do it 'appen that young Joe 'ere didn't recognise the fellow that palled up to us? Both Joe and the nigger ought to 'ave known 'im, if only by 'is voice."

"So they might have done," interposed Frank Kershaw, "but Hobson was careful not to show his face in the lantern light or to speak a word when either Joe or Billy happened to be near."

"There was no man named Hobson aboard the *Albatross*," added Joe Parry.

"I daresay not," nodded Gregson, "but you don't suppose that a man who'd done a job like that would go about telling 'is true name, and especially to them that 'ad just come off the same ship. It's a certainty 'Obson's not alone. What 'e told us last night about being shipwrecked must be all lies, made up to put us off the scent while 'e got us to tell 'im 'ow we came aboard. It's no wonder they fired on us to prevent us coming ashore and finding 'em 'ere."

"They'll be even less willing to let us escape from the island," said Dewar.

"Likely enough," assented Gregson, "seeing that we could get every mother's son of them 'anged. But we've got to tackle them some'ow."

"Remember they're desperate, and have got firearms," cautioned Dewar.

"And so are we desperate ourselves," returned Gregson, "and we've got firearms as well as they, and must use 'em, too, if we don't want to die of starvation." He glanced at his revolver. "Are you ready, mates?" he asked.

He crawled out over the weed-covered stones. The carpenter, Billy Neptune, and Frank Kershaw went close behind him, and Joe Parry, dreading to be left alone unprotected, followed as quickly as his weak condition would allow him. The dog crept at his heels.

Gregson searched for some sign which would show which way the stolen provisions had been carried, but the desolate beach told him nothing. The startled sea-birds flew about with noisy cries of alarm, but there was no trace of human presence. He stopped.

"We've come far enough," he said. "I reckon we ought to 'ave gone the other way."

He was about to turn back, when the negro touched him on the arm and stood sniffing the cold morning air.

"What's up?" questioned Gregson. "What are you smelling at?"

Billy Neptune grinned and whispered the word "coffee," the while he pointed to a fissure in the cliff not many yards away. He went down on his hands and knees and crept cautiously up the beach, watched by his companions until he disappeared behind a

projecting boulder. Presently he returned, as silently as he had gone.

"Them in there for true," he reported. "Them fry plenty bacon. You no niff?"

Gregson sniffed.

"Yes," he said; "I reckon I can make out the smell of 'am and eggs. They seem to be enjoying themselves at our expense. 'Ow many of 'em did you see, Billy?"

The African held up four fingers, and, touching each finger in turn, pronounced the names of Jansen, Griggs, Rossi, and Haldane.

"Then there's no mistake about them being the mutineers," reflected Gregson. "Four of 'em, you say? Well, we're five, and we ought to be a match for that lot if we take 'em with a rush. Seeing what they are, and three of 'em foreigners, too. I don't suppose it would be counted a great crime if we was to shoot one or two of them down. What do you say, Dave? Shall we take 'em by surprise?"

The carpenter shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm thinking there would be little use in asking them for a share of the food," said he. "We must just take it back by force." He got ready his revolver.

All five of them stole quietly along the base of the cliff, and drew to a halt beside the boulder. Gregson presently went farther, until he came in front of a wide chasm, from which a spacious cave opened. Within the opening he could see the stack of stolen

provisions. Near it stood the man who had called himself Hobson, bending over the lighted oil-stove busily cooking the food, which sent forth its appetising smell. Beyond him three other foreign-looking men were seated on empty packing-cases.

Gregson observed their positions in the cave, and withdrew to give instructions to his comrades as to their mode of attack. He and Dewar were to run in and cover the mutineers with their revolvers; then the two boys and Billy Neptune were to follow, prepared to act. In their agitation none observed that the retriever had strayed from them. When Dewar and Gregson advanced the dog had already found its way into the cave and given the alarm.

At sight of the dog Griggs stepped back from the stove and snatched up a revolver from the top of one of the boxes.

“Look out there, mates!” he cried. “We’re discovered! Look alive!”

His companions sprang to their feet. A shadow crossed the entrance of the cave. Two men ran in over the loose shingle. Griggs fired; Dewar fell. He fired a second shot, and Gregson staggered, flung up his arms, and rolled over.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE CRY FROM THE DEPTHS.

IT was at this moment that Martin Venner, struggling in the darkness to find his way out to the open air, came abruptly into this same cavern by a narrow, natural passage high up in its granite roof. He had emerged suddenly into a shaft of daylight, and his nostrils had been greeted with the grateful odours of coffee and fried bacon.

Creeping forward, and looking down over the wall of rock upon which he was perched, he saw the dog running to and fro. His heart leapt with quick joy as he realised that at last he had discovered his friends. He saw Dewar and Gregson running inward, but did not observe that they carried their pistols. They had not advanced many steps when the shot was fired and Dewar fell. Craning over the edge of the rock, Martin then saw his old enemy Griggs, with a smoking revolver in his outstretched hand—Griggs, who had scuttled the *Albatross* and left him, Martin Venner, bound up with ropes in the forecastle to go down with the sinking ship. Behind him were four or five other men, and among them were Jansen and José Rossi.

How did these men, these mutineers and murderers, chance to be here on this island and in this cave in possession of the stores?

Martin was asking himself this question when a second shot rang out, and he saw Gregson stagger and fall upon his face, not far from where the carpenter lay, apparently mortally wounded. Martin was impelled to hasten to the help of his shipmates, even at the risk of himself being shot. Turning over with his face to the rock, he let himself slip down to the lower level of shingle, and was preparing to rush forward when he became aware that someone was moving close to him in the shadow. He drew back in alarm, thinking at first that it was one of the mutineers who had discovered him. Then, seeing whose figure it was outlined against the grey light, he put forth his hand.

“Frank!” he whispered. “Don’t speak a word! It’s me—Martin Venner.”

In his fright Frank Kershaw dropped the revolver that he held and pulled himself away from the hand that had been laid on his shoulder. But Martin caught at him again and forcibly drew him to his side.

“Wait here. We must hide,” he said, still in a cautious whisper.

Their hands met in a trembling grip. They pressed themselves back against the rock, where they could not be seen, and there they stood for many palpitating moments watching.

Jansen and Griggs strode to where Dewar and Gregson struggled to regain their feet.

“We’ve done for these two, anyway,” Griggs muttered. “They won’t give us any trouble now.”

The boys and the nigger don't matter so much; we can soon settle their hash." He put out his foot and kicked away the revolver from the carpenter's fingers, that sought to use it against him.

Jansen knelt with a knee upon Gregson's back and seized the hand that still held its weapon. In the brief and unequal struggle Gregson managed to pull the trigger. The bullet struck the top of the cooking-stove, upsetting the tin lid of the biscuit-box which Griggs had been using as a frying-pan. The spilled bacon gravy caught fire, and Griggs ran back to rescue the burning food.

Three of his comrades hastened to Jansen's help, and the watching boys, dreading to interfere, saw them dragging the two wounded men out towards the mouth of the cave, where they seemed to leave them to their fate, for after a while they returned to continue their interrupted breakfast.

Griggs shared the cooked bacon between himself and his two particular companions, Jansen and Rossi, leaving the others to help themselves to biscuits and tinned meat. They all ate greedily, as if they had been deprived of food for many days. The dog crept hungrily near them, searching for morsels that he might steal, but they chased him away with stones and curses.

"We shall have to do away with that tike," said Griggs, "or else it will be helping itself to our food, and there's little enough, even for ourselves. How long do you think it will last us, Jan, if we're careful?"

Jansen glanced round at the pile of boxes and bags.

"A veek, no more," he calculated. "But ve voss in luck, eh? Without it ve must have been gompelled to eat our boots."

Griggs shook his head.

"A week! We shall have to make it last longer than that," he said. "We must overhaul it and deal it out in rations, for I don't see where we're going to get any more when this is finished. If the gulls' eggs had been anyway fresh, now, they might have done to feed on for months, but I suppose it's not the breeding season, and that's why they're all so rotten and addled and fishy."

He looked out to the strip of sea that could be seen from where he sat on an upturned packing-case.

"We've made a rare mess of this job," he reflected. "We'd better by far have stuck to the ship and sold her when we got across to one of the South American ports."

"That's just what I said before you made up your mind to scuttle her," interposed Rossi. "My plan was to wait until we got across the Atlantic and then do the business properly. But you were all of you in too much hurry to get her into your hands. And then, when we had done for Captain Teach and the rest of them, and only had to paint her black instead of green, you were fool enough to bore a hole in her. What have you gained by it all? Nothing! Why, you are not even sure that you will ever get

back to Liverpool to claim the reward from old Crosby."

"How much voss you going to get for boring the hole in the ship?" Jansen questioned.

"That's my affair," returned Griggs.

"Not half of what you would have made if we had sold her in Monte Video," commented Rossi.

"No," added Jansen, with a scowl; "and even as it voss you didn't do the vork properly, but left the ship floating about, to be picked up by the first vessel vot come along. You make a gross bungle of it all, Mister Griggs."

"What I want to know," said Rossi, "is how we are going to get away from this island before we're all dead of starvation."

Griggs gave an impatient toss to his head.

"I expect some ship will pick us up sooner or later," said he.

"Yes," nodded Jansen, with a grim smile, "pick us up, and also pick up those vot landed from the boat last night—those vot vill tell everything and get us all hanged, eh?"

"The two that ran in here just now won't be alive to tell anything," was Griggs' cool rejoinder. "As for the cook and two boys—Joe Parry and the youngster that was put aboard from the *Mary Brown*—we can easily stop their mouths in the same way, if they're not done for by starvation before help comes along."

Jansen took a long drink of the boiled coffee, then,

wiping his lips with the back of his tattooed left hand, he asked—

“The other von—young Venner—voss not with them, you say?”

Griggs shook his head.

“No,” he answered; “I don’t know what has become of young Venner. I expect he died aboard the ship. He’s well out of the way, anyhow.”

Martin Venner and Frank Kershaw, overhearing this cold-blooded conversation, held in their breath, fearful lest they should be discovered. Frank had already stretched forth his hand and recovered the revolver which he had dropped, and now he passed it silently into Martin’s fingers as a hint that it might be employed to good purpose.

But Martin trembled, hesitating.

Just as he was making up his mind to shoot, Griggs rose to his feet and strode to the opening of the cave. Rossi, Jansen, and the rest of the mutineers slowly followed him.

“The food!” whispered Frank Kershaw, and he made a step forward to go and seize some. Martin pulled him back.

“Wait!” he cautioned.

As he spoke a dark figure stole noiselessly out from beside them, and with incredible speed a pair of black hands snatched up one of the tins of biscuits and carried it back into the deep shadow.

“Quick, Billy, another!” whispered Martin, taking hold of the box that the negro had brought.

Again Billy Neptune stole across the dividing space. This time he seized an opened tin of preserved beef and whatever else he could lay his hands on.

"Where's Joe?" questioned Martin, when the negro returned to his side.

"I'm here, alongside of you," came Joe Parry's feeble voice as he touched Mart's arm. "Billy and me have been here all the time."

"Listen, then!" said Martin, in a quick, imperative whisper. "I know a place where we can hide ourselves. Come! We've got to climb this rock. I'll go first. Give me a hold of the biscuits when I get up, Billy, and then you and Frank fetch the other stuff."

He clambered up the steep, jagged boulder, and, lying flat on the top of it, reached down and took the things up one by one that the cook handed to him. When he had deposited them securely behind him, he helped each of his companions in turn to join him in his retreat; first Joe Parry, then Frank, and lastly Billy Neptune.

Billy had got his knee against the rock and was hauling himself up when footsteps were heard on the shingle below, and Martin, looking down, saw Jansen and Rossi returning into the cave, searching in its nooks and corners. He gave Billy a strong pull inward, and brought him into safety just as Jansen turned and strode directly to the place where all four of them had stood only a few moments before,

and where he must certainly have found them had they lingered. A stone, dislodged by Billy's eagerly gripping fingers, fell rattling at his feet, but the four fugitives made no further sound. The passage into which they had escaped was hidden by the tall detached rock in front of it, and they were not discovered.

It was a low, narrow passage, and so dark that it was impossible for them to see each other. They could only feel their way into its farther recesses, following Martin Venner on hands and knees.

When they had gone a dozen yards or so they stopped, crouching closely together.

"We're safe here for a bit," Martin assured them. "I came into this tunnel only a little while ago, when I was trying to find my way out to you all. I've had an awful night of it. I thought I should never escape."

"Gregson and I searched for you," explained Kershaw, "but you'd gone from the place where I left you. Why didn't you stop?"

"Because I got my foot free," returned Venner, "and I thought I could get out by a nearer way. But the farther I went the more I lost myself. This cave goes a tremendous way in. You might wander in it for weeks without finding an outlet. What about Gregson and Dewar? Can't we try to help them?"

"I don't think so," sighed Kershaw. "You heard the shots, didn't you? Both of them were hit, and

they didn't look as if it would be any good our trying to rescue them. Dewar was shot in the forehead, and Gregson in the chest. That fellow that fired at them didn't mean them to escape."

"It was Griggs that fired," said Venner. "That's the man who scuttled the *Albatross*. What has he done with Dewar and Gregson? Did you see?"

Joe Parry here spoke. "I saw what they did," he explained. "They dragged the two of them out to the beach, and Rossi bent over them and struck them. I think it was with a knife."

"My goodness!" cried Martin Venner. "I wish I'd shot him when Frank gave me the revolver!"

"What's to be done?" questioned Kershaw. "It'll be our turn next if we fall into the hands of these brutes!"

"We must keep out of their sight," decided Mart.

"But we can't live in here without food," objected Frank.

Billy Neptune had been silent, but now he said—

"You think them sabey if I make a light one time?"

"We're too far in for them to see us," returned Venner. "Have you got a match?"

Billy answered by striking a wax vesta on the leg of his trousers. He held up the light, and the boys saw that in his other hand he clutched a large cardboard box full of such matches.

"We're rich!" nodded Venner. "Don't waste any of those, Billy; we shall need every one of them. Now, where are the biscuits? We might have something to eat."

Kershaw served round two biscuits each, and the cook added four morsels of preserved meat, which he managed to carve with his knife while Martin held a succession of lighted vestas. They ate the food ravenously, for they were all desperately hungry.

"I wish we had something to drink," Joe Parry faintly complained. "I'd rather have a mouthful of water than anything."

"I've heard that a fellow can live longer without food than without water," remarked Kershaw disconsolately.

"There's not much hope of our getting any water here," added Venner. "How many biscuits are there in the box? It didn't seem to be very full."

"It isn't even half-full," Frank told him, as he took hold of the tin box and proceeded to count its contents. "There's twenty-five, that's all; six each and one over. You'd better have the odd one yourself, Mart. You had nothing last night."

Martin took the proffered biscuit and divided it into quarters, giving a piece to each of his companions.

"Now we can start even," he said. "But what's in the other parcels?"

Frank felt about in the darkness for the rest of the things which the cook had so fortunately secured.

"You might as well have left these where you found them, Billy," he presently said, in a tone of disappointment. "They're not a bit of use to us. One is a parcel of tobacco, and we none of us smoke. Another is ground coffee. What's the good of that

when we've got no water? There's a third bundle here, though," he continued. "I don't fancy it's anything to eat, by the feel of it. No!" he decided; "it's nothing but a big ball of string!"

"You no speak so loud!" cautioned Billy Neptune. "Listen! Them men out there, them fight!"

The boys sat very still, listening. Through the narrow passage by which they had come they could hear voices raised in anger.

"I tell you I never touched it!" said one. It was the voice of José Rossi.

"But I left it there, on the top of the box, when I went out, and no one but you and Jan has been near it," was the angry retort of Jimmy Griggs. "Who else could have touched it?"

"Yes, it voss there, righd enough, ven ve voss eading our breakfast," chimed in Jansen. "Berhaps der dog have daken it, eh?"

Frank Kershaw put his hand on Martin's knee.

"It's the tobacco they have missed," he whispered. "Shall we throw it back to 'em?"

"No," said Martin; "we must keep it. Later on we can give them some in exchange for food. Men like those would do anything for a smoke."

"They don't seem to guess that we have been in the cave," said Frank. "I made sure that Jansen spied us."

"It's a good thing he didn't," pursued Venner. "We're safe not to be followed. They would never find us here; but we can keep a watch on them, and if they all go out of the cave we can help ourselves to

something better than tobacco and string. We can also keep an eye on them, and wait until they're asleep or eating, so that we may steal out to the open air. I believe there's lots of ways to get out. These caverns seem all to run into one another like rabbit burrows."

"I don't see that we shall be much better off if we do get out," Frank resumed. "We can't get any more food, and that's what we most need. Neither can we escape from the island, for there's no boat."

"What about the one that Griggs and his mates came in?" questioned Joe. "They put off from the ship in the quarter-boat, and they must have left it beached somewhere."

"To be sure they must," agreed Martin. "If we could get possession of it and pull out to sea, even without any provisions, we should at least be better off than trying to exist imprisoned here in this dark cave and perishing of hunger and thirst, like the two poor chaps whose bones I found when I was wandering about last night—two shipwrecked seamen I suppose they were, although one of them——"

"Don't talk like that, Mart," pleaded Kershaw. "We're badly enough off without being told of others who have starved to death in similar situations. Scores and scores of seamen have been cast upon desert islands, and have yet been rescued."

They ceased speaking. But not many minutes had gone by before the utter darkness and silence became painfully oppressive.

"I wish you wouldn't all be so quiet," said Joe Parry. "It makes me feel fearfully lonely crouching here. I don't think I can stand it much longer. I shall go mad. Can't we do something to make us forget?"

"You hold my hand one time, Joe," said Billy Neptune; "then you no feel afraid."

"It would be some sort of occupation and would pass the time if we were to try to explore the cavern," proposed Frank.

"Yes," returned Martin, "if we could be sure of finding our way back here. We don't want to get lost, you know."

"I read a fairy tale once," returned Frank. "It was about a fellow who wanted to find his way in and out of a labyrinth, and a girl named Ariadne gave him a skein of silk to unwind as he went along, so that he might leave it as a clue and know by following it which way to turn. We've got our ball of string here. Why not use it in the same way?"

"That's not half a bad idea," commented Martin. "Billy, suppose you strike another light!"

They tied an end of the string securely round a point of rock. Martin took the ball in his hand and crept through the irregular tunnel, unwinding the string as he went. Billy and Joe followed him, each of them taking hold of the cord that he had left in his trail. Frank, who carried the tin of biscuits under his arm, went last.

Martin Venner partly remembered the formation of the passage, through which he had so recently

crawled in a contrary direction. He remembered that it opened out into a wider corridor, which had a more level floor. He went on slowly, helped by the light of the wax matches, which Billy held aloft. At length he came into the wider way.

“Stop!” cried Billy, holding his match high above his head. “You see them light? Him jump up and down! Him sabey them air come in!”

Martin felt the fresher air upon his face. It reached him in a cool draught.

“There must be an opening somewhere near,” he cried. “Blow out the match, and see if we can discover daylight.”

“Wait! I see where it comes from,” announced Frank. He dropped his hold of the cord and went aside towards a faint gleam of grey light that shone across the rocky floor. His cautious footsteps sounded as he groped his way. They grew less audible as he proceeded. To those who listened he seemed to be going down an incline.

“I can see the sea!” he called back. “Stay where you are a bit.”

They heard his feet slip. A loose piece of rock fell and seemed to leap with increasing speed down some unseen precipice.

“Mart! Mart! Help!” cried Frank’s terrified voice. And the cry was repeated far down in the depths. Then all was silent—terribly, ominously silent.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A FAIR EXCHANGE.

“**M**ART! Mart! Help!”

That cry of alarm thrilled Martin Venner with an awful fear. Where had Frank got to? What had happened to him? How was he to be helped?

The cry came again; this time from near at hand. Then it sounded from far away, repeating itself in a weird, reverberating echo among the hollow places of the vast cavern, perplexing those who heard it.

Taking the ball of string with him and unwinding it as he went, Martin crept cautiously, very cautiously, in the direction in which Frank had gone. He saw in front of him the faint gleam of daylight by which Frank had been allured from his side, and he crawled towards it. Presently he came to a steep downward slope where the light was stronger. Its surface was composed of loose stones that moved under the uncertain pressure of his hands and knees, threatening to send him headlong downward into unknown danger. He turned bodily and sat down, working his way slowly, inch by inch.

“Frank!” he called aloud.

“I’m here!” Frank answered faintly, and his answer was echoed strangely from the depths, mingling with the dull roar of breaking waves.

Martin sat still, looking anxiously about him from side to side, and at last he saw Frank Kershaw, his figure darkly outlined against the shaft of light. He was standing with feet apart on the brink of a yawning chasm, his hands, outstretched in front of him, planted against the wall of rock beyond. His body was leaning forward at a perilous angle, its weight supported by his hands. Below him was empty space. He could not move to regain his lost balance. His situation was desperate; only the strength of his straining wrists and arms prevented him from falling to his death.

"Stay as you are!" Mart cried, as he went nearer, forgetting his own peril.

At last he succeeded in reaching within a few feet of the spot where Frank was pinned. He crept nearer, on his knees, holding the ball of string between his feet. He stretched out his hand and caught at Frank's jacket.

"I've got hold of you," he said. "Wait now." He gripped tighter. "One, two, three!"

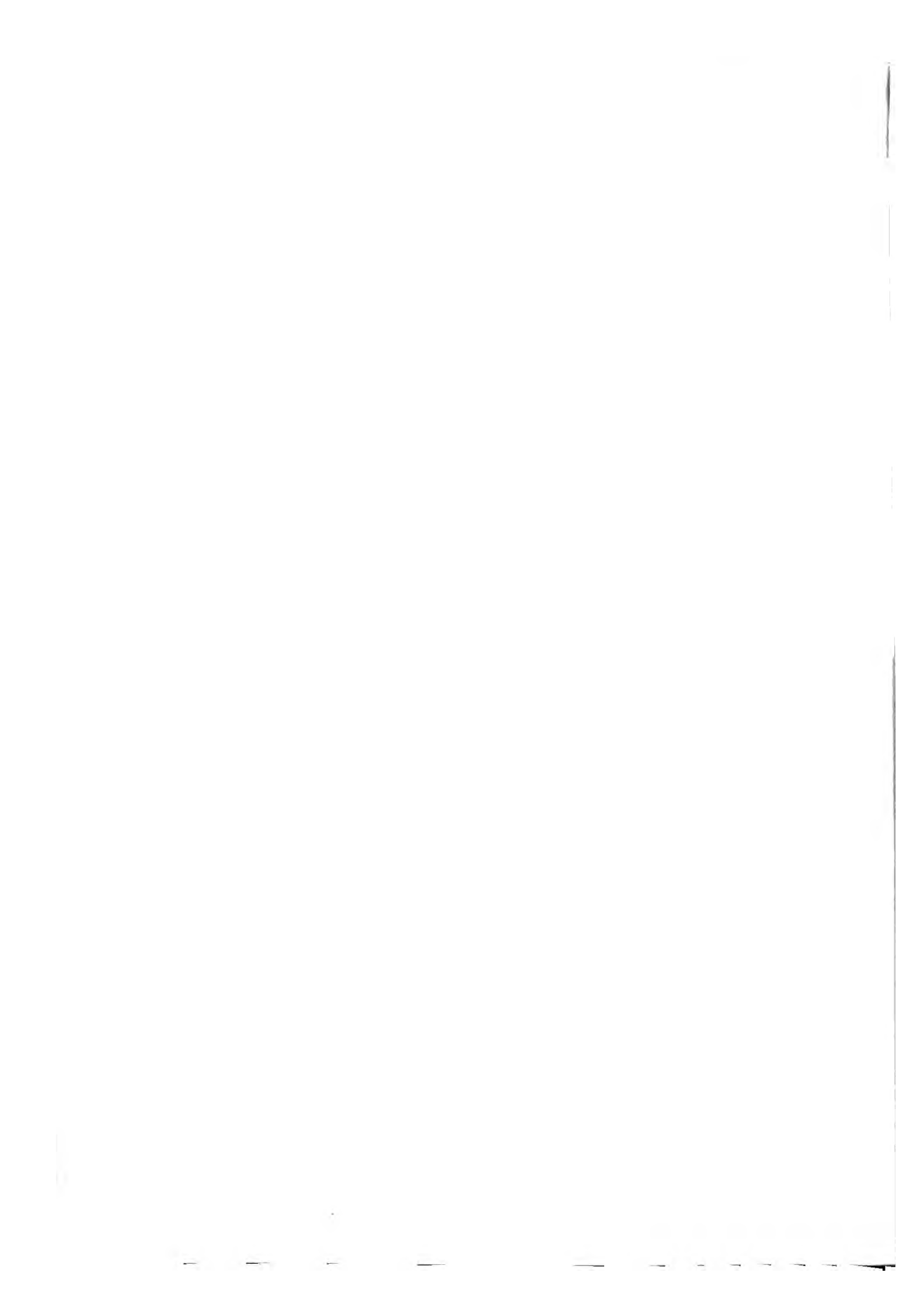
He gave a strong, steady pull. Frank flung himself backward, and in a moment had regained his firm foothold and a safe upright position. Then he sank down.

"You've saved me, Mart," he breathed. "I couldn't have held out an instant longer. If you hadn't come when I shouted, I should have fallen down there. Look at the waves! Isn't it awful?"

Martin leaned forward with his face over the edge.



“I’VE GOT HOLD OF YOU,” HE SAID.—*Page 200.*



Far below he could perceive the great Atlantic rollers sweeping in and breaking into snowy foam against the cliff, sending up a cloud of spray.

"Yes, awful indeed," he responded. "Thank goodness you're safe! Now, when you've got your breath, we must crawl back."

"My foot slipped and I couldn't stop myself," said Frank. "And, Mart—I've lost the tin of biscuits. It fell out of my arms when I put out my hands to save myself from going head first down there!"

"That's bad," reflected Martin. "It means that we've got no food left excepting what remains of the preserved meat, and that's not much." He began to wind in the slack of the ball of string. "Let's get away from here," he said. "Billy and Joe will be wondering where we are."

They guided themselves back with the aid of the clue, and woefully told of the loss of the biscuits.

"Them coffee him good for chop," remarked the negro in his West Coast English.

"Yes, we can keep ourselves alive by chewing the ground coffee, I daresay," agreed Venner. "But even that won't last long. I wonder if we could manage to steal something from the mutineers when they're out of their part of the cave."

"Me try one time," said Billy. "Me watch all same them cat for mouse. When Griggs him gone out, me go down, steal plenty biscuit, berra well."

After Kershaw's narrow escape neither he nor Martin felt inclined to explore the cave any further.

For many weary hours the four of them remained where they were, lying in the chilly darkness, trying in vain to keep up their drooping hearts. At about midday they each had a square inch of their scanty store of preserved meat. Then Billy signified his intention of creeping back to watch for a chance of returning into the mutineers' cave to purloin some food.

Unwilling to be separated, the three boys resolved to follow him, and they retraced their steps. Billy posted himself on the top of the rock from which he could look down into the cave. Two of the men were there, keeping guard over the provisions. After a time their companions entered and Jansen served out nine carefully measured portions of food.

"I can't make out where those two boys and the nigger have got to," said Griggs. "There's not a sign of them anywhere along the beach. I expect they're hiding in one of the caves, if they haven't got drowned. I was very nearly cut off by the tide myself. Did you catch any fish, Jan?"

"No," answered Jansen, "but I had a dry to catch a bird vot come so close to me—I touch him, and he squirt some nasty stinking oil into mine face out of his mouth."

They ate their food slowly, allowing no crumb to be wasted. When they had finished they lay or sat about in the cave in gloomy idleness. Throughout the day Billy Neptune, Frank Kershaw, and Martin Venner watched them in turns, but never once was

the food deserted; never once did the mutineers all go out together. Joe Parry was beginning to feel the pangs of hunger and thirst.

"Can't we have some of that meat that's in the tin?" he pleaded, when the day was drawing to a close.

There was only enough left for one meal each.

"If we finish it now," said Martin, "there won't be anything at all for to-morrow, excepting the coffee."

"I wish we'd eaten all our biscuits this morning," reflected Frank. "We shouldn't be so hungry now if we had done so."

"You wait," whispered Billy. "When them all gone sleep, me get more food for sure."

They discussed their resources and made plans for securing some of Jansen's stores. So hopeful were they of success that they decided to finish what remained of the preserved meat. Taking the can farther into the tunnel in which they crouched, Billy Neptune struck a match and held the light while Frank Kershaw divided the food into four portions. When he handed one portion to the negro, Billy took it and generously handed it to Joe.

"You no be well, Joe," he said. "You eat this, too. Them coffee him good enough for niggerman."

At night, while the boys tried vainly to sleep, Billy watched his opportunity to steal down into the mutineers' cave. When all was silent, he crept over the intervening block of granite. Martin Venner heard him moving and went to the opening to lie there with the loaded revolver in his grasp ready

to protect the negro should any of the men discover him. But so dark was the cave that Billy's stealthy movements could not be followed. Not a sound could be heard. The minutes seemed to drag themselves into hours, yet nothing happened.

Suddenly the silence was broken by a scuffle of feet on the loose shingle.

"Hi! hi! The nigger!" came the voice of Jimmy Griggs. "Stop thief! Jan—Hans—stop him!"

The click of a revolver sounded, but no flash followed. Griggs cursed, and a stone rattled among the rocks, striking sparks of fire. Martin Venner heard a faint movement near him, then Billy Neptune clambered up beside him, panting, into safety. Griggs continued to throw stones, but they fell far away from the place into which the negro had retreated.

"Have you got something, Billy?" Martin questioned, in a whisper, as he caught at Billy's arm and drew him inward.

Billy did not answer until he had flung himself down far within the tunnel.

"No," he said, in a hollow voice of despair. "Nothing."

He afterwards explained that he had silently gathered together a good store of meat tins and biscuits, meaning to carry them off in one load wrapped in a square of canvas that he had found. He wanted, however, to add some cans of condensed milk, and had been searching for them when by accident his fingers touched a man's face. It was

Griggs that he wakened. Griggs had caught at his wrist, but Billy pulled away and had not time to snatch at any food before the alarm was sounded.

"We must make a move from here now," decided Martin. "They know we are alive, and somewhere near them. They know that we've got nothing to eat. They'll search for us. Come, we must shift our quarters."

"No," Billy Neptune objected. "Them no can come in here. If them try, we shoot them."

Martin saw the value of Billy's objection. There was but one narrow passage into their retreat, a passage which could easily be guarded with a revolver against a score of desperate men. But it would be necessary now to keep a vigilant watch.

Frank Kershaw took his first turn at sentinel, posting himself in a recumbent position on the top of the rock commanding a view of the lower cave, ready to pull the trigger if Griggs or any one of his mates should attempt to climb up.

When daylight returned, the mutineers discovered Billy's untied bundle of stolen provisions. They were apparently assured that the negro had approached from some hiding-place at the back of the cave, and accordingly they set about the work of trying to find it.

They searched systematically, leaving no crevice or corner unexplored, excepting only the one place where they might have found what they sought, and from which Martin Venner, himself well out of sight, watched their vain efforts.

At length they abandoned the search.

"It's no use looking any more," said Griggs. "I expect he came in from the outside, after all, and slipped out again that way, too, the black swine. He didn't get anything, though. There's nothing missing, is there, Jan?"

"No," answered Jansen. "But ve knows now that it vass him that took der tobacco and der box of biscuits, and der meat, eh?"

"That's certain," nodded Griggs. "I wonder what he's done with that bacca? He can't have smoked it or we should have found him out by the smell of it; and he can't very well have chewed it all."

"I never saw the cook smoke aboard the *Albatross*," continued José Rossi. "No, nor chew tobacco either."

"If I could only catch hold of him I'd jolly soon get it back from him," declared Griggs. "I'm dying for a smoke."

"I voss vanting von mineself," added Jansen. "Der biscuits and der meat he stole vass nothing gompared vit der tobacco."

The nine of them sat in a circle round their provisions, and Jansen, as before, served to each his measured share. While they were eating, Griggs's eyes wandered about the cave as if he were not yet satisfied as to the method of Billy Neptune's escape from it. Presently he stood up and strolled directly for the rock from which Martin Venner was watching him. He stood at the base of it, looking upward and then down to his feet, the while he munched his biscuit and meat. He went nearer and examined

its surface with keen scrutiny. Something about it—the marks of boots that had scratched away the clinging limpets and barnacles—excited his suspicion.

“H’m!” he muttered to himself. Then he slowly returned to his companions and quietly finished his breakfast. But again and again his gaze wandered to the rock and rested on its higher level, behind which there was a dense black shadow that seemed to indicate a possible hiding-place.

Martin Venner saw that the man’s suspicions were awakened, and his heart beat quicker as again he watched Griggs coming towards him. For a moment the boy drew back to whisper a warning to Frank Kershaw, who was behind him.

“Be ready, Frank; Griggs is coming to investigate,” he said.

Laying his two hands upon the rock, Griggs began to climb. In the dim light Martin could see his shadowy form ascending towards him; first his head, then his shoulders. Finally Griggs prepared to heave himself bodily over upon the topmost ledge. Martin could feel his warm breath upon him.

“Fire!” cried Frank Kershaw.

Martin pulled the trigger. There was a flash, a loud report, and the bullet struck the rock at the opposite side of the cave. Griggs lost his hold and slid down, falling upon his back on the shingle. There he lay, cursing. His mates, alarmed at the shot, ran to his side and picked him up. He was bruised by his fall, but otherwise unhurt.

"It's that nigger, hiding in there," he cried, pointing upward. "Root him out, Jan! Light your lantern!"

Frank had his pockets full of cartridges, but there was only one revolver. The mutineers had many firearms and an abundance of ammunition. Entrenched behind the projecting rock, however, Martin was confident that he could hold his own against them. He watched Jansen lighting the lantern.

When it was ready, Griggs took it from him.

"I'll hold the light," he said. "You climb up beside me, and be ready to shoot the son of a black-pot as soon as you catch sight of him."

Martin looked over the edge of the rock, holding his revolver cocked in front of his face. He knew that he must presently be seen.

"There's no good in your climbing up here, Mr. Griggs," he called out. "I've got my eye on you. I can see you plainly in that lantern light. Come another step nearer, and you'll get a bullet in your head, as sure as nails."

Both Griggs and Jansen drew back, and looked at each other.

"That vos not der nigger!" muttered Jansen.

"No." Griggs shook his head, amazed. "It was young Venner's voice."

"Yes, you're right there," said Martin. "You thought you had done for me, didn't you, Jimmy? You thought I had gone down in the ship that you scuttled. But you did your work badly, and I'm

not dead yet. What do you want? Is there anything I can do for you? Would you like some tobacco, for instance?"

"Oh, it was you that stole it, then?" cried Griggs, handing the lantern to Rossi.

"Not at all," returned Martin. "The theft was on your side. I only took back what was my own. Will you have some?"

Griggs nodded curtly. "Yes, chuck it down here."

"But you must give me something for it," pursued Mart. "You must give me back some of the stores you stole out of the other cave yesterday morning."

Griggs and Jansen glanced at each other questioningly.

"You can have a couple of biscuits if you like," Griggs offered.

"That's not enough," objected Martin. "I must have a box of them. I'm not alone up here, understand. A box of biscuits and three or four tins of condensed milk."

"All right," said Griggs, "it's a fair exchange."

He drew Jansen aside and whispered to him, Jansen strode towards the stores.

"Jan will give you the things you want," Griggs went on. "Throw the tobacco down here to me, and I'll catch it."

Martin hesitated, waiting to see the biscuits and milk before fulfilling his own part of the bargain. He watched Jansen carrying the desired quantity towards the rock; the square biscuit tin in his two hands

and four cans of condensed milk on the top of it. Then he gave the revolver to Frank Kershaw and took hold of the parcel of tobacco. Jansen raised his load above his head and stood with it ready for Martin to reach down for it. Martin threw the parcel of tobacco, which fell at Griggs's feet. Griggs, however, did not immediately pick it up. Instead, his fingers went to his hip pocket where he kept his revolver.

"Here you vos. Take der biscuits," said Jansen.

Martin stretched forth his two hands and took hold of the under box with great care so that the four tins of milk should not fall from it. The load was astonishingly light. In that moment, just as he was drawing it towards him, there was a flash from Griggs's revolver, and a simultaneous flash from over Martin's shoulder. A bullet pierced the biscuit tin. Martin was pulled violently backward into the darkness, yet not so quickly but that he had time to see Griggs fling up his arms and fall, with a splash of blood on his face.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A TERRIBLE SUSPICION.

BILLY NEPTUNE had seized the biscuit box and Joe Parry had taken possession of the milk tins. They carried them inward and deposited them on a flat slab of rock, well sheltered from the mutineers.

"Let's have three biscuits apiece, Billy," said Kershaw, yearning with hunger, "and we can spread the condensed milk on top of them, like jam."

"We've got no tin opener," Martin reminded him.

"Billy's got a strong knife, though," returned Frank.

Joe struck a match. Billy opened the box, and thrust in his hand to take a fistful of biscuits. A deep groan escaped him.

"Empty!" he cried, as his fingers closed on a stone which he flung aside. "Empty!"

"And so are these," moaned Joe, throwing the cleaned out milk tins to the ground, and stamping on them savagely.

"Swindled!" cried Martin, giving the empty tin a kick. "I thought they were very light when I took hold of them. It's Griggs that has cheated us this way. I saw him whispering to Jansen."

"He meant to do more than swindle us," added Kershaw. "That shot he fired would have struck you in the head, Mart, if Billy hadn't pulled you

back. It hit the box instead. But I believe I've paid him out. I saw him raise his revolver and aim at you. He'd pulled his trigger before I did mine. I tried to shoot him in the hand, but I think it was his face I hit."

"Yes, I saw him fall," said Venner, "and I hope that's the last of him."

"We're a good deal worse off than we were before," resumed Frank. "For they know we're in here; we've got nothing to eat, and we've no more tobacco to bribe them with. It's a pity you gave them all of it, Mart. What are we to do?"

Venner shook his head sadly as he watched Billy Neptune's match go out.

"I don't know," he sighed. "It looks as if we are doomed to die of starvation."

"If we could get out of here we might feed on seaweed," suggested Frank. "I've heard of people eating seaweed."

"So have I," said Mart. "I ate some myself once at New Brighton. But when I was in another part of the cave I saw an oyster-shell. That means that there must be oysters somewhere, if we could only find them."

"We shall not find them in here," ventured Joe Parry. "They live under water. The one you saw must have been carried in by a seagull."

"Or more likely by the chap whose bones I found," reflected Mart.

"Can't we get out on to the beach any other way

than by the cave where Griggs and Jansen are?" questioned Joe.

"Yes," returned Venner. "There's lots of ways. If the sea can dash in to make all these caverns and join them together by passages like the one we're in now, then we can get out in the same way."

Billy Neptune struck another match and searched for the line of string which they had used as a clue.

"Me go one time and find them way out," he said. "Me take them string for trail; come back berra quick, you see."

He took the ball of string in hand and went away, striking match after match. When he had gone out of sight and hearing, leaving the boys in darkness and in possession of only the half-dozen safety matches that remained in Mart's box, Joe Parry spoke in a cautious, trembling whisper.

"I say, Venner!" he began. "You don't seem afraid to trust Billy Neptune."

"Trust him!" repeated Mart. "Why shouldn't we?"

"Because," said Joe, in an awed voice, "because he's a *cannibal!*"

"What?" cried Frank.

"Get out!" cried Mart.

"It's as true as we're here," went on Joe. "I knew it before we left the Salthouse Dock. There was a man-o'-war's man came alongside, on the quay, and he saw Billy at the galley door. 'Hello, Billy!' he shouted, 'ow are you coming up? Things is

changed since you was in Benin City, eh? You don't get no long pig to eat the same as you did when you was a Ju-ju man, eh?' Captain Teach came along just then and he asked the tar what he meant. I heard what the tar said. He told Captain Teach that he'd been one of the expedition to Benin under Admiral Rawson, and that Billy Neptune was captured in a Ju-ju compound where they used to practise human sacrifice. Thousands were killed and eaten there every year, and the place was called the City of Blood. They were all cannibals, he said, and Billy Neptune had often eaten human flesh."

"Good glory!" exclaimed Martin Venner, "and we are stranded here with a savage of that sort!"

"I thought I ought to warn you," said Joe. "Because, you see, if we've got no other food for him, Billy wouldn't think twice of killing and eating us."

"I'd sooner drown myself than that," reflected Frank.

"He could do it without anybody finding out," said Venner. "We've better all three stick close together and watch him."

"I believe he's getting awfully hungry already," added Joe. "He hasn't eaten anything for four-and-twenty hours except a mouthful of coffee grounds."

"It's like being imprisoned with a man-eating tiger," said Frank. "When a tiger has once tasted human blood, they say, he'll never be satisfied with anything else."

"Perhaps we ought to escape from him now, while he's gone away," suggested Joe.

"No," resumed Mart. "I don't think we need be afraid of him yet a bit. I should say he's more likely to begin on the mutineers than on any of us."

"Except that we are young and tender," Frank grimly remarked.

"Hush!" whispered Martin. "I think I hear him coming back."

The three of them listened nervously. The movement of a loose stone told them that the negro was near. Martin Venner struck one of his safety matches, and in the circle of light that it shed they saw Billy's eyes staring at them from out of his black face. Frank Kershaw shuddered. Joe Parry caught hold of Martin's arm. Martin dropped the shortened match and prepared to light another. He struck it but it did not ignite.

"Ah, you no waste them match!" cried Billy Neptune. "You wait one time."

In the darkness they heard him open his clasp-knife and they drew closer together. Joe was trembling violently. His hand was on Venner's revolver.

"Did you find a way out of the cave, Billy?" Frank asked.

"No," the negro answered. He was cutting something.

"Then why did you come back?" Frank questioned.

Billy was silent. Presently he struck a wax match.

"Why me come back?" he repeated, applying the

light to something he held in his left hand. "Me come back for make torch. You see them rope me find?" He held up about a yard of thick rope. "Some sailor man him lef' him here in them cave. Suppose me light him before, you take me for them stranger. Me no want give you fright."

"I see," nodded Frank, "very considerate of you, Billy."

The dry ragged end of the rope which the negro had found was beginning to smoulder in the flame of the match; but a second match was needed ere the hard strands were made to catch fire. Billy blew upon the glowing sparks and succeeded in kindling them into a flame that illumined the rocky vault and flickered brightly into its darkest recesses.

"We no stay here," Billy said. "We go find them way out berra quick now."

He turned, and, holding the torch aloft, signed to the boys to follow him.

They gathered their few possessions, and crept behind him, Martin Venner winding up the ball of string as he went. They could proceed more quickly now that their way was visible. Very soon they passed the place where Frank Kershaw had gone aside to the misleading gleam of daylight. Beyond it the negro paused and picked up a wax match that he had previously dropped.

"That where me found them rope," he announced. And he waved the torch to give it a fuller flame. He stood still and the boys searched.

"I've been in here before!" cried Martin, handing the ball of string to Frank to lay the trail. "Billy, lend me the torch!"

He carried the light and led the way through a narrow crevice that gave entrance into a large cavern from which many startled sea-birds flew noisily. They all flew in one direction.

"They're flying out to the open air," declared Martin. "Let us go after them."

He went onward up a steep incline, climbing with difficulty over the rugged rocks. Joe and Frank kept always near him, and cast many a timid, suspicious glance aside at Billy Neptune. Frank now noticed more consciously than before that the negro's teeth were filed like the edge of a saw, and that on his forehead there were three upright marks raised on the black skin. He looked very ferocious in the flickering torchlight, and Frank could well believe that he had been a cannibal dancing naked in some Ju-ju feast.

"Why we no try catch them bird?" Billy proposed. "Them berra good for chop."

"I don't fancy myself eating raw flesh of any sort, however hungry I might be," said Frank.

"No," returned Billy, with a headshake. "We no got fire for cook him. But suppose you fit to die because you no have cooked chop, then you eat him raw. Him keep you alive. Me eat them raw chop plenty times in my own country."

Venner looked back.

"Do you mean in Benin?" he asked.

"What sort of food was it that you ate raw?" pursued Mart.

With a shrug of his broad shoulders Billy answered vaguely, "Me no can tell. Benin man him no eat all same sort of food as white man."

"There!" whispered Joe Parry. "I told you he was a cannibal! Ask him if he ever ate human flesh."

"No, no," said Martin decisively. "We mustn't suggest such a thing to him."

Billy sniffed the air and abruptly went apart from where the boys stood.

"Where has he gone?" questioned Frank.

They listened to his movements in the darkness. Then all was silent. They waited. Suddenly there came the sound of panting breath. Martin Venner started back. As he did so an indistinct black form crept behind him and leant upon him. He fell, and the torch, loosed from his grasp, dropped between two rocks.

Frank Kershaw was beside him in a moment, ready to protect him, thinking only of saving him from what he believed to be the savage attack of a cannibal negro. Then he laughed a loud, boyish laugh.

"It's only the dog!" he declared. "I made sure it was Billy Neptune."

"So did I," added Joe.

The dog pranced around them with joyous yelps, and then ran from them enticingly. Recovering the torch and kindling its smouldering strands into a flame, the three boys followed him, and presently came upon

Billy Neptune standing at the wide-arched opening of the cave, looking down at the breaking waves.

It was the same which Martin Venner had found during his wanderings in the cave—an opening high up in the cliff and overlooking the sea. To be in broad daylight once more was a delight after their imprisonment in the cavern; but their delight was mingled with dismay when they found they could still gain no access to the beach without climbing down a deep and perilous precipice.

All the rest of that day the four castaways were occupied in searching for food. They found some birds' eggs, but they were rotten. They found some tufts of dry grass and shared them. They tried to satisfy their hunger by chewing ground coffee; but it only made them thirsty, and they sought in vain for water.

Night came, and hunger began to gnaw painfully at their vitals. Joe Parry, whose wounds were beginning to fester, was already so weak that he could hardly move.

"I think I could go to sleep," he murmured, "only I'm afraid of Billy Neptune."

Frank agreed to keep awake with the loaded revolver in his hand, and Martin offered to take watch and watch about with him.

"Why you no go to sleep?" Billy asked. "Jansen he no find us here."

He little thought that it was himself that they were afraid of.

On the following morning their search for food was

again unsuccessful, but they found a part of the cavern from which water dripped from the stalactites. It was but a few yards from the place where Martin had discovered the skeleton seated beside the open chest. The dead man's bones were now lying in a confused mass upon the rock floor. The boys stood around them, reading their own possible fate in the unknown remains.

Frank looked into the chest, whose contents were covered with guano.

"I suppose it's impossible that there could be anything good to eat in this chest?" he questioned.

"He wouldn't have died if there had been, I should think," said Martin. "But we might as well look. Even a bottle of spirits would help to keep us alive."

Using slabs of stone as spades, they cleared away the hard layers of filth left by the sea-birds. They came upon a book with writing in it, and tossed it aside. Beneath the book there was some rotten canvas which fell to powder at their touch as they removed it, and disclosed many rows of gold coins neatly arranged on their edges. They scattered these at random into a heap upon the floor, only to come upon more and more. Among the gold they found several little leather bags. Some were filled with glistening diamonds, others with pearls or rubies. They plunged their hands in and scooped out the useless riches; but not a crumb of food could they find; not even a grain of corn.

"I suppose all this would be worth a lot if we only

had it at home in Liverpool," said Martin Venner. "But I'd give every stiver of it for a loaf of bread."

"It wasn't much good to the poor chap whose skull is lying there at your feet," mused Frank. "Come away from it, Mart. I hate the very sight of it!"

They left the treasure lying where they had cast it, and moved away. Frank flung himself down in despair in a dark corner beside Joe Parry. Martin strolled towards a fissure in the rock through which the sunlight entered. Billy Neptune sat on his haunches chewing an end of his leather belt. The dog lay at his feet.

"Frank," said the negro, after a long silence, "suppose we no have food berra soon, we kill them dog for chop?"

Frank did not respond. He was horrified at the mere suggestion of eating dog flesh.

"Listen to him!" whispered Joe. "He's getting hungry. First he'll eat the dog. Then it will be one of us!"

CHAPTER XXV.

WHAT MARTIN SAW FROM THE CLIFF.

FOR four terrible days and nights Martin Venner and his three companions wandered hopelessly in search of food in the gloomy corridors of that vast cave. Once they were fortunate enough to secure the remains of a fish, which a wild bird had brought in and left uneaten on its roosting place. They shared it and devoured it greedily. In their hunger they soon finished their stock of ground coffee, and they would even have eaten the wax stems of Billy Neptune's matches, had not the matches themselves been too precious to be thus sacrificed. They were weak for want of food and water. Joe Parry, indeed, was positively ill, and, while the others sought vainly for something to eat, they left him lying beside the dead man's treasure.

In their wanderings they discovered two outlets from the caves. But they dared not go out upon the beach, for there was a thick white mist upon the island that stood like an impassable wall, warning them that if they should venture to leave their place of refuge they need never hope to return. But within the arched opening of one of these passages they found some whelks and limpets, which they gathered and ate.

Often they discussed the expediency of giving

themselves up to the mutineers, in the hope that thereby they might be allowed to share the stores and be preserved from starvation; and, at length, Martin Venner volunteered to enter their cave and bargain with them. He took with him a pocketful of gold coins to offer in exchange for some biscuits or a tin of milk. But, just as he was about to let himself slip down the rock and drop upon the shingle in the midst of the men, he heard Jansen and Griggs engaged in a heated dispute over the possession of their last crumb of food, and he gathered from what they said that they had exhausted even their last pipeful of tobacco.

When Martin went back to the skeleton's cavern to report the result of his unsuccessful mission, he found Frank Kershaw and Joe Parry trying to decipher the writing in the dead man's book that had been found in the chest of gold.

Frank looked up as Martin joined him.

"We've found out how the box of treasure came here," he announced. "It belonged to a crew of pirates from the Orkney Islands. They seem to have left it here, intending to come back for it. The dead man was their prisoner, and they marooned him in the cave to keep guard over it. This book is his diary that he wrote in, as long as he had anything to write with. He seems to have had an awful time; but he had any quantity of eggs to eat, so he was better off than we are."

"But he died of starvation for all that, I suppose," reflected Venner. "How long ago is it since he lived in here? Is there no date in his book?"

"No," Frank replied. "There's no date. But we've looked at most of the gold coins there. They're all old. There's none of them of a later date than William the Fourth. We haven't found a single one of them with Queen Victoria's head on it, so he must have been here quite half a century."

"I wonder why the pirates never came back for their treasure?" questioned Venner.

"I shouldn't be surprised if they'd been captured and hanged," ventured Frank; "or perhaps they were shipwrecked. You may be sure they would have come back for it if they had been able; for there must be a good many thousands of pounds' worth lying there."

A cry from Billy Neptune interrupted their conjectures. Billy had gone aside to the fissure in the rock through which the boys had many a time tried to get a glimpse of the sea. But, although they could hear the waves murmuring far below, yet the thick mist had not allowed them to see more than a yard's distance away.

Billy called excitedly, and Martin and Frank went to him. He had crawled with half his body out of the fissure.

"What are you up to, Nep?" Frank asked.

"You hold my feet one time, so I no fall," returned the negro. "We gone find some fresh water for sure. Him trickle down them rock."

They held him by the feet, and he crawled farther out. But presently he drew back, panting heavily.

"No, me no can reach him," he said. "My arm him too thick for go through!"

He returned into the cave, and sat down thinking. He was silent for a long time. Then at length he glanced at Martin Venner inquiringly.

"What is it, Nep?" Martin asked, in a feeble voice. "Aren't we going to have any water, after all? It's cruel of you to make us hope that we could get some and then to tell us it can't be reached. If your arm is too thick, as you say, do you think mine is thin enough?"

Billy nodded. "Yes, him thin enough. Suppose you go try, you can get them water for true. Me show you!"

He took Martin to the fissure, and described to him the position of the tiny stream of water that he had discovered. It was half-hidden behind a projecting piece of rock, but now that the mist had cleared, the trickling drops could be seen through a crack in the granite. The crack was too narrow for Billy's arm to be thrust into it, but Martin's arm was thinner, and he might succeed where the negro had failed.

"I could get at it much better if I were to go out altogether," suggested Martin.

"But suppose you fall!" cautioned Billy.

"We can easily make a rope of our ball of string," said Frank Kershaw, "and tie the rope round your waist. But why not let me go instead of you?"

"I'm not afraid," returned Mart. And, to show his willingness to risk his life for the precious drops of water for which each of them was thirsting, he

took the ball of string, and directed Frank to help him in the work of converting it into a rope sufficiently long and thick for the purpose.

When the rope was made and fastened about his waist, Venner took one of the milk tins which they had saved and made his way out through the fissure into the open air. His foothold on the cliff was perilous, but Billy and Frank let out the rope very guardedly, and Martin climbed to the spot where the water trickled down to the sea. It was a very tiny stream, and he had difficulty in reaching it, but he managed to get his hand with the tin through the crack in the rock and hold it there for the water to drip in. When the tin was about half-full, he drew it back and took a drink. It was pure, cold water, and he thanked God for it.

He filled the tin and carried it back, handing it in to Frank Kershaw, who passed it to Joe. All three of them drank of it, slowly, gratefully.

While Martin waited for the empty tin, holding on to the rock with trembling hands, he looked down the precipice. The fog had lifted, and he could see the dark green waves sweeping inward and breaking into foam against the black cliffs that curved round in a wide sheltered bay.

Something else that he saw far down there held his eyes fascinated. Gripping the rock firmly with hands and feet and knees, he leaned over the giddy brink to get a fuller view of the bay.

“Mart, are you there?” Frank Kershaw cried.

"Yes, I'm all right. Wait a moment," Mart answered. "I'm coming."

He crept back. Frank held the empty tin towards him.

"I can't get any more just now," Martin murmured. "Help me in. Give me your hand."

Frank and Billy both pulled him in beside them, and he sank down as if his work had been too much for him.

"Why didn't you get a drink for yourself?" Kershaw questioned. "There's none left."

Martin was silent. He seemed to be dazed. At last he caught at Frank's wrist and at Billy Neptune's arm.

"Frank!—Billy!" he faltered. "You will hardly believe it when I tell you, but, while I was out there, I looked down into the water, and what do you think I saw? No, you wouldn't guess. It was the ship—the *Albatross*—lying against the cliff. She hasn't foundered. She doesn't look as if she were breaking up. I believe she's afloat!"

Frank Kershaw and Billy Neptune looked at each other as though they believed that Martin Venner had lost his reason. Had his hardships upset the balance of his brain?

"Don't you believe me?" cried Mart. "It's true—as true as that we are here. I saw her green painted hull and her poop-deck. I even saw Captain Teach's dead body lying where we left it. Frank! Billy! There's food on board of her, and if we can only get down there, we're saved!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

MARTIN VENNER'S MISSION.

“IT doesn't seem possible!” said Frank, with a doubting headshake.

“If you don't believe it, go out yourself and see,” retorted Mark. “Here, tie the rope round you, and creep along to the right until you come to a sharp bit of rock. Hold on to it, and lean over, and you'll see her as I did. Perhaps you will see more than I saw. Perhaps you will see how we can get down to her. Go on! Don't be afraid. Billy and I will hold the rope.”

Thus urged, Frank tied the rope about his waist.

“I'll go and fetch some more water, anyhow,” he said, not willing to show that he still doubted.

He went out, and had very little difficulty in finding the spot which Martin had indicated. He leaned over the projecting brink and looked down into the bay. There, sure enough, he saw the ship, lying over on her starboard side, with her masts and rigging intact and everything upon her decks exactly as it had been left when Gregson and Dewar had pushed off in the boat. He could not see her fore-castle deck. It was hidden by the bulging cliff. But, so far as he could make out, she seemed to have run aground bow on. The tide was out, and she was not afloat, as Martin had supposed.

Yes, if only they could get down to her there need be no more hunger! But by what means were they to reach her? To climb down the face of that awful precipice was obviously an impossibility.

From where he stood Frank made a quick survey of the coast. He calculated that the cave which he and Martin Venner had entered together in quest of a safe refuge was but a little distance to the west of where the *Albatross* now lay, and that the cave in which Griggs and Jansen and their companions had taken up their quarters was yet farther away, round a high, steep headland, whose base was washed by the sea even at low tide. It was therefore obvious that the mutineers had not yet discovered the ship. It was also obvious that, since Martin Venner in his lonely wanderings had found his way from the first cave, where he had met with his accident, into this higher cavern, where he had found the skeleton and the chest of gold, it was possible to return by the same way, and thus get out upon the beach and perhaps even round to the ship without being observed by the mutineers.

Frank made these calculations hurriedly as he climbed back to the place where Martin and Billy were waiting.

"Yes, it's quite true," he declared, as he handed Martin the filled tin of water. "The ship is there right enough." He went to Joe Parry's side. "Joe," he said, "you needn't be afraid of the cannibal any longer. We're going on board the *Albatross*, where there's plenty of good food. Do you think you're strong enough to do a bit of climbing?"

"I'm strong enough for anything," Joe assured him. "Are we going at once?"

Frank nodded, and glanced at the pile of glittering gold on the floor of the cave.

"Somehow this stuff seems to have increased in value within the last few minutes," he remarked. "What are we going to do with it?"

"Leave it where it is," said Venner. "It's no good to us. We can't sail the ship home, and it would only be wasted labour trying to cart it away. He emptied his pockets of the coins that he had stowed there as a bribe to the mutineers. "Don't forget your matches, Billy," he reminded the cook. "We can use them now to light the way out to the beach."

They had wandered among the corridors so many times that they could now almost find their way in the darkness. But they went quicker by the light of the matches. Billy Neptune went on in front of them, and whenever there was a difficult place to negotiate he struck a light. The dog followed them.

It was still full daylight when at length they came out upon the open beach. Fortunately, the tide was out, and they could go for a considerable distance over the weed-covered rocks without danger. But presently they came to a precipitous piece of cliff, which seemed impassable. They were searching along its front for a means of ascent, when they were suddenly confronted by Rossi and Jansen.

The two men had been gathering shellfish. Their faces were thin and sallow.

"Helloh!" exclaimed Rossi. "Still alive, I see. Have you found any food?"

"Oh yes," answered Frank Kershaw, "we've found any number of nice fat limpets and some beautiful seaweed."

"Is that all?" pursued Rossi.

"Well," returned Frank, "we got a handful of grass along there the day before yesterday."

"Ah!" sighed Rossi. "You're no better off than we are ourselves, then."

"Perhaps not even so well off," said Martin. "I see you've got some nice mussels there. Are you going to give us some?"

"No," answered Jansen. "Clear oud of this, and vind your own mussels. Vich of you voss it that fire der pistol in Mr. Griggs' face, eh? You wait until he catch you. You no vant any mussels afterwards, I tell you sdraight."

"Griggs had not been mortally wounded, then!" reflected Frank Kershaw, with inward satisfaction. He had been secretly terrified at the thought of having killed a man—even such a man as Jimmy Griggs.

"Come along, Frank," urged Martin. "I daresay we shall find some mussels at the other side of this headland."

Rossi and Jansen glanced at each other, and then up at the steep cliff.

"How are you going to get to the other side of it, do you suppose?" questioned Rossi.

"By climbing," returned Martin.

Jansen chuckled.

"It is much better you dry to fly," he remarked. By which observation Martin judged that Jansen had not himself been at the other side of the headland.

"Why?" he asked, with assumed innocence. "Do you mean that it's too steep to climb over?"

"Go on, Jan," said Rossi. "Let them break their necks if they like. That will save us from breaking them for them. If they don't come back we shall know what has happened to them."

The two mutineers proceeded with their work of gathering shellfish. It was evident that they had no suspicion as to the reason why Martin and his companions wanted to reach the next bay.

At first sight it seemed quite impossible to scale the headland, and equally impossible to get beyond it by way of the rocks at its base. For hours they searched and climbed, but all to no purpose. Even Martin Venner, who was the most hopeful of the four, was forced at last to yield to Frank's proposal that they should turn back, for the tide had turned, evening was coming on, and with it a damp, white mist was creeping over the sea.

They sorrowfully retraced their steps to the place where they had met Jansen and Rossi. There they gathered some mussels, which they carried with them up the beach. At the foot of the main cliff they paused to rest themselves and eat the shellfish. While they silently ate, Joe Parry espied above their heads a shelf of rock, upon which some tufts of faded heather could be seen.

"We might make our bed up there among those dead bushes, mightn't we?" he suggested.

Frank Kershaw climbed up, and as he hoisted himself upon the rocky shelf, a cry escaped him.

"Mart, come up here and see what I've found!" he called.

Martin and Billy Neptune both clambered up to him, and among the faded heather they saw the carcass of a dead sheep.

"Food, food!" cried Martin, recognising at a glance that the animal had not long been dead.

Billy took out his knife and went down on his knees, ready to remove the skin.

"Him fall down here," he said. "Him break him neck. You sabey? Him fall down here. What that mean, you suppose?" He poked at the sheep's woolly side excitedly with his finger. "Them sheep him no live where man no live!"

"Just what I was thinking," added Frank Kershaw. "Billy's right. The sheep must have been browsing on the top of the cliff, when it fell over, and it must have belonged to some farmer. So this can't be an uninhabited island, after all!" There must be houses and people on it!"

"Yes, if we could only find them," agreed Martin; "but that may not be for days and days, and in the meantime we may die of hunger."

"We no die of hunger now," said Billy, and he began dexterously to remove the sheep's skin.

With difficulty Joe Parry was helped up to the

place where they were. They made a meal of the raw mutton, giving some to the dog, and slept upon the shelf of rock. The night was bitterly cold, and they were glad to take their turns with the use of the sheep-skin as a covering.

When they awoke in the morning it was to find themselves surrounded by a thick sea mist, which held them there isolated, for they dared not attempt to climb down or even to move very far, lest they should be flung upon the rocks below. For hours they sat motionless and silent, with limbs numbed by the cold. But towards midday a breeze dispersed the fog, the red sun pierced the grey clouds, and they could see the sea stretched beneath them, calm and green.

From their elevated position they could now survey the cliff that stood like a wall between them and the farther bay. Their anxious eyes searched for a way by which they might hope to reach its other side and so gain the ship. But it seemed to be utterly hopeless.

"If we only had a boat or a raft!" sighed Martin Venner.

"Yes," murmured Frank Kershaw, "or even if we could manage to swim round that far point!"

"Swim!" Martin clutched at Frank's arm. "I believe I could do it," he cried, "only—only I'm awfully weak, and those waves seem terribly strong. I've a good mind to try it, anyhow."

"But you couldn't bring the *Albatross* round to us," objected Frank.

"Of course not," Martin smiled grimly. "Jansen and Griggs and the others would soon take her from us. No; but if I could swim round by easy stages and get on board, I could perhaps bring back some food, floating it ashore on a plank or a hatch-cover."

"But you might get drowned," said Frank.

An expression of firm resolve came into Martin's eyes.

"I'm going to chance it," he announced.

Frank and Billy climbed down to the beach with him, leaving Joe on the shelf of rock, where he would be safe from harm. They clambered along the reef as far as they could, and then Martin took off his boots and jacket and waistcoat, and stood at the brink of the sea.

"Good-bye," he said, shaking hands with them.

He plunged in head first, and they watched him swimming to a rock some twenty yards away. He caught at its tangle of seaweed and rested; then struck off again to another rock, keeping always within easy reach of some refuge. From rock to rock he swam. They followed him with eager eyes.

"Where is he now?" murmured Frank. "Can you see him, Nep?"

Billy was silent for a long time.

"No," he answered at last; "me no can find him!"

They kept their eyes fixed upon the line of jagged rocks. Once they saw a hand uplifted against the blackness. It disappeared. They stood there until the rising tide drove them back, but not again did

they see a sign of the swimmer. They returned to the place where Joe was waiting for them. There they remained, and as the minutes lengthened into hours they grew more and more anxious.

Martin was safe, nevertheless.

He had not swum very far along the base of the cliff before he came to a cleft, where the light shone through from the farther side. The sea washed through it in a strong current, carrying him with it into a narrow arched tunnel. So narrow was it in places that he had to leave the water and climb in sideways with a foot at either side. At one part the roof was so low that the waves, lifting him, dashed him against it with a force that almost stunned him. But he had seen that the light of day came through, and he judged that he was bound to come out at the farther side. And so indeed it proved, for he had struggled with wave and rock for little more than an hour when he emerged into a lofty cavern that opened out into a sunlit bay.

He swam to the side and crept upon a level stretch of shingle, that was shadowed by what appeared to be a curiously smooth and rounded wall of rock. He rested his shoulders against its green surface, and was presently aware that a jet of water was streaming down his back. He thought it strange that the water should be falling from above him, where no waves splashed. Was it a stream from some fresh spring high up on the cliff? He put up a hand and let the water wash upon it. He put

his wet hand to his lips. No; it was salt, and it had an evil smell. He moved away in disgust, and was about to wade in and continue his swimming when his backward glance caught the shape of the wall he had been leaning against.

His heart gave a bound. Excitedly he strode back and touched the green wall. It was not rock, but wood. The wooden built side of a ship. And the ship was the *Albatross*! There was no possibility of doubting his eyes. He could see the bulge of her streaks inclining inward to the keel and slanting off towards her bow, which was partly embedded in the shingle. And the jet of water was coming out from her bilge through the hole which Jimmy Griggs had bored. High above him were her fore-chains. Her bulwarks were hidden, but farther outward he could see the lift of her quarter, and below it her slowly swaying rudder. He was at her port side, and she was lying over to starboard. By swimming round under her stern he might perhaps climb on board.

He trembled violently as he waded in and let himself fall forward into the deeper water. As he swam he perceived that the vessel's after part was afloat. She was held by the bow, and but for the weight of water that had leaked into her she might even slide off at high tide.

He held on at her rudder chains to gain breath and rest his tired limbs. From under her starboard counter he saw the wide bay and its frowning cliffs, and far up the precipitous wall he distinguished the

spot where he had stood and looked down upon the barque's deck.

Once more he plunged and swam. The mizzen chains were within his reach. He caught at them and pulled himself up until he could swing a leg over the bulwark.

"Thank God!" he cried, as he sat dripping and shivering, clinging with stiff fingers to the shrouds.

The deck sloped downward to the starboard side. He lowered himself upon it and crept along the channel past the dead body of Captain Teach, which he looked upon with a shudder. He kned his way up the poop-stairs on to the poop-deck. Looking forward, he saw that the vessel had suffered surprisingly little damage. Her bowsprit was broken against the cliff, and a tangle of loose rigging and canvas hung from it. Her foretopmast also had been snapped off short, but her other spars were intact, and all else was as it had been when the boat was put off from her.

Martin tried to explain to himself how it was that the ship had not foundered in deep water. It had been night when Gregson gave the order to shove off for the shore, believing that the vessel could not float any longer. But she had seemingly drifted beyond the headland and been carried by the swift tide to her present resting-place. Probably when the tide went down she was left aground, and the water had run out of her down to the level of the auger holes, to leak in again when the tide rose. The only wonder was that she had not broken her back and

fallen to pieces under the strain ; but this was probably due to the circumstance that the sea had been calm. Had a storm come on she must surely have been dashed to fragments.

Could she yet be saved ?

This was the question which engaged Martin Venner's brain as he made his way below into the cabin. Perhaps, if the auger holes could be properly plugged and the water pumped out of her, she might still be made sufficiently seaworthy to sail to some safe harbour. But to do this many skilful hands would be required, and where were they to be procured unless the mutineers were engaged ?

The cabin door was open. He went within, forgetting that the murdered mate was lying there. The body had slipped down the slope of the floor, and was rotting in a mess of bilge-water and drowned rats. Martin was thankful that in the twilight he could see no more than the back of the man's head and his already mouldy coat.

He entered the pantry, and from its confused and scattered contents rescued a plate of butter and a box of captain's biscuits. He hardly dared to eat, knowing that Frank and Nep and Joe were without such food. But, reflecting that he had need to keep up his strength for his return journey, he satisfied his hunger, quenching his thirst from a bottle of claret.

He had found the ship. There was an abundance of provisions on board of her unspoiled by the seawater. This was great news for him to take to his

suffering companions, and he must take it without delay and relieve their anxiety.

Filling the captain's biscuit box with such dainties as he could most readily lay his hands on, he tied it over his shoulder. He also thrust a couple of candles inside the front of his shirt. Then he returned on deck and prepared to go back by the way he had come. But as he went forward to the rail he felt the ship move, lifted by the rising tide. She seemed to be righting herself upon a more even keel, and there was a sound of gurgling water from below her decks. Soon the sea would be rushing into her again through the auger holes in her side! If he had only plugged those holes! But it was too late now. He had hardly more than the bare time to get back to his friends before dark.

To save himself the swim round the ship's stern, he went forward to the forecastle, and with the help of a stout rope lowered himself over the side. Instead of his feet touching the firm shingle, as he expected, he sank into deep water. The tide had risen far more quickly than he had calculated it would do. Still clinging to the rope, he glanced to the tunnel through which he had approached the ship.

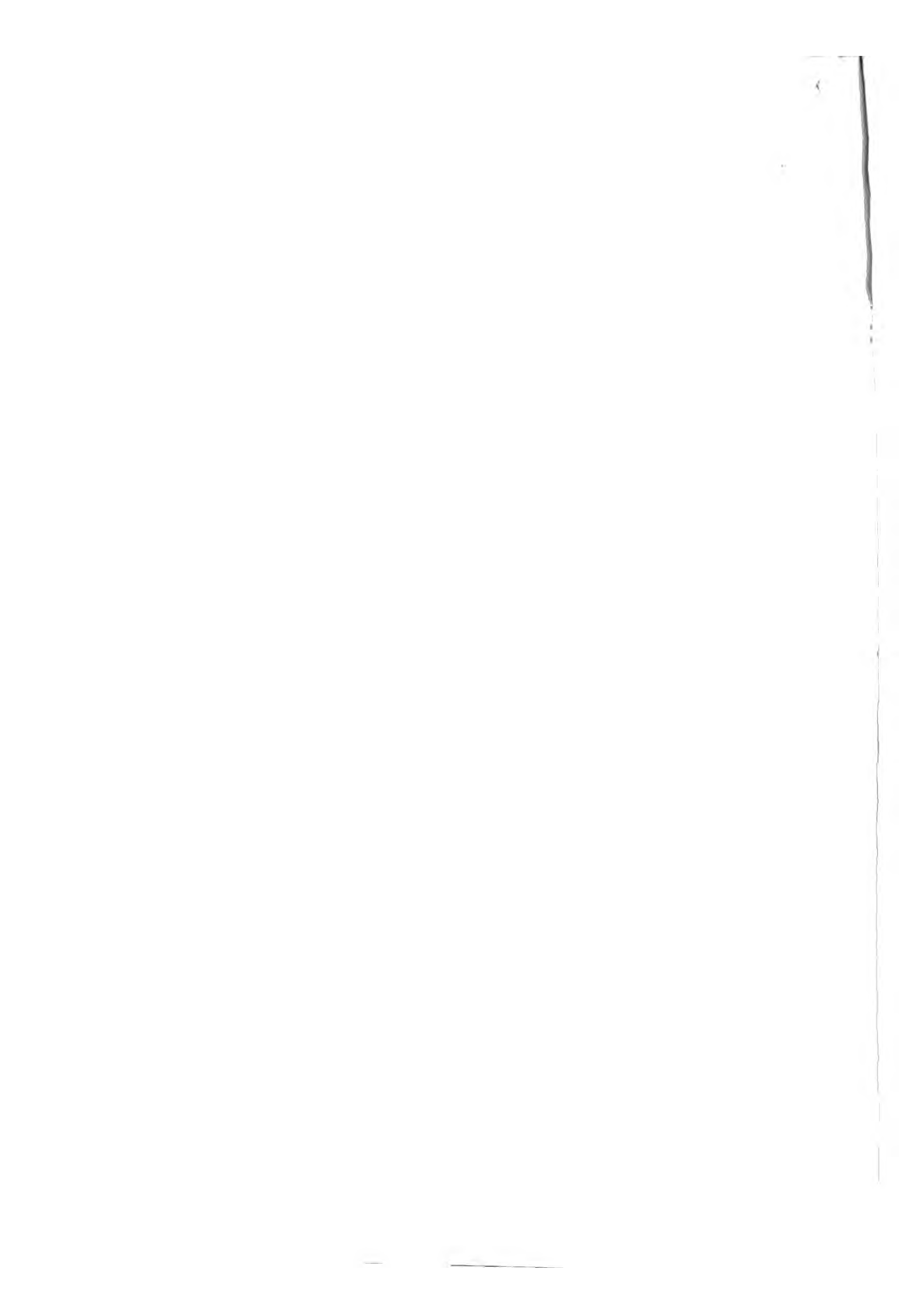
Already it was submerged. His only known way of return was cut off.

What was he to do? How was he to convey the food to his friends, who waited for it hungering?

There was nothing for it but to climb back upon the ship and wait until the ebbing tide should open the tunnel anew. Sadly he realised that there was no



“LEAVE VENER ALONE!”—Page 245.



means of signalling or of letting Frank and Billy know that he had succeeded in his quest. They would think that he was drowned. Perhaps they would risk their lives in searching for him.

But there was no help for it. He had done his best, and could only trust that when daylight came he would be able to complete his work and bring his companions into safety.

With great difficulty he managed to climb on board. When he got back into the cabin he denied himself more food, and would hardly allow himself the comfort of sitting down on one of the cushioned couches. The presence of the dead mate made him feel nervous in the deepening twilight. He tried to forget that it was there, that he was alone on a death-ship. But everything about him reminded him of the tragedy of the mutiny. He searched for matches, and, finding some, lighted the swinging lamp over the cabin table. Even the company of the flickering flame gave him very little comfort.

He opened the table drawer, and found in it a bundle of charts. Unrolling them, he discovered that one was a chart of the North Atlantic, including the British Islands. He clutched at it eagerly, and spread it out in front of him, trying to make out the course which the *Albatross* had sailed and to ascertain her present position. There were countless islands marked off the north-west of Scotland, but one small group far to the westward seemed to him to answer most closely to his surmises, and they were named the

islands of St. Kilda. But, as the chart was drawn on a very small scale and the islands were represented by mere dots, he was not greatly helped. In any case, they were so far remote from the mainland, and apparently so much out of the way of traffic, that it was almost useless to hope for help from any passing ship, and equally vain to hope that the *Albatross* could be sailed into any port with a crew consisting of three boys and a negro cook.

Martin sat contemplating the chart until his eyes grew heavy. He tried to keep awake, but the food that he had eaten, added to his weariness after his long swim, made him strangely sleepy, and, in spite of his efforts of will, his head dropped on his arm and he fell into a profound slumber, dreaming that he was back again in Crosby's office in Liverpool writing out charter-parties and bills of lading.

He was awakened by being thrown bodily across the cabin table. The hanging lamp had burnt itself out, and the light of day was streaming in at the skylight. The ship, left aground by the retreating tide, had careened, and was again lying over on her starboard side.

Martin picked himself up and crept out of the cabin. He did not wait to help himself to any breakfast, but went on deck. The morning air was dark with gulls, that hovered over the deserted ship. A carrion crow was perched upon the dead body of Captain Teach. Martin clapped his hands and startled the evil bird, and watched its flight over the

cliff. His eyes lingered on the rocky barrier, and he saw that at this side its slope was more gradual, affording promise of an easy foothold.

He resolved to venture across it rather than return by the more perilous way through the tidal tunnel by which he had come.

The ship's maintopmast-yard touched the face of the cliff, resting against a level ledge. Carrying the provisions on his back, he ascended the main rigging, swarmed down the slope of the yard, and stood upon the solid rock. Then up and up the rugged cliff he climbed, until he came to its grassy summit and reached its highest ridge. It was a long and tedious climb, in which one slip of the foot or one incautious movement must have sent him headlong to his death; but the descent on the farther side was even more dangerous. Far below him he could see the various caves. Nearer to him he could see the shelf of rock upon which he had left Joe Parry. Joe was not there now, nor could he see any sign of Frank Kershaw or Billy Neptune or the dog. But, he reflected, most probably they had gone back into the security of their cave.

He began the perilous descent, going down backward and stepping from ledge to ledge with infinite caution.

Not many steps had he taken, however, when he was startled and almost knocked over by the heavy thump of a man's fist upon his back.

He turned, and came face to face with Jimmy Griggs.

CHAPTER XXVII.

IN POSSESSION.

THE face of Griggs was awful to look upon. There was an unsightly wound in his left jaw, where the bullet from Frank Kershaw's revolver had struck it. The congealed blood had not been washed from it. His cheeks were hollow and livid, and his evil eyes were as the eyes of a madman. He thrust forth his dirty fingers greedily to snatch at the box which Martin carried on his back.

"What have you got in that box?" he demanded to know. "Where did you get it?"

Martin Venner stepped back from him, afraid not so much of possible violence as by the danger of Griggs' gaining possession of the provisions and discovering whence they had been obtained.

"It was brought ashore from off the *Albatross*," he answered promptly. "You don't suppose, do you, that biscuit boxes grow among the rocks like grass?"

"Yes, I know it's off the ship," Griggs retorted impatiently, evidently believing, as Mart had intended he should believe, that it had been brought ashore in the wrecked boat with the other stores. "What has it got inside?"

What was Martin to answer? If he told the truth, Griggs would immediately suspect his secret.

For the sake of his own safety and the safety of his companions, he temporised.

“Only some mussels,” he said.

“Mussels!” repeated Griggs incredulously. “I don’t believe you. Mussels don’t grow on the top of the cliff here.” He leapt forward and caught at the boy by the throat, forcing him to his knees. “I’ll have it, whatever it is,” he muttered savagely, tightening his grip.

Martin fought to free himself. Griggs pressed him back against the sharp edge of a rock, watching his face turn purple.

“I’ve got you now!” he muttered, with an oath. “You’ve given me the slip once or twice, but this time——”

A revolver-shot took off his cap, and Frank Kershaw showed himself from behind a boulder not a dozen yards away. A second shot passed over his shoulder.

“Leave Venner alone!” cried Frank, scrambling over the rough ground.

Griggs flung Martin from him as Frank and Billy Neptune ran in his direction. He was without a weapon, and saw that he was in Kershaw’s power. He stood cowed.

“Now go back to your mates,” commanded Frank. “And if ever you want food from us, remember that when you had some and we asked you to spare us a little, just to keep us alive, you refused.”

“Well, you see, there wasn’t enough to go round so many,” protested Griggs, “and I had to consider my own mates first.”

He turned to go away, afraid of Frank's weapon, and believing that there was no food to be got.

"Frank!" said Martin, when Griggs was beyond earshot. "I've been on board. The ship is ours. We must keep the mutineers away from her and not let them know she is there. Let us give them what's left of the dead sheep. That will keep them quiet for a bit. We must go back to our cave and pretend that we are still starving."

Griggs went down the cliff very slowly, picking out the least dangerous places. He often glanced back to see if the two boys and the negro were following him. He got down to the level beach without accident, and they watched him until he disappeared among the chasms.

In the afternoon of that same day, at low tide, Jansen, Rossi, and Hansen went out to gather shellfish. Frank Kershaw and Billy Neptune watched them as they walked listlessly in the direction of the mussel beds. Suddenly Hansen went aside towards a patch of sand where a great many sea-birds hovered. He quickened his pace and the gulls flew away at his approach, leaving behind them something at which they had been pecking.

"Ah!" exclaimed Nep, "Hansen him seen it!"

The German pounced upon the haunch of mutton which Billy had deposited there.

"Jan!" he called aloud excitedly, adding some words in German.

Jansen and Rossi ran up to him, and all three clutched greedily at the newly found food.

"How did it come here?" questioned Rossi.

Hansen passed to him a slip of paper which he had picked up. On it were written in pencil the words:

" TO JAMES GRIGGS,
" *Mutineer and Murderer,*
" FROM MARTIN VENNER."

Rossi handed the paper to Jansen, who read it in his turn.

"Didn't I tell you there vas sheeps on de island?" he asked.

Hansen lifted the haunch of mutton to his shoulder.

"Ve don't vant no more mussels," said he, and his two mates went back with him to their cave, where for the rest of the day they remained cooking the flesh on their oilstove and hungrily devouring it.

That they should remain in the cave was just what Martin Venner wished, for while the mutineers were not prowling about the beach it was possible to return to the *Albatross* unseen and unsuspected.

The way over the cliff was as dangerous as it was difficult, and especially so to Joe Parry, who had to be helped continually. Rain was falling heavily, making the rocks slippy and insecure. But after many hours of toil the farther side of the headland was reached and the green ship could be seen far below, looking as small as a rowing-boat from the precipitous heights.

Dusk was deepening into darkness when at last Martin led his three companions on to the rock against which the ship's maintopmast-yard dragged its dangling rigging. They caught at the tackle, and Nep succeeded in swarming up to the yard. He got astride of it, and sent down the bight of a rope by which Joe Parry was hoisted up. Frank Kershaw followed, and then Martin. From the yard to the sloping deck was an easy descent by means of the shrouds.

"Only fancy!" exclaimed Martin, when they all four stood together on the maindeck, "we might have been here all these days, safe and sound, instead of starving in that cold, dark cave, if we hadn't taken to the boat. And Dewar and Gregson might still have been alive."

"But even if we had stayed aboard we couldn't have brought her into a better berth than where she is," said Frank. "It wouldn't take much to float her off from here at high tide, and she doesn't look as if she was much injured."

"Excepting for the holes that Griggs bored in her side," added Mart, "and we can plug them up and then perhaps pump some of the water out of her, and lighten her. But even if we get her off from here, what good will it be? We can't manage her by ourselves. Nep isn't a seaman, you know, and Joe's no good. You and I have never been to sea before this voyage. We should only get wrecked and be worse off than we are now."

“Unless,” suggested Frank, “unless we were to employ the mutineers to take us into the nearest port.”

Mart shook his head.

“Do you think for a moment that Griggs and Jansen would keep faith with us?” he questioned. “They would simply maroon us somewhere and make off with the ship and all that’s in her.”

Billy Neptune then spoke up.

“Suppose Griggs he no find them ship, we all right,” said he. “We get other men for help.”

“Other men!” repeated Frank. “Where from?”

Billy pointed landward to the high hill which was visible above the top line of the cliff.

“Over there,” he said. “Them dog him gone that way, for find a new home.”

Since the finding of the dead sheep Nep had persistently held to the belief that the island was inhabited. He had argued that the western side of the island upon which they were stranded, the side fronting the Atlantic, was probably the wilder side, and that the eastern coast, if they could get round to it, would be found to be fertile, where sheep could graze and men could live.

Both Martin and Frank believed that the sheep they had found might be a wild one. It was not like any other sheep that they had ever seen. But the negro’s observation had gone further than theirs, for he had noticed that one of the dead animal’s horns was branded with the letter “H,” clearly indicating that it was the property of some civilised person.

“Over there!” he repeated. “There we find me for true.” He gave a little start. “You hear that?” he cried. “Listen!”

They stood still, holding in their breath.

Down from the hill there came the unmistakable sound of a bleating sheep and the barking of a dog. They believed it to be the bark of their abandoned retriever.

“I believe Billy is right, after all,” decided Martin. “Where there are sheep there are men, and where there are men we can work up a crew to work us home!”

They strode aft along the deck. Near the galley they came upon the body of the Dutchman whose shot had killed Captain Teach.

“Can’t we manage to get the dead men off the ship?” questioned Martin.

Billy Neptune entered his galley and lighted a lantern. Frank bent down as if about to begin the gruesome work of burial. But the negro drew him back.

“You no touch that!” he said. “You go into them cabin one time.”

He led the three boys to the poop cabin, and into the captain’s stateroom, where he bade them wash themselves. While they were thus occupied, he quietly carried away the body of the mate and dropped it over the taffrail. This done, he returned to the galley and lighted the stove, and set about the work of cooking a good supper.

The boys in the meantime made tidy the cabin.

Frank kindled a fire, and Joe spread the tablecloth, while Martin got ready the berths for sleeping in.

It was a well-cooked meal that Billy Neptune prepared for them. He had opened the storeroom, in which there was an abundance of food that had not been touched by the water—potatoes, salt beef, rice, tea, biscuits, butter, and cheese; and he served the various courses just as if he had been waiting on Captain Teach. Not until the boys had finished would he eat himself, and even then he would have taken it in the pantry if Martin and Frank had not insisted upon his sitting at the cabin table. When he had cleared away the empty plates and dishes, he wished the boys a good-night, saying that he preferred to spend the night in his old quarters. But long after they had turned in to their berths they heard him moving about the ship. They did not know what he was doing. In the morning, however, when Martin and Frank went up on deck, they discovered that all the dead bodies had been cast overboard, and all traces of the mutiny removed.

Daylight enabled them to make a thorough examination of the ship. Uncovering the hatches, they found that the cargo had shifted, and that much of it was under water. At low tide Martin climbed over the side by means of a rope and examined the auger holes. There were two of them. One was partly plugged up with seaweed; the other was very small. Water streamed out from both of them. He removed the seaweed, and the water came with

greater force. Ever since the vessel had been lying there this process had continued. When the falling tide had reached below the level of the holes, the water from inside had poured out, only to leak in again when the tide rose.

Returning on board, Martin went to the carpenter's room and made ready a pair of wooden plugs and two squares of tin well pierced for nails. These he took over the side with him, and, helped by Frank, thrust in the plugs and hammered them home, nailing the squares of tin over them. When the tide next rose the ship leaked no longer. There was still a great quantity of water in her hold, but she was lighter than before; so much lighter, indeed, that at high tide she floated on an even keel.

If her small crew had had the strength, they might have shoved the vessel off from the rocks; but they hardly realised that she was afloat when the ebb left her aground once more. To lighten her they worked at the pumps by spells of ten minutes at a time. This they did for two days, freeing her of many inches of water.

This pumping enabled them to get below and try to shift some of the cargo. But the work was too heavy for them. Nevertheless they had the satisfaction of knowing that the vessel was now capable of making the passage over to the mainland of Scotland, requiring only a crew to work her.

On the fourth day of this life on board the ship, the weather being clear and frosty, Martin and

Frank decided to make an expedition to the top of the hill in order to find out if possible whether the island was indeed inhabited by a native population. They had surveyed the coast with a spyglass, and decided which would be the easiest way to attempt the ascent. They could manage, they thought, by climbing up the cliff as far as the mouth of Skeleton Cavern, and then making a zigzag course to the northward until they came to a grassy slope which could be seen from the ship's deck.

They started early in the morning, taking food in their pockets, a pair of revolvers, and a binocular glass. The climb up the cliff occupied them fully two hours, and they rested at the mouth of the cavern. Before they renewed their climb they went inside the cave, and saw that the pirate's store of gold remained as they had left it. No longer hungry and despairing, they looked upon the glittering mass of wealth with new eyes, estimating what could be done with it if they could but carry it away to Liverpool.

"Why, we should be as rich as anyone in the town!" cried Frank.

"We could start as shipowners on our own account!" added Mart.

"How can we get it down aboard the *Albatross*?" questioned Frank.

"I am only surprised that the mutineers have not explored the caves and found it long before this," remarked Venner.

"Oh, they only want food now," returned Frank, "and they know they can't find any in the caverns."

"It looks rather hard on them that we should have plenty and they none," said Mart. "Don't you think we ought to give them some?"

"I've thought that often," said Frank. "But there's a difficulty in the way. If we were to give them any they'd know immediately that we had a secret store, and they wouldn't waste much time before they found it. The only food we could offer them would be such as we could get possession of nowhere but on a ship; and of course we don't want Griggs and Jansen to discover the *Albatross*."

"I'm not sure that we shall not be obliged to take them into our secret very soon," resumed Mart. "They are all seamen, you know, and they would manage the ship for us."

"Yes," nodded Frank. "And when we got them on board, the *Albatross* wouldn't be ours any longer. No. Let us first try to find some of the islanders if there are any. Even if they are not trained seamen, we could at least bribe half a dozen of them to come with us to do what we told them, and protect us against Griggs. We could pay them with some of this gold."

While he spoke he was filling his pockets with some of the more valuable of the jewels.

"I say, Mart," he went on after a pause. "Couldn't we rig up some tackle with ropes and pulleys and send down the gold in flour bags to the ship?"

Martin smiled.

"The pirates must have got it in here by some such device," Frank decided.

"That's true," agreed Martin. "And if we are going to take the stuff away we shall have to do something of the sort. It would take us weeks to carry it away bit by bit in our pockets, and there's plenty of tackle on the ship for the purpose. We could rig it up in the way they have at the Liverpool warehouses for hoisting bales of cotton into the top floors."

They spent some time in planning how it could be done. The cave was something like a hundred feet high above the beach. With a good pulley block and a very long rope, they thought it might be managed. Martin remembered that there was a large quantity of new hemp rope among the cargo.

As they climbed the farther heights they often paused to discuss a new suggestion as to how the treasure was to be secretly packed away in the ship's hold, so that if the mutineers should accompany them they might not find it, and be prompted to add to their crimes.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A RACE FOR THE SHIP.

FRANK was the first to reach the top of the hill. The sight that met his gaze was a wide rolling stretch of blue sea. On the far horizon was what he took to be a row of islands; but when Martin joined him they decided that what they saw was a range of mountains whose purple summits showed above the level of the sea-line.

“If this place where we are is St. Kilda,” declared Martin, “then those must be the mountains of Lewis. I remember seeing the Lewis marked on the chart. It’s a big island off the coast of Scotland, and the principal town is Stornoway, where my telegram was sent from, you remember.”

Frank had the binoculars and was looking through them to the land that sloped downward from the foot of the hill to the sea.

“Mart!” he cried joyously, “I believe I can see houses!” He pointed below him to the shores of a wide sheltered bay. “Take the glass and look,” he said.

Martin could distinguish a row of tiny dots that followed the line of the shore.

“If they’re not houses they are huts,” he agreed. “I can see smoke rising from one or two of them. Let us go down and see.” And he started off at a quick stride.

The eastern slope of the hill had a surface of stones mixed with patches of grass and faded heather. Walking was easy. When they got to within a mile of the island settlement the boys heard the barking of dogs, and presently half a dozen men and several women and children were seen gathered in a crowd, from which two of the men presently detached themselves and approached to meet the two strangers whom they had seen from a distance making their way down the hillside. One of the men was middle-aged, and was dressed like a fisherman. His companion was much younger, and wore a bowler hat and a suit of coarse tweed.

When they drew nearer they halted and waited for the boys to go up to them. They were accompanied by two dogs, and the boys were astonished to recognise that one of them was their own retriever, Brian. The elder man was first to speak; but neither Martin nor Frank could understand him, and they shook their heads. Brian ran up to them, licking their hands.

"Can't you speak English?" Martin asked, looking from the one to the other inquiringly.

The younger man's face brightened.

"Who are you? Where have you come from?" he questioned. "We knew there were strangers on the island, because the dog came. He has been here two days."

"We are shipwrecked, and we want help," Martin announced.

The younger man turned to his companion and spoke some words in Gaelic. Then to the boys he added, "Is it food you want?"

"No," Frank replied, "we have got enough food. What we want most is a boat and the help of some men to tow our ship off from the beach where she had run aground, at the other side of the island. Our own boats are all lost."

"I see," nodded the spokesman, "but I don't know about the boat. Perhaps you will come down to the village and I will inquire. I am only the schoolmaster and cannot speak for the whole island."

Martin and Frank accompanied them down to the village, telling something of what had happened to the *Albatross*, but withholding information concerning the mutineers, lest the islanders should be alarmed at the presence of such dangerous men.

As they came nearer to the houses they saw two rowing-boats lying high and dry on the shore.

"Perhaps they will sell us one of them," whispered Frank. "I've got a handful of guineas in my pocket."

The schoolmaster told them that the island was named Hirta, and that it was one of the St. Kilda group, lying about forty miles westward of the mainland of Scotland. No ship had anchored in the bay for four months, and they were getting short of provisions.

The whole population had come out from the huts to look at the two strangers. None of the men could speak English excepting the minister and the schoolmaster, who acted as interpreters.

In response to Martin's offer to buy one of their boats, or, if not buy it, at least to borrow it, they all joined in a heated debate. Frank Kershaw supposed that they disputed whether it would be worth their while to help the shipwrecked crew, and he offered them a handful of gold guineas. But he soon learned that they did not want the money. It was of no use to them, they said. They would only take food or clothing in exchange for the accommodation required; and upon Martin agreeing to let them have a sack of potatoes and whatever other stores could be spared, they signified that four of their number would take a boat round to the ship and give two days to the work of getting her ready for sea.

But it was already nearly three o'clock in the afternoon, with only another hour of daylight, and the islanders positively refused to put out a boat that day. For the reason that darkness would soon make it impossible for them to return to the ship over the hill, Frank and Martin were forced to yield to necessity and to remain in the village for the night, accepting the accommodation offered them in one of the huts.

On board the *Albatross* Billy Neptune and Joe Parry waited anxiously for their return. They had watched the two boys climbing upward and had seen them pause at the mouth of Skeleton Cavern and enter it. After that they had lost sight of them, for although Joe watched the spot for hours yet he did not see anyone come out of the cave.

"I'm certain I saw them go in there," he said to Billy. "Do you reckon they could have got lost or had an accident?"

Billy shook his head in doubt.

"Me no can tell," he said.

"Perhaps Griggs and them have found their way into the cavern where all the gold is," Joe fearfully suggested, "and Kershaw and Venner may have fallen into their hands."

"Them come back berra soon. You wait," said the negro consolingly.

Joe was lying on the skylight seat with an overcoat and a blanket wrapped about him. Frank Kershaw had acted as his doctor for some days past; had cleaned his wounds with Condyl's fluid, and bandaged them up with lint that he had found in the dead captain's medicine chest, and Nep was regularly feeding him with nourishing food. Billy, indeed, waited upon him most assiduously, never suffering him to be lonely or to want for anything that could be procured. So kind and attentive was he, that Joe began to regret that he had ever doubted him or suspected him of a possible reversion to cannibalism. Yet now when Martin and Frank Kershaw so unaccountably prolonged their absence, Joe's fears were reawakened. If Venner and Kershaw should never come back, he thought, and if he should be left alone upon the stranded ship with the negro until they had exhausted all the food, would not Billy Neptune then assert his savage instincts? Joe

did not dread death by drowning or by any other natural accident; but to be killed by the knife of an African savage and then eaten, this was an unspeakable fate to contemplate.

When night came and still Kershaw and Venner did not return, his fears increased. Billy noticed that he trembled, even when he sat by the cabin fire.

"What for you shake all same you cold?" the negro asked.

"I'm afraid," Joe faltered, "afraid to be left here alone—with you. Kershaw and Venner are dead. I feel sure they are, or they'd have come back before dark. Even the dog has gone away."

"You think me no fit keep you company, then?" questioned Billy. "You 'fraid of me?"

Joe eyed him nervously.

"Wouldn't anyone be afraid of you?" returned Joe. "You're a Ju-ju man—a cannibal."

"Cannibal!" repeated Billy. "What you mean? Me no sabey cannibal. What you mean?"

"Why, you eat human men," blurted out Joe. "You eat men the same as all your people in Benin do."

Billy frowned and looked very ferocious.

"Benin man him no more for Ju-ju," he said. "Him stop all that. Him live all same white men. Suppose him once make Ju-ju, he no eat white man. No, him eat them nigger slave. Nigger slaves them only trash. No, no, Joe, you no be 'fraid of Bill Neptune. He no fit to hurt you. You go sleep."

He went out of the cabin and up to the deck, where he strode to and fro, wrapped up in a thick overcoat, to watch for Martin and Frank. Once or twice during the night he went below to warm himself and heap more coals on the cabin fire and to keep the galley fire alight, so that the pan of soup that he kept always ready should not get cold.

The night was frosty. The rigging and spars were white with frozen dew. Yet in spite of the bitter cold the negro kept faithful watch. The moon shone brightly in a clear sky, but he had lighted lanterns to mark the position of the ship if Venner and Kershaw should be coming back in the night and require such guidance.

Morning came and they had not returned. He prepared Joe's breakfast. He sat by the fire while Joe ate.

"Do you suppose they have found that there's a town at the other side of the island and gone to it?" Joe questioned.

Billy did not answer. He had fallen into a sound sleep. Joe rose from the table and looked at him, then stole quietly out of the cabin, closing the door behind him.

"I suppose it's the warmth of the fire that has made him sleepy," he reflected.

He did not know that the negro had been awake and on watch all night.

He went on deck, taking the mate's binoculars with him. With the glass he searched the face of the

cliff, the slope of the hill, and every rock and chasm within sight, but the barren expanse showed no sign of human presence. Again and again he searched, and at last gave up in despair. Surely, he thought, if Frank and Mart were alive they would have come back!

At about midday he again turned the glass upon the cliff, searching in every direction from which he considered it possible that his two companions could approach. But again he was disappointed. He was about to go down to the cabin to see if Billy was awake, when his eyes turned once more to the cliff. He saw that the gulls had been disturbed from the ledges where they had been resting at a particular part of the headland. The birds flew screaming into the air, and across the sea towards one of the outlying islands. Joe raised the binoculars and tried to discover what had startled them. He thrilled with quick joy at sight of two moving figures outlined upon the ridge of the headland.

He strode to the companion and called aloud—

“Nep! They’re coming! They’re coming!”

Billy was putting coal on the fire.

“All right,” he cried. “Me make them dinner ready.” And he went out of the cabin and along to the galley.

“They’re over yonder,” cried Joe from the poop rail, as the cook went forward. He pointed to the cliff. “But they’re not coming down the same way that we did.”

"You keep your eye on them," cried Nep, "and tell me when they come near."

Joe went to the flag locker and took out the Union Jack, which he ran up to the mizzen truck. When he had secured the halliard he returned to the poop rail where he had left the binoculars. He saw the two figures once more. They were descending the cliff very slowly and cautiously, walking along the edge of a precipice that overhung the sea sheer as a built wall. He tried to make out which was Venner and which was Kershaw. While he watched them his heart gave a sudden leap. He dropped the spyglass and ran to the galley.

"Billy!" he cried. "It's not them, after all! It's Griggs and Rossi!"

Billy drew the saucepan off the stove and stared at the boy amazed.

"Joe!" he said, "you go get them gun. We no can let them men come here. We shoot them first."

While Billy stood at the poop, Joe went down and brought a rifle and a belt of cartridges.

"Me no see no men," he said, as he took the gun in hand.

Joe pointed to where Griggs and Rossi were sliding down a steep slope of rock. "They've seen the ship, that's a certainty," he said. "And they're coming down to us as quick as their legs can carry them."

Billy held ready the gun, but the range was yet too great for him to fire. He watched the two mutineers.

"You got a gun for yourself, Joe?" he questioned.

Joe took a revolver from his overcoat pocket. "Yes," he said. "I'm ready. We must defend the ship, Nep. Hullo! They've got to that level place now! They'll be here soon."

Griggs was striding quickly along what looked like a sheep track. Rossi went with more caution. Suddenly he stopped and sat down, pointing.

"*Albatross*, ahoy!" The cry came distinctly. Joe and Billy looked at each other perplexed.

"That's Frank Kershaw's voice!" exclaimed Joe.

"Yes," Billy nodded. "That's so. Where it come from, you suppose?"

Joe ran across the deck and gazed across the bay.

"Billy! Billy!" he shouted. And he pointed across to the farther headland, beyond which he saw a brown-sailed boat steering towards the ship.

As he turned to see if Nep was coming to him, his eye caught something moving in the water some fifty yards away from him. He looked at the moving object through the glass. It was a man swimming, hand over hand. He could not yet see his face, but presently he turned over on his other side and Joe saw that it was Jansen.

Griggs and Rossi were by this time near at hand, Jansen was swimming strongly, the boat at whose stern sat Venner and Kershaw, was sailing quickly. It was a race. Which would be the first to reach the ship, friend or foe?

CHAPTER XXIX.

GRIGGS OUTWITTED.

WHILE Joe Parry was excitedly watching the approaching boat and keeping an eye upon Jansen, Billy Neptune watched the two mutineers descending the cliff.

Griggs was now far in advance of Rossi. He had reached a ledge of rock hardly higher above the sea than the barque's main truck. There, however, he came to a stop, holding to the rock with both hands, his further descent being barred by the narrowness of the ledge, upon which he could secure only a very perilous footing. Below him the precipice caved inward, and he seemed unable to move either onward or backward; and, to increase his discomfort, he now saw that Billy Neptune's rifle was levelled at him. Billy saw and understood his predicament and refrained from shooting, turning his attention to Rossi.

Rossi also had paused. He seemed to be overcome with nervousness, for he leaned against a detached arm of granite and was contemplating the awful gulf between him, where the cliff went sheer as a wall into the deep green of the sea. But presently he gathered courage to proceed, taking little, cautious steps from point to point, until at last he got into a position of safety. He then turned and looked back

up the steep cliff and beckoned. Billy Neptune followed his glance, and saw that he had been beckoning to some of his mates who were struggling to descend from various parts of the headland. Four of them there were.

It was evident that the mutineers, having by some means discovered the ship, had determined to make a raid upon her.

Billy went across the deck to Joe.

"That's Jansen down there, swimming," Joe told him, pointing to the glassy rollers astern of the ship. "And Muller and Kauffman are behind him yonder. They must have swum round by the rocks."

"You no let them come aboard, Joe," Billy ordered. "Suppose they try, you shoot them one at a time."

He turned from the swimmers to regard the boat, which had now got under the shelter of the cliff, where the wind was less strong. Her sail was swaying lazily; her men were putting out their oars. Martin Venner had clambered forward over the thwarts and was at the bow, urging the islanders to their work in words which they did not understand, and which the schoolmaster, who sat at the stern, saw no reason to interpret.

Martin had already seen Jansen swimming towards the *Albatross*. He had also seen Rossi climbing down the cliff, and he was all excitement to get on board before them, for he knew that if they should once get possession of the ship there would be no turning them off. Jansen was within easy pistol range of him, and he handled his revolver where he kept it in his jacket pocket. But he did not dare to bring it out and shoot

for fear of alarming the islanders, who had not been told of the mutiny.

Suddenly the schoolmaster rose to his feet.

"There is a man in the water!" he cried, pointing to Jansen, and he clutched at the tiller, putting it over while he shouted in Gaelic to the rowers, bidding them pull their hardest.

Jansen, catching sight of the boat, altered his course and swam towards it, and all Martin's protests failed to dissuade the schoolmaster from hastening to the swimmer's rescue.

In the meantime, Griggs, by climbing upward a few yards, had succeeded in finding a level ledge of the cliff by which he was enabled to gain the flat platform of rock from which Billy Neptune and the boys had caught at the ship's rigging. The tide, however, was now high, and the trailing tackle was beyond his reach.

"Joe!" he called aloud.

Joe was standing at the break of the poop, revolver in hand, ready to prevent Jansen from coming aboard. He looked upward to Griggs.

"All right, Jimmy, I see you there!" he called back. "What do you want?"

"Just lay aloft to the maintopmast-yard there," cried Griggs, "and lower the bight of the rope that's dangling there, so that I can lay hold of it."

"Do you want to put it round your neck, then?" shouted Joe.

"Shut your face, and do what I tell you!" called Griggs, with an oath. "Go up and lower the rope."

“You’re nearer to it than I am,” retorted Joe. “Lower it yourself, or, if you want so badly to come aboard, jump down and break your neck.”

Griggs saw that the boy was determined not to help him, and he sat down and waited until Rossi and the four other men joined him.

He saw the boat coming nearer and nearer, and he pulled out his revolver, resolving that if he himself could not get on board the ship, Venner and Kershaw should not do so. But very soon he caught sight of Jansen catching at one of the boat’s oars, and he smiled grimly, believing that when Jan should set foot upon the deck, he would not delay very long in contriving that his mates on the cliff should join him.

Griggs was ill and weak from hunger. His hand was unsteady, and he was afraid that if he fired at the occupants of the boat he might very well hit Jansen instead of Venner or Kershaw, so he put away his weapon.

He wondered where the boat and its crew had come from. It was not a ship’s boat. That was plainly to be seen, and as plainly the men were not sailors.

“They’ve done us this time, those boys—done us clean!” he said, when Rossi dropped down beside him. “I lay they’ve had the ship here all along, and have been living like lords while we’ve been eating our boots in that cave. And now they’ve got hold of these men to help them get her away. Where have they come from, I wonder?”

“They look like fishermen,” said Rossi. “Most likely they landed for water or something, and the boys have offered them part of the salvage if they can

haul the ship off. Jimmy, old pal, you didn't do much good by boring those holes in the craft. I believe she's floating! Don't you see how she sways with the tide?"

"What's Jan up to there?" asked Griggs. "What does he want messing round the boat instead of getting aboard in front of those swabs?"

Jansen's strength was exhausted with his long swim. He clung desperately to the boat's oar and drew himself along it until he caught at the high gunwale. The islanders stopped their rowing, and two of them helped him in beside them, in spite of Martin Venner's remonstrances.

"That voss too bad of you, Venner," protested the German. "What for you tell der men not to help me? Have you forgot that I saved your life in der Mersey ven you vould have been drowned?"

He tumbled in under the thwarts and lay there helpless, until the boat was pulled alongside the ship. No one interfered with the islanders, who assisted him to mount the accommodation ladder, but Joe Parry watched him closely when he stood dripping on the deck; watched him casting anxious glances up the side of the cliff to where Griggs, Rossi, and their comrades were gathered in a group awaiting an opportunity to get down upon the barque. Griggs was making signals to him, urging him to climb the main shrouds and lower a rope from the yardarm.

Jansen understood, and he crept forward. But Joe, seeing his intention, stood in front of him.

"No, you don't!" Joe covered him with his revolver.

"Stay where you are! If you go another stride nearer that mast, I'll shoot you!"

"All right!" Jansen growled surlily. He glanced over the side and saw that Muller and Kauffman were nearing the ship. He saw also that a second boat was rounding the point, with four men on board her.

Martin Venner had expected this second boat, which had started from the village bay at the same time as the boat which had brought himself. He watched her anxiously, thankful that he could count upon the support of her crew in the event of the mutineers proving obstinate. But, although Jansen had managed to get on board, yet Griggs and Rossi and their four companions were in a position of such difficulty that they could not possibly reach the deck without help from the ship.

"Leave those chaps to me, Nep!" he ordered, going forward to the poop rail, where the negro stood on guard. "Leave them, and go and get some dinner cooked." He turned to Frank Kershaw. "Take charge of the deck, Frank, will you? I'm going aloft to have a palaver with Griggs."

He strode to the starboard shrouds of the mainmast, and slowly climbed upward to the topmast-yard. He got astride of the stout spar, and jockeyed his way along to its extreme end. This brought him very near to the six mutineers, who stood in a group on the rock some twenty feet beneath him. A thin, pale, emaciated lot they looked, with their unwashed faces, their tattered clothing, and their bleeding hands and feet. Martin pitied them.

"Well, Griggs," he began, "what do you want? You've had rather a nasty journey this morning, climbing over the headland. Did you think you would like to change your quarters?"

Griggs hid his revolver.

"You've stolen a march on us," he responded. "You've been cheating us nicely, living here on the ship while we've been starving over yonder in the caves. What do we want? Well, you need hardly ask. We want to come aboard to our duty."

"Oh!" said Martin. "But you don't, any of you, belong to this ship. You are all deserters, and worse than deserters. You are mutineers and murderers. You can't suppose for a moment that you can be allowed to come back."

Griggs frowned.

"Look here, young Venner," he returned. "I'm not going to stand here and argue with you. Call us deserters, if you like. I won't deny we left the ship in a hurry. But we're willing to come back now and sail her into port for you. We can't live any longer here. We've not got a crumb of food. Lower a rope to us, and let us come aboard. Give us something to eat, and then we can come to business."

Martin shook his head.

"You're none of you coming aboard until I have a proper understanding with you," he declared. "If I were to take you aboard on the old terms, the law would say that I had condoned the mutiny and the murders. You scuttled the ship, you killed Captain

Teach and the mate and several of the crew. Those are hanging matters, you know, and if I did what I ought to do, I should hand you over to the police in the first port we touch at. You understand that, don't you?"

"What about the food?" cried Griggs. "Don't sit there like a blooming magistrate jawing us this way. Give us something to eat. We're half dead, I tell you!"

"Oh, you shall have some food!" smiled Martin. "Billy Neptune is getting it ready. He's in the galley cooking it."

"Very well, then," pursued Griggs, "send down a rope for us to climb aboard—that one in the block close by your hand."

Martin caught hold of the rope and drew a coil of it into his hand, as if preparing to throw it. Then he laid it over his knees.

"No," he said, "I can't let you come aboard. You shall have the food sent ashore to you. You need not be destitute, even if you are left on the island. There is a village over at the other side of that high hill yonder, and the people won't let you starve."

Griggs and Rossi exchanged glances of surprise at this information concerning a village. Their guilty consciences saw in it a possibility of escape by another method than that of going aboard the *Albatross*. Venner's threat that he might give them up to the police had obviously an effect upon them. Nevertheless, Griggs evidently realised that, with eight men to help him, it would not be a difficult matter to overpower three boys and a negro and retake the ship.

"Thank you," he said. "We shall be glad to have the food, and it's good of you to tell us about the village. It was from there, I reckon, that you got these men that have come in the boat?"

Martin nodded, "Yes."

"But they won't be sailing along with you in the barque, will they, if so be, you can get her free of the rocks?"

"No. Why?"

"Well," said Griggs, "in that case you don't suppose that you three youngsters and the cook can sail her to port, do you? Better by far that you let us help you."

"I will think about it," returned Martin. "We shall not be ready to sail for a bit—not for a day or two. She will have to be towed out, you see; and," he added, thinking of the treasure in Skeleton Cave, "my chum Kershaw wants to take some—some fossils with him that we found along the cliff."

"Fossils!" repeated Griggs. "What are they?"

"Oh, shells and things," Mart answered glibly. "The islanders are going to get them for us. And they are going to tow the barque out beyond the point. Then, when we are ready, I will let you know if we can take you. In the meantime, one of the boats will take the food round to the front of your cave, and you and your mates can go along with it."

"So you're not going to lower the rope to us?"

Martin secured the rope to the yard.

"No," he answered decisively; "and you musn't be surprised if I say I can't trust you."

He went back along the yard and descended to the deck. Griggs and his company remained where they were.

"Don't let those two men on board, Mr. Macrae," Martin commanded, as he reached the deck and saw the schoolmaster preparing to help Muller and Kauffman on board from the boat into which they had climbed.

"Why not?" questioned the schoolmaster. "They are members of your crew, are they not? I do not quite understand what all this means. These men, and the men on the rock there—why do you refuse to let them enter their own ship?"

Martin drew the schoolmaster aside and invited him down into the cabin. There, as briefly as possible, he told him the story of the mutiny and the attempt to scuttle the ship.

"So you see, Mr. Macrae," he concluded, "I cannot very well let them aboard again. They would only repeat their crimes."

"That is all very well," nodded the schoolmaster. "I quite see the danger. But, at the same time, you must not forget that to leave such men at large here in St. Kilda, where crime is unknown, would be almost worse. You must not abandon them, Mr. Venner. You must take them away with you. It would never do to ask the innocent islanders to take care of them."

Martin shrugged his shoulders.

"I can see your objection," he said, "and perhaps you are right. I will have a talk with Kershaw about it presently; but I must go now and see that the mutineers get some food."

They returned on deck and found the second boat alongside its companion. Frank Kershaw was trying to make himself understood to the men by signs.

The schoolmaster went to his assistance, and Martin Venner was following, when he was stopped by the report of a revolver-shot discharged from the upper deck. He looked round quickly, and saw Joe Parry with a smoking revolver in his hand. Beyond where Joe stood, Jansen was seen to stagger against the bulwark and clutch for support at the mainstay. For a moment he swayed and writhed, and then he sank upon the deck.

At the same instant Jimmy Griggs on the rock platform lifted his right hand, aiming at Joe. Rossi leaned forward and knocked up his arm, and the bullet intended for Joe splashed into the sea beyond the ship.

"What did you fire that shot for?" cried Martin Venner angrily, leaning over the rail and flashing a reproachful look at Joe.

"Why," returned Joe unabashed, "he was going forward to climb aloft and lower a rope to Griggs. I had told him that if he tried to do it I'd shoot him. But I only shot him in the leg; he isn't killed."

Martin turned to Kershaw, who was at his elbow.

"Frank, we must get rid of these fellows somehow," he said. "Let some provisions be put into one of the boats—enough to last them for two or three days. Nep is warming some soup, and there's a boiled ham. Give them lots of biscuits as well, and some tobacco."

For the next quarter of an hour, Frank, Billy, and

Joe, with the help of the islanders, were busy lowering the food into the first boat and serving some to Muller and Kauffman, while Martin Venner and the schoolmaster attended to Jansen's wounded leg.

Jansen was not too badly hurt to take his share of the warm soup. He imagined that now that he was wounded he would be kept on board and treated as an invalid; but Frank and Martin considered that to detain him would only mean disaster, and they determined to dismiss him with the rest of the mutineers. He was therefore helped down into the boat.

All being ready, two of the islanders took the oars, and, receiving their instructions from the schoolmaster, pulled the boat away from the ship's side and made for the rocks not very far from the point at which Jansen had first been seen. There one of the islanders landed, and climbed with astonishing agility along the crag until he came close to the place where the six mutineers waited. He was above them, and he threw down to them the end of a rope which he had carried over his shoulder. Rossi caught it, and, with its help, climbed up beside the islander, when the rope was again lowered for Griggs and the others, each in his turn.

Guided by the islander, they were not long in getting to the boat. Muller served them with food, and, while they ravenously devoured it, the boat was pushed off and rowed out into the deeper water and round the headland to the bay of the caves. And, when they had passed out of sight, Martin Venner gave a deep sigh of relief, and said, "Thank God!"

CHAPTER XXX.

IN THE FIRST MORNING WATCH.

SOME two hours afterwards, as darkness was falling, the boatmen returned to the *Albatross*. They returned, not by the sea, but over the crags, preferring this way; for they were wonderful cragsmen, and knew every rock and precipice. They had beached their boat close to the caves, intending to go back for it the next morning, when daylight would enable them to bring it round in safety.

During their absence, Venner, Kershaw, and the schoolmaster went down into the second boat to complete the repairs of the leak, while the remaining islanders worked at the pump. They exhibited a childish fear of Billy Neptune, never having set eyes on a black man before, so Nep kept himself judiciously out of their sight.

At high tide it was discovered that the vessel was unmistakably afloat, although she had a list to port, owing to the shifting of her cargo. Venner sought to remedy this defect, and he had half a dozen lamps lighted in the hold. The islanders went below, and, being made to understand what was required, worked willingly for an hour, moving the bales and cases of merchandise into their original positions, helped thereto by the winch.

So busily were they all engaged in this work, that none of them noticed the vessel's movements in the tidal current.

Billy Neptune was going aft to the cabin with the supper that he had cooked for the boys and the schoolmaster, when, glancing aside to the rock upon which the mutineers had stood, he saw, to his astonishment, that the ship had slewed completely round, and that the distance between her and the cliff had increased by many yards. There was a cold wind from the westward, and the sails were drawing.

Nep hastened into the cabin with the dish of boiled potatoes which he was carrying, and then ran forward to the winch.

"You no see them ship him move away?" he cried excitedly, tugging at Frank Kershaw's sleeve.

Frank and Martin both crossed to the side and quickly took in the situation.

"This will save us any amount of trouble," said Martin, "if we can keep her from drifting too near to the other side of the bay. The tide is at the full now, and we must keep her in deep water."

"What about the anchor?" suggested Frank. "Could we weigh it again if we were to drop it?"

"We ought to, with all the hands we have aboard," nodded Martin. "But wait a bit. See! She's drifting nearer to Skeleton Cavern. There's a good twelve fathoms of water next the cliff, even at low tide. We can let her go close in and lower the fossils

right into her. We're in luck, Frank! Things couldn't be better. Once we get her alongside the cliff, we needn't be afraid of the mutineers coming aboard."

"That's all very well," agreed Frank, "but how do you suppose we are going to get into the cave up the face of that precipice? How are we going to get the gear there for hoisting and lowering the bags of fossils?"

"I don't know," was Martin's perplexed response. "That's just what puzzles me. I wonder if the islanders could take it up and rig it there for us? They're splendid climbers, the schoolmaster says. They spend half their lives going up and down these crags in search of eggs and puffins and fulmars. That's in the breeding season, of course. Now, in winter-time there aren't many birds here, but Mr. Macrae says that in the spring there are millions of them."

"But," resumed Frank, "if we get the men to help us, we shall have to take them into our secret about the treasure."

"What does that matter?" questioned Martin. "They can have their share of it, if they like. There's lots of it for us all. But it seems they don't know the use of money in St. Kilda. All they want is food, which they can get for themselves in the shape of birds and eggs and fish, or clothing, which they make out of the sheep's wool. Everything else they can get from the factor who comes across from

Stornoway twice a year, and sells them boots and corn and potatoes in exchange for feathers and birds, oil and wool."

"You seem to have got a heap of information from the schoolmaster," smiled Frank. "But don't you think they could buy a good many luxuries from the factor, as you call him, if we were to give them a few bags of gold?"

"Perhaps so," said Martin. "But I believe they would sooner have some of the potatoes and pots and pans and things that we've got in our cargo. I've seen them casting covetous eyes on our ropes, too. No, I don't think there will be any harm in our letting them into our secret. Indeed, if you come to think of it, they have quite as much right to the gold as we have. It is only Griggs and Rossi and the others that we need fear getting to know about it. Griggs agreed with old Crosby to scuttle the *Albatross* for the sake of a reward that would be as nothing compared with a handful of the pirates' diamonds, and his mates broke into mutiny for the sake of gain. What would they not do to gain possession of what we found in the old chest up there?"

Very slowly, but surely, the ship was drifting towards the cliff beneath the cavern. Frank Kershaw went aft to the steering-wheel, and found that the vessel had just enough way on her to steer by, and he took up his post there, regardless of the supper which Billy Neptune had taken into the cabin.

Martin Venner and the schoolmaster had their

supper together at the captain's table, while the islanders were similarly provided for in the fore-castle.

"If your men get us off all right, Mr. Macrae," said Martin, "there will be some salvage due to them. There is a lot of damaged goods down below that they may have to take ashore with them."

"They will be glad of anything that you can spare," said the schoolmaster. "But what is wanted most in St. Kilda is a supply of seed potatoes. Our potato crop was a failure last year, and unless we get some to put in the ground we shall be badly off indeed the next winter."

"Potatoes!" repeated Martin. "They can have tons of them."

The schoolmaster bowed his thanks. "They will wish for nothing more," he said.

"By the way," resumed Venner, "there is a cave up the side of the cliff that we are drifting to. My chum Kershaw and I found something there that we should like to take away with us."

The schoolmaster glanced at him curiously across the table.

"Do you mean the cave where the dead man sits?" he questioned.

Mart looked at him in surprise.

"You've been in it, then?" he cried.

"No." Mr. Macrae shook his head. "No one will willingly enter a place like that. The presence of that gruesome skeleton is too much for them. One

of the boys went in there by accident some years ago with a companion, and he was so terrified that he ran out, lost his footing in his nervous fear, and fell down the cliff to his death. His companion has been half-witted ever since."

"Indeed!" said Mart. "Then it would be no use our asking your men to help us to bring away what we found in the chest against which the skeleton was leaning?"

"I am afraid it would be no use," replied Mr. Macrae, with a doubting headshake. "What was it that you found?"

"Gold," Mart told him. "The chest was crammed full with gold—spade guineas mostly, and a lot of foreign coins, as well as some precious stones. Kershaw and I were planning to rig up some rope tackle and send the stuff down in bags."

The schoolmaster was silent for some moments.

"Gold!" he echoed at last. And there was a tone of yearning in his voice. He leaned over the table. His eyes had a curiously eager look in them. "I never dreamed that there was any gold in St. Kilda. If I had known it, I should not have stayed here so long, toiling on this bare and forgotten island for the sake of a few paltry shillings a year."

"Don't you belong to St. Kilda, then?" asked Mart.

"No. It is from Ross that I come. And it is to Ross that I would go back if I could see my way to earning a living."

Martin understood the man's yearning poverty.

"Mr. Macrae," he said, "if you can contrive to get the treasure down here on board the *Albatross*, you will, of course, have your share of it."

The schoolmaster's face grew pale with agitation. He stood up.

"The men will do what I tell them," he faltered. "To-morrow at daylight you shall see them climbing up to the cave, and every coin of the gold will be honestly transferred to the ship's deck."

When Martin and the schoolmaster left the cabin, they saw that the *Albatross* had drifted to within a dozen yards of the cliff.

"The tide is just on the turn," Frank Kershaw told them. "She won't go in any nearer. We must moor her, where she is, or else she will drift out again. Mr. Macrae, I wish you could get a couple of your men to take a hawser ashore fore and aft. That would be better than dropping the anchor."

The schoolmaster sent three men down into the boat. A coil of rope was dropped down to them over the taffrail, one end of it being held on board. They rowed landward with it, and secured it round an out-lying rock. A second rope was similarly taken over the bow, and the vessel was as safely moored as if she were in one of the Liverpool docks.

Lest the mutineers should prove inquisitive, all lights were put out, and a watch was kept on deck, Martin Venner and Frank Kershaw taking turn and turn about in four-hour spells, with Nep and Joe as companions.

Frank's was the first morning watch, and he and Joe patrolled the poop-deck together.

"I suppose you will never go to sea again, Joe, if we are lucky enough to get back to Liverpool?" remarked Frank.

"Not likely," said Joe. "I've had enough of it. I'd sooner be an errand-boy again."

"Oh, you were an errand-boy before you signed on to Captain Teach, were you?"

"Yes. I was in a paper shop in Castle Street—used to go my rounds with the newspapers to the offices round about the Exchange. In my dinner-hour I often went down to the docks to look at the ships, and I thought there could be nothing so nice as going to sea. And one day, when I was delivering the *Mercury* at Crosby & Venner's office, I asked if there was a vacancy for a cabin-boy on one of their ships, and was taken on. I went two voyages in the *Albatross*; one up the Baltic, and another to Lisbon. This is my third trip; and it'll be my last, unless I can get a berth on one of the liners. But, what I'd like best of all, it would be to go into an office, the same as you and Martin Venner used to be. I wouldn't go into a place like Crosby's, though; not now that I know what sort of tricks they're up to. An insurance office or a bank would be more to my liking."

"Perhaps you haven't had a good enough education for that," suggested Frank.

"Haven't I?" said Joe. "I've passed the seventh standard; that ought to be good enough."

He stood still and looked out over the rail. "Hello! There's the moon rising!" he cried, pointing towards the headland, beyond which there was a glow of light.

"The moon!" repeated Frank. "The moon doesn't rise in that direction. Besides——"

"It's gone out!" whispered Joe. "It must have been some boat's light."

"Yes, or else some men at the other side of those rocks!" said Frank. "Keep your eye on the place where you saw it. I shouldn't wonder if it were Griggs."

"I believe you're right," pursued Joe. "It was like the light of a torch, just beyond the rocks where the *Albatross* was aground!"

"Hush!" whispered Frank. "Listen! I think I heard men's voices."

They leaned over the quarter rail, listening and watching. Presently they heard the regular thump-thump of muffled oars against loose thole-pins.

"It's the mutineers, in the boat that the islanders left near the cave!" Frank breathed.

Then across the dark water, above the murmur of the tide, there came the sound of a man's voice.

"I tell you she voss gone away!" It was Jansen's voice.

Griggs then spoke—

"It isn't possible, Jan!" he said. "Muller would have seen her if she'd sailed out of the bay. Pull away, lads!"

The oars again sounded. The boat could not be

seen in the darkness, but it seemed to Frank and Joe that it was being rowed to the place from which the ship had recently drifted. After a long silence, Griggs spoke again—

“I believe the young varmints have given us the slip!” he said. “I told you we ought to have kept a closer watch on ’em!”

“There’s deep water farther in under the cliff!” came Rossi’s voice. “She was afloat when we saw her last. I believe they’ve only moved her out a bit and dropped anchor.”

“Muller would have heard the cable rattling through the hawse,” remarked Griggs. “Go on, boys! At it again! Pull right round the bay, close by the cliffs. And don’t make such a noise. Shove your cap in between the thole-pins, Max! It’s your oar that’s making all the row! They’re sure to be keeping a watch on deck, and they’ll hear us if we’re not careful!”

Scarcely a sound now reached the two boys. But once or twice Frank caught the gleam of phosphorus in the water as the oars dipped. He stole quietly away from Joe’s side and went down into the cabin to summon Martin Venner. Martin had not undressed, but was sleeping in his berth with a rug over him. He accompanied Frank on deck. Very silently, hardly daring to breathe, the three boys watched. Each of them was armed with a loaded revolver, and Frank had, in addition, the rifle which Billy Neptune had left in the deck-house.

"Don't fire until you hear me cough twice," cautioned Mart, in a whisper. "Joe, take off your boots and slip forward. Bring Nep."

"Nep him here!" said the negro from behind him.

The four of them knelt at the rail, not daring to stir a hand or foot. Nearer and nearer came the boat. They could hear the swish of the water as the oars were lifted; could see a dark shadow creeping towards them.

"H-s-sh!" Martin was heartily thankful that there was no light on board, and that the barque was in the deepest shadow of the black crag. He was only afraid that a gust of wind might stir the sails and cause a rustle of canvas; or that the dull white sails themselves might be distinguished against the darkness. But the ship was within an embayment, a low reef of rocks projecting like arms at either side of her. Everything depended upon whether the boat crossed the little bay or turned inward, following the exact line of the cliff.

The rowers rested on their oars. One of them sneezed.

"Can't you be quiet?" muttered Griggs, with a savage curse. "Do you want them to hear us?"

"Ach! They voss not here," said Jansen. "They voss gone out to sea! I believe there voss another channel over yonder."

"She's in this bay, if she's anywhere!" Griggs declared.

The oars creaked again. Frank and Martin could almost hear their own hearts beating.

“Be ready!” whispered Mart.

Very suddenly the air grew even darker than before. A cloud of damp mist rolling down the hill spread over the water, obscuring the boat. The muffled thumping of the oars could no longer be heard, but some instinct told the boys that Griggs was hovering very near.

They waited, never moving, although their knees were cramped. Joe Parry shivered with mingled cold and fear.

Martin calculated that an hour had gone by since he had heard or seen the boat, when the fog became whiter, as if some light were piercing it. The rocks loomed visible. The mist moved in grotesque shapes across the bay, taking on a rosy luminance. It was too early yet for the dawn, yet the luminance grew deeper; quivering shafts of rosy light darted across the sky, flickering like summer lightning.

In this fitful light of the *aurora borealis*, Frank Kershaw saw the mutineers' boat—a dark speck far out upon the bay.

“They've given it up!” he cried. And he laid his revolver on the deck and began to breathe upon his cold, stiff fingers.

CHAPTER XXXI.

FRANK KERSHAW'S "FOSSILS."

MARTIN VENNER was awakened by the sounds of many feet trampling the deck above his head and the hauling of ropes. Daylight streamed in through the porthole above his berth. There was an odour of hot coffee and fried bacon in his nostrils. The door of his stateroom swung open, and Billy Neptune's black face appeared.

"You no fit to get up yet?" Billy asked. "You fit to lie up here all them day? Suppose you tumble out here one time and eat them breakfast chop me got ready, before him grow cold?"

Martin leapt down to the floor.

"Why didn't you waken me earlier, Nep?" he complained. "Is there any sign of Griggs?"

Billy emptied a jug of hot water into the wash-basin and hung a clean towel on the rail.

"No! He no come back! Them all gone in them cave. They no find ship."

"Then we'll baffle them yet!" said Mart, turning up his sleeves.

He washed quickly, and as quickly ate his breakfast. When he went up on deck, he saw two of the islanders standing by the taffrail, each unwinding and

paying out a thin rope. The two ropes stretched from the rail across to the cliff.

"What are they up to?" Martin asked of Joe Parry.

Joe's eyes were watching something half-way up the face of the crag.

"Why," said he, pointing upward, "it's Mr. Macrae and a fellow named Andrew! They've gone up the cliff with ropes tied round their waists. They're climbing up like a pair of monkeys. I never saw such a thing. You'd think they were going upstairs instead of up a precipice as steep as a wall! Have a look at them through these!"

Martin took the binoculars from the boy, and discovered the two climbers. The man named Andrew was in advance. The schoolmaster, however, seemed to be overtaking him. They were but forty feet or so below the mouth of Skeleton Cavern.

"That rope won't be strong enough!" said Mart.

"No; it wouldn't be if they were going to trust their lives to it," returned Joe. "But when they get into the cave and fix the pulleys that they've got with them, they will haul up a thicker and stronger rope. They know what they're doing. *We* can't teach 'em anything!"

On the upper deck three of the islanders were planning a system of rope and pulley tackle. They had emptied half a dozen sacks of potatoes, and were tying the sacks at measured distances along one of the thicker ropes. Frank Kershaw was helping them.

"The sacks are for Frank Kershaw's fossils," smiled Joe. "They'll bring the stuff down like a dredger's buckets bring the mud from the bottom of a river."

Martin remarked that two of the islanders were missing.

"Where are they?" he inquired.

"They're up in the cavern," Joe told him. "They started at daybreak. Frank told them that the skeleton wasn't there now, and they weren't any longer afraid."

Martin watched Mr. Macrae going up step by step. Sometimes he hesitated at a difficult point, but not for long. In less than half an hour after Martin had come on deck he had reached the mouth of the cave, and was beginning to haul in the slack of the rope. To its end the men on the deck attached a heavy block, through which the stouter warp was rove, and when the first line was taut these were sent overboard, being slowly hauled up by the men in the cave. This was a long and arduous piece of work, and it occupied quite two hours. Further time was taken up in rigging the tackle inside the cavern, and, perhaps, in filling the sacks. Mr. Macrae had undertaken to contrive all this, helped by Frank Kershaw, and the contrivance worked admirably.

When everything seemed to be ready, one of the cragsmen was seen to leave the cave and begin to climb down the precipice with the end of the thinner rope round his waist. He looked like a spider weaving its web. So sure-footed was he and so well

did he calculate the difficulties of his descent, that he reached the foot of the cliff within a few yards of where the boat waited to receive him.

His rope was brought on board the barque and used as a guy in keeping steady the loaded sacks and keeping them from grating against the cliff.

The stout warp hauled taut by means of the winch and secured, and it was down this line that the loads were slowly lowered from the cavern. Tight though the rope was, it sagged greatly when the weight of the first bag was augmented by a second and a third.

All hands on deck were needed for the work of hauling the burden over the ship's side. But at length the first sack was drawn inboard and emptied of its glittering specie. The golden guineas, as they fell in a shower upon the planks, sent forth a jingling sound not easy to forget. The men tramped over them as if they had been herrings shaken out of the drift-net.

The second and the third sack followed in due course, and, when their contents were added to the pile, the rope was sent up again. This process was repeated time after time, until, as the schoolmaster had promised, every coin of the treasure was honestly transferred from the cavern to the deck of the *Albatross*.

Mr. Macrae and his two companions descended by means of the gear, which was left in position as a gift to the islanders. Nothing was removed from the pile

of gold and precious stones until the whole of the ship's company had gathered round it.

"I suppose," said Martin Venner, "that nothing remains now to be done but to divide the spoil. Mr. Macrae, I will leave that work in your hands. Let each of us have his share, equally divided. There are eight islanders and yourself; that's nine. There are Billy Neptune, Frank Kershaw, Joe Parry, and myself. That is thirteen shares."

"Thirteen is an unlucky number," smiled the schoolmaster. "And you are far too generous. Why should I and the islanders take more than half of the wealth? It would demoralise us. A tenth part will be sufficient. And if you would have us take more, then I will ask you to let us take it in the form of some of your cargo."

"Well, well," nodded Martin, "you are the first people I have come across who despised gold. You shall have what you want. Only let the lot of it be stowed safely away before I invite the mutineers on board."

"You intend to take them with you, then?" questioned the schoolmaster.

"Yes," returned Martin. "They shall work the ship across to Stornoway, and then—well, then we can consider what to do when we are safely at anchor. We shall need the other boat for towing the ship out from here. The wind is in our favour, once we get out of the shelter of St. Kilda. Let two or three of your men go now and bring the boat. I will give

them a note for Griggs, stating the conditions upon which I agree to engage him and his mates."

Three of the islanders then went ashore and climbed over the headland to the bay of the caves.

They were absent some two hours. This delay was irritating to Venner and Kershaw, who had hoped to get under weigh before sundown. They watched anxiously for the returning boat. But no boat came.

At sunset the three men appeared on the brow of the headland. They scrambled down the rocks. When at last they got on board, their excited gesticulations and noisy gabble told that something strange had happened. The schoolmaster caught the infection of their excitement.

"What are they saying, Mr. Macrae?" Frank Kershaw asked.

"They are saying," replied the schoolmaster—"they are saying that they could not find their boat. It has disappeared. The mutineers have stolen it. They have escaped."

"Escaped!" Frank and Martin looked at each other in astonishment.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE BOAT IN THE RAIN-MIST.

“**E**SCAPED!” cried Martin. “Then we are well rid of them! We shall not be troubled any more by Jimmy Griggs or Jansen!”

“Other people will be, though, if they reach land,” Frank Kershaw reminded him. “We ought to have taken them on board and given them up to the police to be tried and punished, as they deserve.”

“They have gone away with our boat,” bemoaned the schoolmaster. “And what will the islanders do without it? You cannot very well haul the ship out, either, with only one boat.”

“Not so well as with two, perhaps,” said Venner. “But I think we can manage, for all that. We can fix a hawser on the rocks yonder, and haul upon it with the winch, warping ourselves out in the same way that it’s done at the docks. Everything’s ready, isn’t it, Frank?”

“Yes,” Frank nodded, “so far as I know. But I wish we could find out what became of Gregson and Dewar. We ought to give them a decent burial, poor chaps. It was hard lines their being shot down that way.”

“There wouldn’t be any good in trying to recover their bodies now, however,” explained Martin. “They were left lying below high-water mark, and the tide



"I KNOW IT NOW BY THE WHITE PATCH IN THE SAIL."—Page 302.



would carry them out to sea and dispose of them quite as decently as we could do."

"My father thought a lot of them," sighed Frank, "and they were favourites aboard the *Mary Brown*."

"I suppose the *Mary Brown* will be half-way across the Atlantic by now," said Mart, by way of changing the subject.

"Yes, unless she cruised about in search of the *Albatross* for many days. I'm pretty certain father wouldn't continue the voyage until he felt sure that the barque had foundered. He will believe that I'm drowned. I wish we could get into some port and send a cablegram to meet him when he arrives at the other side."

Martin Venner glanced aloft at the sails, which were as Gregson had left them.

"Do you think we ought to try to shake out more canvas?" he asked. "None of us knows very much about the working of a ship; but you're the son of a master mariner, and you should at least have a second-hand knowledge of seamanship."

"I know enough to understand that we can't do very much while the bowsprit is broken," returned Frank. "Nearly everything depends on the staysails and jibs when you've got to steer a course. But the wind is from the westward, and it ought to carry us along all right to the island that we saw from the top of the hill. On which side of the island is Stornoway?"

"It's on the side facing Scotland," Martin explained. "I believe we should be all right if we were to steer directly east until we see land. But we shall be in

a queer state if it comes to blow. I almost wish Griggs and the others had been on board to help us! These St. Kilda men won't come with us. Mr. Macrae says they won't any of them go out of sight of their island. None of them has ever been on the mainland, and none of them has ever seen a horse or a railway train."

At high tide in the afternoon four of the islanders went down into their boat, taking with them the end of a hawser. They had two pairs of oars, and they pulled across the bay to an isolated pinnacle of rock, round which they warped the rope, securing it with a double hitch. The end on board the ship was hauled upon with the help of the capstan by the remaining islanders and Joe Parry. Very soon the great ship began slowly to move away from the cliff and across to the middle of the bay. Then the boatmen took the warp to a farther rock, and the process was repeated. All three of the boys had many a time watched ships being warped out of the Liverpool docks, and their knowledge served them in good stead now that it was put into practice.

While still the vessel had some way on her, the slack of the rope being drawn in, the boatmen secured their end to one of the thwarts and pulled at their oars, towing the ship out beyond the shelter of the headlands into the open sea. Here the breeze from the west was blowing freshly, bellying the sails. Frank Kershaw put over the helm, while the men in the boat continued to haul her round by the head. Her close-reefed topsails and topgallant staysails

caught the breeze, and the water began to whisper along her streaks.

The boat was then drawn alongside, and two of her four men climbed on board and set to work lowering down to their companions the merchandise which they were to take ashore with them—sacks of potatoes, rolls of cloth, cabin furniture, coils of ropes, boxes of sugar and tea, bags of biscuits, and a great quantity of pots and pans. They had been allowed to choose for themselves what they would take, and they were not backward in making their choice. Among other things they selected from the cargo were a dozen Birmingham clocks, some Sheffield cutlery, and toys enough to serve a generation of children. These could not all be taken ashore to the village in one trip, but the boat was loaded almost up to her gunwales, and there was not much room left for the rowers.

The *Albatross* sailed slowly round the north side of the island under the shadow of a tremendous cliff, where multitudes of sea-birds wheeled and screamed. The lower parts of the precipice were honeycombed with vast caverns and rent into dark chasms, into which the Atlantic waves rolled perpetually, sending up clouds of snowy spray. But at the north-eastern point the land sloped down into verdure, and beyond it the village bay opened calm, sheltered by the high hill.

Frank was told by the schoolmaster that the water was deep even up to a cable's length from

the landing-place, and, thus assured that there was no danger, he steered close in round the point.

When the ship was opposite the village the islanders dropped the anchor, and she swung round with the tide, riding there in security, while the boat was taken shoreward with its first cargo.

Three new men accompanied the boatmen back and helped with the second load, and a third trip was made, when the schoolmaster's portion of the treasure was taken ashore.

By this time darkness had fallen, and Martin and Frank decided to remain at anchor. They had forgotten, however, that the next day was a Sunday, and when they asked Mr. Macrae for the help of half a dozen men to weigh anchor, the schoolmaster shrugged his shoulders and declared that the Sabbath could not be broken on any such account. Accordingly the *Albatross* remained idle in the bay, her crew of three boys and a negro fretting to be away, yet helpless to move.

The west wind brought heavy rain, and no watch on deck was kept. Only at intervals did Frank or Mart venture to leave the warmth of the cabin and go up in his overalls to the poop to see that all was right and to gaze out through grey rain-mist across the bay.

Shortly after noon on the Sunday, when Billy Neptune was getting ready the boys' dinner, he went out of the galley to empty a pan of potato peelings and other refuse into the sea, when, on approaching the side, he caught the sound of a rope creaking

through a block. His quick ears also detected the sound of a man's hoarse cough. He looked over the bulwarks on the landward side, and saw dimly through the rain the shape of a boat with a lugsail. He counted six men on board of her.

Laying down his empty pan and drawing closer the oilskin coat that he had thrown over his head and shoulders, he strode aft to the cabin and went within.

Martin, Frank, and Joe were engaged before the fire going through the Church Service. Frank, who was reading, looked up from the book at Nep's hurried entrance.

"Them Kilda men, them come out for weigh anchor!" Billy announced. "Them come aboard all same it no Sunday. They no want us here. They think it better we go one time."

"Why, the schoolmaster declared that nothing would persuade the islanders to enter a boat on Sunday!" said Martin. "Has he come aboard along with them, Nep?"

Nep shook his black head.

"Them no 'longside yet," he said.

"I thought we should have heard them if they were aboard already," remarked Frank. "I never came across such a talkative lot as they are. Shall we go up, Mart?" he questioned. "We were very near the end of the Lessons."

Mart signified his answer by rising and taking down his overalls from the hook. Joe and Frank followed his example, and they all three went on deck, led by the negro.

The boat was still a considerable distance away, but was making for the ship. She had gone round on a new tack during Billy's absence in the cabin, and her tanned lugsail now hid the men from view. It occurred to Frank Kershaw that it was curious she should be so far to the windward of the landing-place from which she had started, more particularly as the tide was also setting in her favour. He crossed to the deck-house and took out the binocular glasses, directing his gaze through them towards the rough stone-built pier at which the islanders had gone ashore on the previous evening. The pier was deserted but for a dog that nosed at the merchandise still remaining there. There was not a person to be seen upon the beach or among the houses, as there would surely have been had it been supposed that the ship was about to depart. Suddenly Frank turned the glasses on the approaching boat.

"Mart," he cried excitedly, "these chaps are not from the village. The village boat is still lying against the pier. Ah! I understand now. This boat coming towards us is the one that the mutineers escaped in! Yes; I know it now by that white patch in the sail!"

"Then who are on board it?" questioned Martin. "It can't be——"

"Yes, it is," returned Frank, handing him the binoculars. "It's the mutineers! I can make out Jansen in the bow. But I can only see six men altogether. Where are the other three? Perhaps you can see them."

"No," interposed Billy Neptune; "me sabey them only six. Them others them stay ashore."

“Or else they’re hiding in the bottom of the boat,” added Martin. “What are we going to do, Frank? Are we going to let them come aboard?”

Frank shook his head in doubt. “I don’t know,” he said. “Let us have a jaw with them when they come alongside, and get to know what they want and what terms they will accept.”

“Quick!” commanded Martin. “Billy—Joe! Run below, both of you, and hide all the firearms and cartridges. Everything except Frank’s revolver and mine. Bring them up to us.” To Frank he added, “We must be ready, in case they mean mischief!”

The boat came nearer, watched intently by the two boys. There certainly seemed to be only six men in it, unless, as Martin had suggested, the other three were hiding below the level of the gunwales.

Billy handed the two loaded revolvers to their owners, who pocketed them. Joe presently returned, and reported that the spare firearms were all safely locked away.

“*Albatross* ahoy!” cried the voice of Jimmy Griggs, as the boat, with lowered sail, drifted alongside. “Throw us a rope!”

“Who are you, and what do you want?” returned Martin Venner, feigning not to recognise the men. He looked down into the boat, and saw that in truth the three other men were missing.

Griggs, standing at the tiller, glanced up from a face whose ghastly, untended wound was horrible to see. His left arm hung limp at his side.

“We’re starving shipwrecked seamen,” he replied,

“and we’d thank you to give us a passage to whatever port you’re bound for.”

“Oh, that’s the way of it now, is it?” Martin smiled sarcastically. “You find you can’t get along very well in that boat that you stole from the poor islanders, I suppose?”

“Stole!” echoed Griggs, in well-assumed astonishment. “We never stole her. We’ve been looking for the ship for the past forty-eight hours. You gave us the slip, but we’ve found you at last, and, please, we’re ready to come aboard, every one of us, and to do our duty by you.”

“Every one of you!” repeated Martin. “How many is that? There were nine of you. I only see six. Where are the other three?”

“We’ve had to leave them behind,” Griggs answered. “José Rossi died of a bad cold in his chest. Max Kauffman fell from the cliff and broke his neck, and Hans Metzger he had an accident too.”

“Indeed!” said Martin incredulously. “And all that happened yesterday, did it? You all seemed hale and hearty enough when you were pulling round the bay early yesterday morning, for we saw you, all the time. The ship wasn’t far away from you, if you’d only searched better. What sort of an accident was it that Hans met with? By the look of you all, I should say there had been a second mutiny or something of the sort. What’s wrong with your left arm? What caused that ugly wound that I see on Muller’s head? And why is Jansen lying across the thwart as

if there was something the matter with him? You look as if you'd had accidents all round."

Muller was holding on to the ship by the mizzen chains. Jansen did not move, but lay across the thwart breathing painfully, and pressing his side with a hand that was covered with congealed blood.

"No, Griggs," Martin went on. "What you tell me about accidents and colds in the chest won't wash. You've been quarrelling among yourselves. I can see that with half an eye. Let me have a look at that revolver that's sticking out of your hip pocket. Throw it up; I'll catch it."

Griggs threw the weapon obediently. Mart caught it and examined it.

"Ah!" he nodded, "just as I guessed. You've fired five shots from it since you stood on the cliff, and you haven't even thrown away the spent cartridges." He took hold of the weapon by its barrel. "You won't require it any longer," he said, and he threw it far out beyond the boat, watching it splash into the sea. "Muller," he continued, "you've got a revolver in your pocket too, and Jansen has one. Take them both and drop them overboard."

Muller glanced to Jimmy Griggs inquiringly.

Griggs signed to him.

"Go on," he said; "drop 'em overboard. Venner's got the upper hand of us."

Submissively Muller did as he was bidden. But still Martin Venner was not satisfied until he was positively assured that no man in the boat possessed a weapon.

“Joe, lower a rope,” he ordered, “and let the men come aboard.”

Griggs was the first to step on deck. Jansen followed. When they all stood together they looked a sorry lot of miscreants—haggard, dirty, ragged, every one of them suffering more or less from wounds.

“You have given yourselves up as our prisoners, understand,” declared Martin Venner, conscious now that they were practically helpless in his hands. “I don’t promise anything, mind you, except that you shall be treated fairly, as if you were members of the crew, until we reach port.”

“All right, young ’un, we’ll take our chance of all that,” growled Griggs. “I reckon you’re going to be skipper yourself, are you?”

This point had not been discussed, neither Frank nor Martin having yet questioned who was to be in higher authority. Martin now hesitated.

“Yes,” Frank Kershaw intervened, “Venner is going to be captain, and I am his mate.”

“Ay, ay, sir,” nodded Griggs, in humility. “What are we to do first? Are you going to up anchor to-day?”

“No,” returned Martin. “You can all go below and make yourselves comfortable. The cook will serve you with food presently. We weigh anchor at sunrise in the morning.”

The mutineers straggled forward to the forecastle.

“I don’t think they will give us any trouble to-day,” remarked Venner. “But we had better keep a watchful eye on them, for all that.”

CHAPTER XXXIII.

ADAM CROSBY LETS THE CAT OUT OF THE BAG.

“HA! What have we got here, I wonder?”

HISLOP had strolled into Adam Crosby's private room in the Water Street shipping office, and had begun busily to turn over and examine the documents and letters which Mr. Crosby had inadvertently left upon his table. Hislop had wormed his way into the old shipowner's house of business, if not also into his confidence. It was his habit every day to pry into his master's affairs when the chance suited—that is to say, when Adam was out at lunch or gone to some neighbouring office to see a client. Indeed, Hislop knew just about as much of what was going on as did the head of the firm himself.

“Lloyd's are going to pay up at last, I suppose,” he ruminated, with a wise nod of the head, as he read the letter received that forenoon from the great marine insurance institution. “‘Our representative will call upon you at 12.30 to-day,’” he quoted. “No wonder old Adam has gone out to his lunch a bit earlier!” he smiled. “The money for the lost *Albatross* is as good as in his pocket! And that means that I shall get my share of it for holding my tongue so tightly. Poor Jimmy Griggs! *He'd* have had his reward, too, if

he'd played his game better, and not lost himself as well as the ship!"

He glanced at the clock on Mr. Crosby's mantelpiece.

"He ought to be back from his lunch by now," he meditated. He stood listening. Footsteps sounded along the outer landing; a door swung on its hinges and was shut with a bang. Hislop quickly rearranged the papers as he had found them, and turned to poke the fire. The little shipowner walked hurriedly into the room, removing his gloves and his heavy overcoat.

"Anyone called, Charles?" he asked cheerfully. "I'm a little later than I ought to be." He looked at the clock. "I expect someone from Lloyd's at half-past twelve."

"Lloyd's!" repeated Hislop in assumed surprise, as if he knew nothing of the letter he had just read. He laid the poker in the fender and went to Mr. Crosby's side. "I say"—he gave that person a playful dig in the ribs—"are they going to pay up for the loss of the *Albatross*, old man?" he asked, with a familiarity which betokened the intimacy of the terms upon which he now stood with the shipowner whom he had been blackmailing for the past few weeks.

"Hush!" cautioned Mr. Crosby below his breath. "Yes, I believe so. They've come at last to understand that she foundered. That boat with her name on it that was picked up off Cape Wrath was taken as a final proof. And then, you know, there was the report of that Captain Kershaw, of the *Mary*

Brown, who searched for her when the squall had gone by. The fact that Kershaw's son and two seamen had gone aboard the derelict made him search all the more carefully, you see; and in the message he sent by cable from St. John's he states conclusively that she couldn't be found and that he firmly believed she had gone down."

"Well, I don't see how they could doubt it, considering the evidence," commented Charles Hislop. "Of course, Jimmy Griggs isn't the man to do things by halves. He scuttled her, right enough, and she must have been sinking when Kershaw sent the three hands aboard of her."

Mr. Crosby turned upon him angrily.

"How often am I to warn you against mentioning that word?" he demanded to know.

"What—scuttling!" Hislop grinned. "All right," he said. "Don't be afraid. We're out of the wood now, when Lloyd's have been hoodwinked. Only it's a pity Jimmy didn't manage to save himself, isn't it? He might have been useful for another occasion. I believe it's the boat he and his pals put off in that was found off Cape Wrath, keel uppermost. I say, I hope they'll pay the whole lot at once, without any deductions. I'm anxious to take a trip abroad, and I shall want my share paid up, you know."

"Yes," returned the shipowner; "you've told me that often enough. And I tell you once more, I shall be heartily glad to get rid of you. I'm sick and tired of the sight of you, sick and tired of your

demands for hush-money, sick and tired of having you about my home and my office, haunting me like an evil shadow."

"Come now, Mr. Crosby," pleaded Hislop. "Don't be hard on me, after all I've done for you. You can't say I haven't kept my mouth shut over the *Albatross* affair. And I'm sure I've been discretion itself in the matter of Jansen's attack on poor Mr. Venner."

Again Mr. Crosby turned in anger upon his tormentor.

"I repeat for the hundredth time that that was a mare's nest you found. I tell you I had nothing whatever to do with Jansen's alleged attempt upon my partner. And I don't believe that any such attempt was ever made. There were no witnesses."

"There was Mr. Venner himself," retorted Hislop. "How could he have come by the knife-wound in his shoulder if nobody had attacked him? He has said it was Jansen."

"Yes, I know. He has said lots of things that are not to be believed." Mr. Crosby had accustomed himself to speaking thus disparagingly of his partner in the presence of Hislop. "Who is to believe, for example, that all this time since the *Gem* accident, while we have counted him as one dead, he has been lying unconscious in a cottage at Hoylake? The boatman who picked him up at the mouth of the river would surely have told about him if that had been the case."

"You would expect so," agreed Hislop. "But he had lost his memory, it seems, and couldn't tell who he was or how he got into the river. He couldn't even let his wife know where he was. But he's better now, and I shouldn't wonder at his turning up at the office one of these fine mornings."

Hardly were these words uttered when the door of Mr. Crosby's private room was thrown open, and Mr. Royden Venner, Martin's father, who had been so miraculously saved, walked in, accompanied by his wife.

Hislop stole out of the room to his desk in the outer office. The clerks there were all excitement over Mr. Venner's return.

"Of course, you have heard the news?" said Mr. Venner, when the greetings were over and he had taken a seat near the fire.

Adam Crosby's face was blank.

"The news!" he repeated. "What news? I have heard nothing unusual."

"What!" exclaimed Mr. Venner. "You have not heard that the *Albatross* has come back—with Martin on board?"

If a pistol had been fired at Adam Crosby's ear he could not have exhibited more genuine astonishment. He jumped up from his chair and stared at his junior partner incredulously, as if he believed him to be insane.

"My dear Venner," he cried, "you are not well enough to come out! Let me beg Mrs. Venner to take you home again!"

"No, no; I am perfectly well," declared Mr. Venner. He took a telegram from his pocket and handed it to Adam Crosby. "We received that an hour ago," he said, "and I came across at once, hoping that Martin might be here. The telegram simply says that the ship is in the river. I expect it was the pilot who sent it off by Martin's instructions."

Adam Crosby had turned terribly white about the lips. Then he said, with an unpleasant laugh in his throat—

"The telegram is a forgery—a hoax."

Martin Venner's mother drew in her breath sharply.

"A hoax!" she cried. "Oh, don't tell me that! No one could be so cruel!"

"My dear lady," returned Mr. Crosby nervously, locking and unlocking his fingers, "the *Albatross* has foundered at sea. There are no survivors. We have ample proof of that. Even the underwriters do not doubt it. How is it possible that she can be in the river?"

Royden Venner stared into the fire.

"A hoax—a forgery!" he muttered. Then he glanced aside and met Adam Crosby's deceitful eyes. "You have no right to say that, Adam Crosby!" he cried vehemently. "You know perfectly well that the underwriters—that Lloyd's—have believed all along that the ship would come back. She is back! Something tells me that this telegram is genuine!"

CROSBY LETS THE CAT OUT OF THE BAG 313

He rose and crossed the hearth-rug to where his wife was sitting. He put his arm about her soothingly.

At that moment the door opened and Lloyd's representative entered. He hesitated on the threshold on seeing that the head of the firm was not alone, but Mr. Crosby, who knew him, put out an inviting hand.

"Pray come in, Mr. Gordon," he said, in his sweetest tone.

Mr. Gordon bowed to Royden Venner and his wife, but took no notice of Adam Crosby's hand.

"You have kept my appointment, Mr. Crosby," he said. "But my business with you is private as well as urgent, and I must ask to see you alone."

"Not at all, Mr. Gordon," smiled Crosby. "Pray keep your seat, Mrs. Venner. The business need not be private."

"Just as you choose," returned Mr. Gordon. "I only wished to spare your feelings in what to you is, no doubt, a very uncomfortable situation." He went back to the door and beckoned. A man who looked more like a detective in plain clothes than one having connection with marine insurance strode within. "That is Adam Crosby," Mr. Gordon went on, pointing to the little man at the table, who now realised that the business was not turning exactly in the direction he had anticipated.

The detective, for such he was, advanced and took hold of Mr. Crosby's coat-sleeve between a finger and thumb.

"You are required at Dale Street, Mr. Crosby," he announced, "and you will please regard yourself as my prisoner."

The little shipowner drew back, his face turning from white to purple.

"Dale Street!" he protested. "Your prisoner! What for?"

The detective rustled a folded sheet of blue paper.

"The warrant states the charge against you," he said. "You are arrested on the charge of attempting to defraud the underwriters and of instigating certain persons mentioned to scuttle, or sink, or wreck the barque *Albatross*."

"All nonsense—utter nonsense!" cried Adam Crosby. "The ship foundered in a squall off the north of Scotland."

"We have proof to the contrary," interposed Mr. Gordon. "The *Albatross* entered the Mersey with this morning's tide, with the holes plugged up which you caused to be bored in her timbers, and with the man on board whom you employed, with promises of a high reward, to scuttle her."

"*Griggs!*" gasped the guilty shipowner, aghast.

"Ah! You have let the cat out of the bag now!" retorted Mr. Gordon. "Yes, Griggs is his name. He and his accomplices are in the custody of the river police."

"Come!" ordered the detective. He helped his prisoner to put on his overcoat, and then conducted him out of the room. Mr. Gordon followed them.

As they passed through the outer office, Charles Hislop, seeing and understanding what was taking place, and knowing that his own game of blackmailing Adam Crosby had come to an abrupt end, snatched up his hat and made his final exit from Crosby & Venner's by another door, slipping in advance before the prisoner and his two conductors reached the main staircase.

He had gone only half-way down the wide stairs when he was passed by three ragged and untidy boys, and he looked back at them, hearing one of them remark—

“ We never expected to be mounting these stairs again, did we, Frank ? ”

It was Martin Venner who put the question. He had managed to disguise his shabbiness under the cover of an overcoat, which was obviously too big for him. His boots were in holes, and there was no visible sign of any stockings on his feet. Frank Kershaw's rough serge suit was torn at the knees and elbows from climbing up the St. Kilda cliffs, and his boots were no better than Martin's. Joe Parry had had a reserve outfit on board the *Albatross*. He was pale and thin, but altogether in better condition than he had been on that Sunday when the barque lay at anchor in the village bay.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE END OF THE GAME.

THAT was a fortnight earlier than this day of their return to Liverpool.

While they lay at anchor the three boys and Billy Neptune had kept a close watch upon the six mutineers, but nothing happened to excite their suspicion. The men came on deck once or twice, single or in pairs, but only to observe the weather. None attempted to stray beyond their own part of the ship. Griggs and Jansen seemed to take more interest in the broken bowsprit than anything else, and once they were seen together examining the confused wreckage, and evidently discussing between themselves how it might be repaired.

With the first peep of dawn on the Monday morning three of them emerged from the cuddy and went forward to the forecastle head. Without receiving any order from the boy captain or his mate, they proceeded to disentangle the running rigging and to bend a jury bowsprit. They were still occupied at this work when at sunrise the islanders' boat was seen putting out from the landing pier.

There were eight men in it, and when they came near it seemed that their object in coming out to the barque was to recover their lost boat rather than to give their promised help at heaving the anchor. The

schoolmaster was again with them to act as their interpreter, and he signified that the men would only come on board on being assured that they would not be molested by those who had stolen their boat and on being allowed to place the recovered boat itself in the charge of two of their number.

When, however, they at length put their hands to the capstan bars they worked with a will, and very soon the anchor was hanging from the cathead and the barque drifting outward with the tide. Then, when the islanders had gone ashore contented, those of the mutineers who were well enough went aloft to trim the sails, while their comrades busied themselves about the decks, making all things shipshape and tidy.

The wind blew cold from the north-west, bringing frequent showers of hail and sleet. The *Albatross* sailed out on the starboard tack, and the St. Kilda islands soon became dim shadows in the grey mist. Martin Venner managed, with Frank Kershaw's help, to set a course, and Muller, with his wounded head bandaged, was put to the wheel, Frank taking charge of the deck, and giving his orders in seaman fashion.

The mutineers made themselves comfortable in their old quarters in the forecastle; so much so, that, in spite of being short-handed and having to work double watches, they began to be in less haste to make port. They seemed to think that so long as there were plenty of provisions on board the ship provided a more agreeable, as well as a safer, refuge for them than they could expect to find on land. Griggs in particular did

not forget Martin Venner's assertion that he would not promise to shield them from the consequences of their crimes ; that he would treat them fairly until they reached a safe harbour, but that beyond that he would enter into no engagement. And, fearing that the young captain intended to make use of them only so long as he required the help of their seamanship, meaning to hand them over to the officers of the law as soon as they entered port, Griggs secretly resolved that young Venner should not long remain in his assumed position of authority.

" Perhaps you wouldn't mind letting us know what port we're bound for, sir?" Griggs pleaded, when they were well under sail. He touched his cap to Martin as he spoke. " You know, sir," he went on, " I've been to sea a good many years, while this is only your first trip. It follows that I know more about navigating the ship than you do, begging your pardon for making so bold."

" I think you can leave the navigation in my hands, Griggs," returned Martin. " I have studied the chart, and I know our bearings. It doesn't require any unusual skill in seamanship to work her into Stornoway. We ought to sight land in an hour or two, keeping on this tack, and we've only got to follow the lie of the land and get round to the east side of the Lewis, where we shall find a good harbour."

" Would it be too much to ask you to let me have a squint at the chart, Mr. Venner ? " Griggs asked politely.

Martin went below to fetch it.

While he was absent Griggs strolled to and fro on the upper deck. Suddenly something glittering on the planks near the lee channel caught his eye. He strode towards it and picked it up. It was a golden guinea.

He drew a long whistling breath, kicked aside the corner of a stretch of tarpaulin, and discovered two other similar coins. "Where in thunder did these come from?" he muttered, pocketing them.

"Ah, vot voss that you bicked up, mine friend?" questioned Jansen, drawing to his side.

Griggs nudged the German's arm and drew the three coins from his pocket, revealing them in the palm of his hand.

"I reckon there's more of these aboard of us somewhere," he said, in a cautious whisper.

Jansen smiled, put his fingers into a pocket of his leather belt, and produced yet a fourth guinea.

"Dat voss where I find it!" he said, nodding in the main hatch. "Joost beside der coaming. I voss dhinking mineself that there vould be more."

"Clear out!" said Griggs. "Here's the young skipper coming back!"

Martin Venner halted at the forward rail of the poop, and beckoned Griggs to him as he unrolled the chart of the North Atlantic.

"This is where we are," Martin told him, indicating the ship's position with the point of a lead pencil. "Those are the St. Kilda Islands, see? And here is the Lewis—this long island here off the west of Scotland. Stornoway is down here, look."

Griggs affected to be near-sighted. He put his lame hand on the chart and drew it an inch or two nearer to him. He studied it keenly, his eyes traveling over it from point to point.

"There's no need to look up there!" objected Mart. "We've nothing to do with the Orkney Islands! That's too far north. Here's where we're going—down this bit of open sea that's called The Minch, and in here to Stornoway. That's our nearest port. The next nearest is Portree, in the Isle of Skye, but it doesn't seem so easy to get to, and, besides, it's not such an important place as Stornoway, which is an important fishing station."

"Yes, you're quite right, sir," nodded Griggs. "We ought to fetch Stornoway some time to-morrow if the wind holds."

Very soon afterwards, when Joe Parry was in temporary charge and Martin and Frank were below, Griggs altered the set of the sails, and secretly instructed Hansen, who was at the wheel, to bring her round by two points to the north.

When Martin and Frank returned on deck they noticed the altered course, but, believing that the wind had shifted, as Hansen declared, they made no protest.

The sleet thickened into snow as the day wore on towards evening, and in the darkness the mutineers contrived to bring the vessel yet more directly upon a northward course. Griggs himself took his trick at the wheel in the first morning watch, and Joe Parry and Billy Neptune had charge of the deck.

Billy was still rated as cook, and Griggs ventured to engage him in conversation.

"I say, Nep," he began, "did young Mr. Kershaw manage to get those fossils aboard that I heard about?"

Billy was discreet enough to give an evasive answer.

"Me no sabey 'bout no fossil," he said. "Masser Kershaw him bring plenty things on board for make plaything."

"Where did he stow them?" questioned Griggs. "Down below in the cabin?"

"Me no can tell," returned the negro, moving away.

"Yes," Griggs said to himself, "I reckon it was in the cabin they were stowed. I must sneak in there somehow and have a spy round."

In the morning there was still no land in sight. Frank and Mart began to be anxious and to keep a closer eye upon the steering. The ship was sailing a good eight knots to the hour, and by all reckoning she ought, as Frank declared, to have got to the middle of Scotland if she had been making eastward all the time. On consulting the chart and estimating the rate at which they were sailing, they decided that it was impossible they should not have made a landfall. The only explanation of the mystery lay in the conjecture that they had been making a slant to the north-east instead of due east. If that were the case, then, instead of being anywhere near the Butt of Lewis, they must even have doubled Cape Wrath and be now entering the Pentland Firth.

Griggs noticed their perplexity, and, having in mind his desire to get a peep into the cabin, he determined to make a bold move. He waited until Martin Venner was below at dinner. Then he tapped at the cabin door and entered.

"We've got out of our reckoning, sir," he announced, "and unless there's anybody aboard who can take an observation, we're in a fix."

He was glancing inquisitively about the cabin as he spoke, and his eye fell upon a little leather bag that lay upon the sideboard. Martin's eyes also went to the bag anxiously, and he saw that he had neglected to tie the string about its neck. It was open, and from the opening a large diamond had rolled.

Martin rose from his chair and stood between the sideboard and Griggs. But Griggs had seen the glitter of the diamond, and guessed that the bag from which the gem had rolled contained other stones as precious. He gasped in covetous astonishment, and edged nearer so that he might see the diamond's reflection in the mirror at the back of the sideboard. Then, certain that he had made no mistake, he recovered his composure and smiled as he jerked his thumb in the direction of the little bag.

"Fossils, sir?" he questioned.

Martin nodded with cleverly assumed indifference. "Yes," he answered.

He allured Griggs to the chart.

"We're out of our course, are we?" he remarked coldly. "Whose fault is that? We could not have

gone wrong if we had kept due east. But you and your rascally crew have not been obeying your orders. You have been steering northward. That doesn't very much matter, as it happens, however, for we can now make for the Orkneys, where there are two harbours to choose from—Kirkwall and Stromness."

Griggs frowned. He perceived that the boy captain was more alert than he had expected him to be.

"Yes," he mused, looking closely at the chart, "you're right, sir. But we shall not be able to get into either of them without a pilot, you know. It's a dangerous coast."

"You seem to know it, then?" said Martin.

Griggs shrugged his shoulders.

"It's not the first time I've been in the Pentland Firth," he responded. He put a gnarled finger on the chart. "It was here that the *Queen of the Seas* went to wreck."

"Ah!" nodded Martin. "I had forgotten that you were responsible for that business. How much did Adam Crosby give you for running her aground?"

"It's a lie!" cried Griggs. "I'd nothing to do with it."

Martin was slowly rolling the chart, still keeping between Griggs and the sideboard where the diamonds lay, when a voice came down from the skylight—

"Land ho!"

It was Joe Parry who made the announcement.

"Where away?" cried Martin Venner.

"On the starboard bow!" answered Joe.

Having no excuse for remaining longer in the

cabin, Griggs slunk off, giving a furtive glance at the glittering diamond as he passed through the cabin door.

Martin locked the bag of gems away in the safe in the captain's room, and went on deck.

The mist had lifted. There was a high headland visible only a mile away, and at its rear stretched a rocky coast, topped with green fields and broken by channels of the sea. Right in the barque's course there was a wider channel, and in the middle of it, making towards her, there was a steamship with two slate-coloured funnels. A glance at the vessel told Martin Venner that she was a gunboat. A white ensign fluttered over her stern.

"Quick, Frank!" he cried. "Run up the flag of distress!"

Frank obeyed, and the gunboat presently altered her course.

Griggs had slipped below to inform Jansen of his discovery of the diamonds, and the two mutineers put their heads together to discuss how they should overpower the three boys and the cook, take possession of the ship, and make off with her to some quiet haven, where they might abandon her and get on land with all the riches they could secure.

They were discussing their plans when the gunboat came abreast of the *Albatross* and sent a boat's crew to board her.

An officer mounted her accommodation ladder, and was met by Martin and Frank, who quickly told

him of the mutiny, and informed him that the ring-leaders were aboard.

Griggs and his five confederates were caught in a net from which there was no possible escape. The man-o'-war's men were summoned to arrest them, and they were put in irons, while the *Albatross* was taken into the channel and piloted round to the harbour of Stromness. For the land that had been seen was that of the Orkney Islands.

Among the first persons to come on board was Lloyd's agent, who, upon hearing Martin's account of the attempt to scuttle her, telegraphed for his instructions. The answer he received from the head office was to the effect that he was to get together a scratch crew to work the ship home to the Mersey, and that the guilty men were to be kept in irons until they should be taken in charge of the Mersey river police.

During the two or three days that the *Albatross* lay at anchor in Stromness Bay, neither Frank nor Martin went ashore, notwithstanding that each required a new outfit. They were both busily occupied in the work of superintending repairs and engaging a new crew. Much of their time was also engaged in making out formal statements as to the crime for which Griggs and his confederates were held under arrest. On being examined by a magistrate—the provost of the town—who came on board, Griggs and Jansen endeavoured to cast the weight of guilt upon José Rossi. Joe Parry's evidence

supported this view in so far as the actual mutiny was concerned; but the attempt to scuttle the ship was a different matter, and Martin Venner clearly proved that for this Griggs alone was guilty.

Something which Jansen said under examination before the provost and Lloyd's agent excited Martin's curiosity, and when the *Albatross* was under weigh and sailing down the Minch, Martin sought an opportunity of speaking with the German.

"That was a deliberate lie that you and Griggs told us when you said that Rossi had died of a bad cold on the chest," he began. "He didn't die of a cold, any more than Kauffman and Metzger died from the effects of accidents on the cliffs. What happened to them, Jan? Why were they left behind in St. Kilda?"

Jansen looked about him to make sure that no one was listening.

"It vos Jimmy Griggs vot told you all der lies," he protested. "Der men—Rossi and Kauffman and Hans Muller—they vos left behind, that vos drue, all right. They vos killed dead mit a pistol. Boot it vos not der pistol of Griggs vot kill dem. No; it vos the oder man—vot you call him—Gregson."

"*Gregson!*" exclaimed Martin, in astonishment.

Then Jansen, in his broken English, told him what had happened.

Gregson, he said, had survived the wounds dealt him by the revolver-shot in the mutineers' cave and by the knife of José Rossi. He had crept away from

the mouth of the cavern before the tide rose, and had taken refuge along the cliff. He had remained in his hiding-place for days, subsisting on seaweed, attending to his own hurts. But at last he had been forced to emerge. He had come out upon the beach just at the moment when the mutineers, returning after their fruitless quest of the ship, were attempting to land from the boat that they had stolen from the islanders.

Concealing himself behind a rock, he had waited his chance, and then fired upon them. Jansen did not know where he had found the revolver and cartridges. Rossi was the first to fall. Gregson fired into the midst of the scoundrel crew desperately, recklessly. Kauffman and Metzger were mortally wounded, and there was hardly one of them all who was not badly hurt. Griggs and Jansen both fired back at the desperate, starving man, but so well was Gregson protected by the rock behind which he had entrenched himself that not a shot reached him.

"Did he know that the ship was there?" interrupted Martin excitedly.

"Yes," Jansen told him. "He saw the things vot we had brought from her in der boat, you see. Yes, he know der ship vos there."

"And we thought he was dead!" cried Martin, in despair. "Is he still alive, do you suppose, Jansen?"

"Mine friend, how shall I know, you think?" questioned the German. "Ve leave him there on der beach. He would not let us land. Ve ask him into der boat; he vill not come. 'No,' he say,

'I rather starve than go mit such a crew. I vill go agross der hill there to der village.'

"Ah! Then he knew that there was a village on the island!" exclaimed Martin, in an access of hope. "And if he could only succeed in climbing over the hill he wouldn't starve!"

Martin went aft to Frank Kershaw to tell him the news he had just heard.

"Can't we 'bout ship and go back to St. Kilda and rescue the poor chap?" Mart suggested.

Frank shook his head.

"If Gregson got to the village he will be all right there for a week or two," he said. "If he didn't get to it, there wouldn't be a bit of good in our going to look for him. What did Jansen say about the carpenter?"

"Dewar's body was swept away by the tide," responded Martin, looking up into the barque's sails.

The two boys walked the poop-deck in silence.

"I wish to goodness we were under steam instead of sails," Frank presently sighed. "We're not going half quick enough."

Nevertheless the *Albatross* made an unexpectedly quick passage down the Irish Sea, entering the Mersey on the fourth morning after leaving the Orkneys.

And now Martin and Frank and Joe were in Liverpool, mounting the wide staircase of Crosby & Venner's office in Water Street.

Adam Crosby, in the custody of the detective, recognised them as they stood gazing at him wonderingly.

He clenched his thin hands, knowing now that his game was lost.

“Curse you!” he cried, as his eyes flashed upon Martin Venner. “It’s all through you that I am like this!” and he tried to clutch at the boy with his claw-like fingers.

CHAPTER XXXV.

RETRIBUTION.

MARTIN drew back amazed, and stared at the detective, who still held the little shipowner by the sleeve of his rich, fur-lined overcoat.

"Where are you taking him to?" he innocently asked, guessing, nevertheless, that the old man was in police custody.

But the detective did not answer, and Mr. Gordon, the representative of Lloyd's, urged them on.

"Come, Mr. Crosby," he said persuasively, "don't forget yourself. Don't make a scene! You will do far better to come quietly."

Adam Crosby seemed to consider that his best policy was to go as if he was merely accompanying two of his business friends out of the building.

"Very well, then," he nodded. "But please don't hold my sleeve that way. It is not necessary."

The three boys watched them as they went down the wide staircase.

"That's a policeman in plain clothes that had hold of him," declared Frank. "You could tell that easily by his boots, if by nothing else. But what has the old governor been up to, I wonder?"

"He's been up to quite enough to justify them in taking him off to the police-station, that's clear,"

Martin surmised. "I shouldn't be astonished to hear that they have dropped on him for the *Albatross* affair. Lloyd's knew days ago that the ship was safe, and they've only waited to hear that she was in port before nabbing him. For, you may be sure, he has been trying to get the insurance money from them. Let's go into the office and see if we can find out anything."

They were turning towards the familiar door of Crosby & Venner's when the sudden shuffling of feet on the stone stairs below them caused them to go aside to the bannister and look over.

They saw Adam Crosby running along the lower corridor, the two men after him. They heard the slamming of the iron door of the lift, and then came the low rumbling of the lift quickly descending. Mr. Gordon and the detective ran excitedly down the two flights of stairs to the ground floor, but when they got to the well of the lift, expecting to intercept their prisoner, they found that the fugitive shipowner had gone yet farther down, to the basement.

"They've missed him!" cried Frank, seeing the two men at the stairs and hearing them hastening down to the basement.

Both Frank and Martin knew how easy it was for anyone to baffle pursuit in the many passages and lobbies of the same building. Many a game of hide-and-seek had they enjoyed there in their earlier days as office boys!

"I know which way he has gone!" cried Martin.

“He’s gone along to the other lift at the end. He’ll go up to the ground floor, and then escape into Fenwick Street. Let’s go down and see the fun!”

They raced down the stairs, and reached the ground floor in time to see the two men hurrying in opposite directions to the two exit doors, the one in Water Street, the other in Fenwick Street. They were about to join in the pursuit when Joe Parry came after them.

“Venner,” he called aloud, “there’s somebody upstairs wants you!”

“Want’s *me*?” questioned Mart. “Who is it?”

“A gentleman,” returned Joe. “He came out of one of the office doors just as you ran down, and told me to fetch you back.”

Martin and Frank looked at each other, perplexed.

“I expect it’s Mr. Ellisden,” suggested Frank. “Come on. Let’s go up and have a jaw with him. We shall only waste time trying to catch old Crosby.”

Abandoning the chase, they climbed the stairs to the third floor, and went in at the well-remembered door of the general office.

A new boy barred their way as they attempted to pass through the swing-door without first stating their business.

“Is Mr. Ellisden in?” Martin asked. Mr. Ellisden was the head clerk, who usually took charge of the business in the absence of the chief.

“He’s out at lunch,” the office boy answered, sticking his pen behind his ear and staring at them

rudely. "What do you want—a berth on one of our ships? We've no vacancies. Clear out!"

Martin laughed in his face. So did Frank Kershaw.

"None of your cheek!" said Frank. "When will Mr. Ellisden be back? We want to see him, or somebody above the position of office boy. Who's in, if he isn't?"

The door of Mr. Adam Crosby's private room was flung open, and a gentleman in a heavy overcoat showed himself.

Martin Venner started back as if he had seen a ghost.

"*Father!*" he cried, amazed at the sight of the parent whom he had believed to be dead.

Mr. Royden Venner caught him in his arms.

"My boy! My boy!" he murmured, and drew him into the inner room.

Frank and Joe did not attempt to follow, but stood back and waited in the outer office. Two of the clerks had been standing near the fire exchanging conjectures as to the reason why the head of the firm had gone out so precipitately in the company of a man whom they both believed to be a detective. They interrupted their discussion to look in astonishment at Martin Venner rushing into his father's outstretched arms. No less astonished were they to recognise Frank Kershaw. They called him to them at the fire, and bombarded him with questions too numerous for him to answer.

"Yes," he told them, "the *Albatross* is in the river, and Venner and I have both come home in her." He

vaulted on to a high stool, and, swinging his legs to and fro, began to explain the things which to them were mysterious, questioning them in his turn concerning Mr. Venner's escape from drowning and Adam Crosby's arrest. They were thus deeply engaged when Martin peeped out from the private room.

"Frank! Joe!" he called. "Come in here, both of you. There's somebody wants to see you."

"I could hardly believe my own eyes when I saw you just now, sir," Frank said, as he shook hands with Mr. Venner. "We never thought ever to see you again, Mart and I. How did you escape, sir? Weren't you badly wounded by Jansen's knife? I saw him attack you just before the *Gem* heeled over."

"I was hurt—yes," smiled Mr. Venner; "but not seriously. It was Jansen himself who saved me. He fell in at the same time that I did, and he caught hold of me and kept my head above water until a boat picked me up. He wouldn't get into the same boat himself, but continued swimming, and then, as I now understand, he saved Martin's life also."

Mrs. Venner, who had been sitting with her arm about Martin's neck, rose from her chair.

"I want to thank you, Kershaw," she said, "for all that you have done for Martin."

Frank bashfully lowered his eyes.

"Mart did as much for me, and more," he protested. "We all helped each other, and you ought to thank Joe here and Billy Neptune just as much as me."

"I think the most practical thing to do is for all

of us to go out and have a jolly good lunch together," Martin broke in. "I'm simply famishing for a good square meal."

"So am I," added Frank. "But we want first to get into civilised clothes, don't we?"

"That needn't occupy us long," smiled Martin. "We can get everything we want in that shop in Lord Street."

"You will need some money," interposed Mr. Venner, with a look of embarrassment, as he made a mental calculation of the amount that would be required. "I am afraid——" He sighed audibly and turned away.

It was only then that Martin Venner realised that both his father and his mother were more shabbily dressed than he had been accustomed to see them, and that they had every appearance of being poor. He went up to his father, who was staring blankly into the fire.

"Are you hard up, then, father?" he questioned.

"Hard up!" repeated Mr. Venner gloomily. "I am worse than hard up. I am ruined, Mart—ruined." He glanced woefully into the boy's face. "Things have gone to the bad since I have been away from the office. They couldn't be much worse. Soon—very soon, now—we shall be in the bankruptcy court, and the whole business will fall to the ground."

Martin inwardly pitied his father, yet rejoiced in his secret heart that he had it in his power to avert the impending calamity.

"Is it all Adam Crosby's doing?" he asked.

Mr. Venner sighed once more.

"I trusted him too much," he said, "and he cheated me—cheated me right and left. For months past, without my knowing it, he has been carrying on a system of most audacious frauds. I only discovered it on the day before that morning of the *Gem* accident, and since then I have been helpless to interfere. I have been ill, Mart; very ill. Even now I ought not to be out of the house. I only came because I heard that the *Albatross* was in the river, and hoped that you had returned on board of her. How thankful I am that you are safe! But it is a poor, broken-up home that you have come back to, my son!"

Martin smiled, thinking of the treasure on board of the green painted ship, and of how it might be employed for the restoration of his father's fortune and honour.

"So long as you yourself are not guilty, why need you care?" he asked. "No one will dare to say that you were dishonest. You knew nothing of the scuttling of the *Albatross*. That was Adam Crosby's doing. Let him bear his punishment."

"His punishment will come swiftly," remarked Mr. Venner. "They have arrested him."

"I know," said Martin; "we saw them taking him as we came up the stairs. But he has escaped."

"Escaped! They ought to have put the handcuffs on him! He is slippery as an eel. But they will catch him again. He cannot get away. And they

will have no difficulty in proving his guilt. But think of the disgrace! The firm can never be built up again. All our credit is gone! And it is not the business alone that he has ruined by his cheating. He has managed to make me responsible for many of his debts. Martin, do you know, at this very moment the bailiffs are in our home, and we are to be turned out."

Martin put his hand on his father's arm.

"You shall not be turned out, father," he said, "and the business shall not be broken up. I will save you."

"*You!*" Mr. Venner looked at the boy's ragged clothes. "What do you mean?" he cried.

"I mean," said Martin, "that Frank and Joe and I are rich. Yes, rich as princes. On board the old *Albatross*, safely stowed away, there is a great store of gold and precious stones. And it is all ours. We found it in a pirate's cave on the island where we were stranded, and we have brought it home."

He plunged his hand into the side pocket of his overcoat, and drew forth a fistful of golden guineas, which he emptied on the table.

"That ought to be enough to pay for three suits of clothes and a lunch!" he said. "Perhaps the tailor won't take old-fashioned guineas, but we can first call at the bank and get them changed into sovereigns."

Both Mr. Venner and his wife were incredulous. They supposed for a moment that their son was romancing. But the golden guineas strewn on the

office table were obviously genuine, and Frank and Joe's assurances, added to Martin's declaration as to the manner in which the treasure had been found, presently convinced them.

Mr. Venner murmured something about the law of treasure-trove, by which, as he explained, some portion of the find would be claimed by the Crown. He believed that it would be a third part of the gross value which would thus have to be relinquished.

"Even if the Crown claimed a full half," said Frank, "there would still be enough left to make us rich. Come down to the ship, Mr. Venner, and see the treasure for yourself, and then you can advise us exactly what to do with it. We don't want to keep any more than is honestly due to us, do we, Mart?"

"Of course not," agreed Martin. "We can take a lawyer with us, can't we, and get him to settle the whole business properly? We can put the matter into Mr. Trimble's hands."

This suggestion seemed to be a satisfactory one, and accordingly it was arranged that Mr. Trimble's services should be employed.

They all went out of the office, and drove away in two cabs. They first called at a money-changer's in Lord Street, and Martin exchanged thirty of his guineas for as many sovereigns. Next they went to a large outfitting establishment in Church Street, and the three boys bought new suits of ready-made clothes, with shirts, collars, boots, hats, and all other articles needful to make themselves more respectable in appearance.

In turning out the pockets of his discarded jacket Frank Kershaw produced a long sealed envelope, crushed and soiled. He handed it to Martin.

"That is your father's will, that you asked me to take care of for you," he said. "I expect it isn't of much use now, is it?"

When they returned to Mr. Venner where he waited, they restored the packet to him. He tore open the envelope and took out the document and examined it.

"It is of no value now," he said, "but I am glad you preserved it so carefully. It might have been of the utmost importance."

They engaged a private room in one of the best restaurants in the town, and while they sat at lunch the boys related their adventures in detail, each giving his own version of the mutiny and of the perils through which he had passed.

"I have always disagreed with Adam Crosby's habit of employing foreigners on English ships," commented Mr. Venner, "and this affair of the mutiny is only one more illustration of what may result from it. The mutiny would not have occurred if he had manned the ship with a crew of honest Britons. The scuttling of her, however, is a very different affair, for which Mr. Crosby is wholly responsible, and for which the law will punish him most severely. I begin to understand now why he was so anxious to employ that man Griggs—a low scoundrel, who would stick at nothing for the sake of the promised reward. It was fortunate that the gunboat turned up when she did."

"Yes," nodded Frank. "Griggs thought that if we had gone in to Stornoway we should have given him and his crew into custody. So he altered our course, never dreaming that by doing so he was only jumping out of the frying-pan into the fire. He is in safe hands now, however. Lloyd's put the river police on our track, and they boarded us with the pilot outside the bar."

"I cannot understand how you risked taking the mutineers on board with you when they came out in the boat," remarked Mr. Venner. "I think I should have been tempted to leave them to their fate in St. Kilda, although, as it happened, you did the wisest thing, for I don't suppose the islanders would have thanked you for leaving such a pack of rascals at large in their midst. What do you intend to do about the seaman who was left behind—I mean, Gregson?"

"When we have settled everything here at home," said Martin, "we are going to charter a steamer, and return to St. Kilda to search for him and bring him back."

"You believe him to be still alive, then?" questioned Mr. Venner.

"There is the chance that he is," Martin responded confidently. "Anyhow, it's our duty to try to rescue him as soon as ever we can. It gives me the creeps to think that he may still be stranded in one of those caves."

"But you will be required to give evidence at the trial of the mutineers," his father reminded him, "and

that is a business which may keep you here for weeks. If you are bent upon making a search for the missing man, you would do better, I think, to engage the captain of some steamer outward-bound from Glasgow to touch at the island and make inquiries."

At this suggestion both Martin and Frank shook their heads. They had already discussed the project in all its bearings, and determined to undertake the expedition on their own responsibility, if only they could secure a suitable steamer.

It was three o'clock when they finished their sumptuous lunch, for which Frank Kershaw insisted upon paying. Mrs. Venner had some friends whom she wished to call upon in Liverpool, and she arranged to meet her husband on the landing-stage at half-past five. Having seen her into an omnibus, Mr. Venner and the three boys walked round into Cook Street to ask Mr. Trimble to accompany them on board the *Albatross*, which Martin expected would already be berthed in the Sandon Dock.

Dusk was falling when they discovered the green painted barque lying amid a crowd of other ships. They got on board of her with some trouble, and were met at the gangway by Billy Neptune and the skipper who had brought the vessel round from Stromness.

"Griggs and him rotten crew them all taken off to them lock-up," Billy informed Martin. "Them policeman him want speak with you, but me no sabey where you am gone. Me say you go see him one time."

"I suppose they want me to swear to them being

the right men, or something of that sort," Martin conjectured. "All right, I will go up to Dale Street presently. Frank," he added, turning to Kershaw, "you'll come too, won't you? We'd better sleep on board to-night. Your mother won't expect you, will she?"

Frank was reading a telegram that Billy had handed to him.

"She's not at home," he said. "This telegram is from her in answer to the one I sent to her when we landed. She's gone to stay with my uncle in Southport, and won't be back till to-morrow."

Mr. Venner and the lawyer were taken down into the cabin, which had already been lighted. Dismissing the captain, Martin unlocked the safe, and took out the parcel of precious stones and spread out the gems upon the bare table. The two men stared at the glittering mass in astonishment.

"Why, it's a fortune!" cried Mr. Trimble, taking up a very large rough diamond and examining it by the light of the hanging lamp. He glanced at Mr. Venner. "Venner," he added, "there is no need for you to be afraid of bankruptcy now. Your son's share, even if it be only a tenth part of all this, will save you from all money worries for the rest of your days." He took up a handful of the gems and let them trickle in a glittering shower into the open palm of his other hand. "Tremendous!" he exclaimed. "And you say that this is not all?"

"These are all of the precious stones," Frank

Kershaw told him, "excepting four large rubies, which Mart has put aside to make into a brooch for his mother, and a few pearls that my sister is going to have. Joe hasn't got any mother or sister, and he doesn't covet anything. But there are three packing-cases full of gold coins that you must see. They are mostly foreign, but there are four thousand two hundred and twenty English guineas among them, not counting the thirty that we took ashore with us. We've kept a strict account of everything at the end of the nautical almanac."

Martin opened the door of the captain's room.

"The packing-cases are under the bunk here," he said. "I don't know how we're going to get them out. They're too heavy to lift."

"There are not many people who couldn't devise some means of getting such treasure on shore, if you gave them the chance," remarked Mr. Trimble. "We will take your word for it that the gold is there. It can be taken to the bank to-morrow, where it will be deposited to your credit until the legal business in connection with it is satisfactorily settled. In the meantime, of course, the bank manager will let you draw upon him for whatever amount you may require. Nothing can be done to-night, however, and I will only congratulate you all on your good fortune."

The treasure was again locked away, and the key left in charge of Billy Neptune. Martin, Frank, and Joe then went ashore, with the lawyer and Mr. Venner, and made their way to Dale Street police-station.

At the police-station Martin was required to make a general statement on oath in charging the mutineers with the murders on board the *Albatross*, and to make an additional charge against Griggs for the crime of attempting to scuttle the ship. The six men were brought out from their cells to be formally identified. This being done, Martin, Joe Parry, and Frank Kershaw were summoned to appear on the following morning in the court to give evidence before a magistrate.

They were preparing to leave the police-station, and were crossing one of the many corridors, when the six mutineers, all handcuffed, were marched past them on their way to the cells. Griggs was the last of the file. Just as he came abreast of where the boys were standing, a new prisoner appeared, from an opposite direction, conducted by a warder and a policeman. Frank and Martin immediately recognised the prisoner as the head of the firm of Crosby, Venner, & Co.

Adam Crosby's fur-lined overcoat was torn and muddy, his collar and necktie were awry, his silk hat looked as if he had been sitting on it, and his face was scratched and bleeding. Even now, in the grip of the law, he struggled to free himself. Suddenly his bleared eyes rested upon the face of one of the passing mutineers. Griggs caught sight of the man who had tempted him to his crime. There was a low growl of anger from the handcuffed seaman; then in a moment the two men broke away from their warders and flew at each other like a pair of enraged animals. They

fought and scratched and bit and kicked. Griggs dashed his handcuffs into the older man's face, and Adam Crosby fell. They rolled upon the stone floor together, and it was all that the warders could do to fling them apart.

In the midst of the struggle Jansen put forth a hand and caught at the sleeve of Martin Venner's new coat.

"So, mine yong friend," he said, "you vos got der better of us, eh? You just vait until I get out of brison, den you vill know vot it mean to have an enemy."

A warder pulled him away, and the whole gang were driven to their cells, while Adam Crosby was taken before the chief inspector to be formally charged.

On the following morning, when he was brought before the magistrates, a long list of his commercial crimes was read out, and the evidence of the underwriters was taken in the matter of his inciting a seaman in his employ to scuttle the *Albatross* on the high seas. He had no defence, and he was committed for trial at the Assizes.

The case against the fraudulent shipowner was followed by the case against the mutineers, and the evidence of Billy Neptune, Joe Parry, and Martin Venner was sufficient to warrant their committal to prison to await their trial before judge and jury.

Martin made inquiries as to the date of the trial, and was told that the Assizes would not take place for six weeks.

“That’s right into our hands,” he said to Frank, as they were leaving the court. “It will give us nice time to go to St. Kilda and bring Gregson away. Father has told me of a first-rate steamboat that we can charter, and he’s going to come with us. The voyage will do him all the good in the world.”

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE SCHOOLMASTER'S POSTSCRIPT.

“CAN you make it out yet, Frank?”

“No, the skipper says we shall not see it for another hour yet. But there's lots of sea-gulls about, and you can tell we're getting near.”

Martin Venner and Frank Kershaw stood together in the shelter of the windward dodger on the steamer's bridge. They both wore oilskin coats, sou'-westers, and big sea-boots. A drizzling rain was falling, the ship was pitching uncomfortably on the great Atlantic waves that rolled in long furrows from the north-west. Her bow dipped into them deeply, and they broke into snowy foam that swept along her sides hissing and seething.

The captain, pacing the bridge, paused beside the two boys.

“I'm afraid we shall not be able to land, sirs,” he said, with a head-shake. “We'd better put back to Stornoway, and wait for calmer weather.”

Martin looked at him sharply.

“Turn back!” he echoed. “No, go ahead. We can get in under the lee of the island somehow. The east bay will be sheltered from this wind, and we can wait there at anchor as well as in Stornoway. Go ahead!”

The steamer was named the *Kelpie*. She was a

vessel of a thousand tons built for the coasting trade, but converted into a yacht. She had been lying since the previous summer in the Great Float on the Birkenhead side of the Mersey, and the boys had chartered her from her owner, a wealthy Liverpool merchant, and manned her with a picked crew for this expedition to St. Kilda. She was fitted out with luxury; her dining saloon and staterooms were furnished and decorated regardless of expense, with electric light and gilded mouldings, rich velvet cushions and silk hangings. Her accommodation was as carefully studied as that of a floating hotel on an Atlantic liner. As for her behaviour on the sea, there was not a member of her crew who was not proud of her sailing powers.

"Mind you," said the captain, "it's not the ship that I'm afraid of. She will stand any sort of weather you like. I'd take her round the world for you, and she'd come back as clean and neat as a new pin. I'm only warning you that if this wind holds, we may have to lie off the island for days together, unable either to land or to get your man aboard. There's no harbour, you tell me, and no quay for us to go alongside."

For the twentieth time Frank Kershaw described the village bay, and told the captain how they might effect a landing by means of the electric launch. Their discussion of these possibilities was interrupted by the ringing of a gong, and the boys looked aft to see Billy Neptune at the door of the deck-house

beating the instrument with as much vigour as if he were sounding the war-drum in his native Benin.

Billy was dressed in the tight-fitting costume of a steward, with brass buttons on his short jacket and gold stripes on its sleeves.

"You come for eat breakfast chop one time," he said, as Frank and Mart approached him. He helped them to take off their wet oilskins and sea-boots, which he flung out upon the deck for one of the under-stewards to take charge of. Then he led the way down the wide companion stairs into the spacious dining saloon where Mr. Venner and Joe Parry were already seated at the breakfast-table, both looking very fresh after their morning baths.

Billy Neptune, as chief steward, was supposed to superintend the work of his subordinates; he ordered them about as if he had been born to command, scolded them roundly if they were not prompt to bring in the hot dishes, or the toast was cold, or if a coffee-cup was for a moment left empty.

"Nep," remarked Frank, "you ought to be the proprietor of an hotel. You'd make heaps of money if you served breakfasts like this every morning."

"What you suppose them nigger him do with heap of money?" Nep asked, holding on to the table to steady himself as the ship rolled. "Me no want money."

"That's the worst of Nep," smiled Mart. "He's as bad as a St. Kilda man the way he despises wealth. I don't know what we are to do with him. He won't go into any business on his own account. He

won't go any more as a cook on board a sailing-ship. He's set his mind against returning to Africa. The only thing he seems to want is to hang round about us three and do things for us."

"Not a bad occupation, is it?" interposed Mr. Venner. "Now that you are so rich, you can well afford to keep him as a sort of general henchman."

"We might dress him up as a commissionaire and let him stand at the door of our new offices, when we get them," suggested Frank. "He'd look well in Water Street."

"That reminds me," said Mart, breaking his egg. "What are we going to call ourselves when we open those offices?"

"Shipbrokers, I suppose," said Mr. Venner. "You can't quite call yourselves owners yet, although I hope that some day you will run a line of passenger steamers."

"We ought to call it the St. Kilda Line," put in Joe Parry, "and compete with the Cunard and the White Star."

"Yes," nodded Mr. Venner, "that is something for you to work up to in the future. Begin by being shipbrokers, calling your firm 'Venner, Kershaw, Parry, & Co.' That would sound quite imposing."

"It's too long," said Joe, "you'd better drop the Parry. I will stand for the Co., as a sort of sleeping partner."

"There won't be much sleeping for any of you if you intend to be millionaires," observed Mr. Venner, "and you will have a lot to learn, I promise you."

"We're going to trust to you to teach us," said Frank.

"*Me!*" cried Mr. Venner. "But what have I to do with it? I'm out of it all."

"Oh no, sir," declared Frank. "You're going to be our manager, and to run the show for us until we're old enough to take the responsibility. That's all settled."

"Of course it is," agreed Mart and Joe.

They talked of their commercial prospects until breakfast was finished, when, all donning their oilskins, they went on deck and searched the horizon for the first glimpse of St. Kilda.

Frank Kershaw was the first to descry the island, rising like a leaden cloud against the sky, directly in the steamer's course. He recognised its outline, and soon he could distinguish the low-lying skerries clustering about the main island.

Joe Parry climbed the mainmast to get a fuller view through the marine glasses, but the vessel was heaving and pitching so much that he soon returned to the safety of the deck, and rejoined the group on the bridge.

After another hour's steaming they could see the white breakers against the blackness of the cliffs. When they got nearer still, the whistle was blown and the roosting sea-birds left the crags and rose in a moving cloud into the air. Their number was astonishing.

"There weren't so many in our time," observed Mart. "But the schoolmaster told me that the fulmars would soon be coming back for the breeding season."

"In that case there ought to be lots of eggs to be got," added Joe Parry.

"Yes," nodded Frank. "I daresay; now that they're not wanted."

It was close upon noon when the yacht steamed into the village bay, and dropped anchor. Her whistle had been sounded repeatedly, but the islanders had seen her smoke from a distance and had gathered in a crowd upon the rocks, where the waves broke too angrily for any ordinary boat to approach.

"It is an English steamboat," the schoolmaster said to the minister. "What can she be wanting here?"

"Indeed, yes," said the minister, "what can she want? I have never known a steamboat come to St. Kilda excepting in the summer-time. If she had come from the westward I should have thought she was in need of something—water or food. But from the east—from the mainland—why does she come?"

"She will not be able to send a boat ashore," commented the schoolmaster. "They don't seem to be putting one out. See! They are making signals to us! I will go and get my spyglass and then we can see them better."

He went very quickly up to the hut in which he lived. When he returned to the rocks his pockets bulged curiously, and as he walked a slight jingling sound came from them.

"I think I can guess what she has come for, Mr.



HE WENT DOWN ON HIS KNEES AT THE MAN'S SIDE.—Page 361.



Duncan," he said. "You remember the green painted ship that was here?"

"I'm not likely to forget it," returned the minister. "I have not yet got over my satisfaction at seeing the last of her and her terrible crew. But what has the green painted ship to do with this beautiful steamboat with all its bright brasswork and its trim ropes and white boats?"

"I was thinking that maybe the three boys had sent her to bring a present of stores for the people of St. Kilda," said the schoolmaster.

The minister shook his head.

"People are not generally so grateful as all that, Mr. Macrae," he said. "It is possible, indeed, that the three boys have sent the steamboat; but not with a present of stores. It is more likely that they have come to inquire about the man that they left behind—the man that was living in the caves over by Connacher Cliff."

"But he was one of the mutineers that we heard about," rejoined Macrae, "and they would never want to know any more of him."

As he spoke there was a bright flash of fire from the deck of the yacht, and a rocket rose hissing into the air. It curved in its flight, and they saw that there was a line attached to it. They watched it drop among the rocks far behind them, and the line of string fell in the midst of the crowd.

The islanders caught hold of it, and the schoolmaster ordered them to haul it in. They pulled at it

hand over hand. It seemed endless. But presently it grew more weighty, and they saw that the people on the steamer were paying out a heavier rope to follow the light string. When the first end of the rope showed itself above the breaking waves, it was seen that a shining tin box was tied to it. They hauled it in over the rocks. The minister caught at the box and opened it. There was a letter inside.

“It is for you, Mr. Macrae!” he cried in astonishment, handing the letter to the schoolmaster. “And there is a pencil with it. They will want a reply.”

Mr. Macrae opened the letter and read:

“To Mr. Macrae, schoolmaster, St. Kilda.

“Dear Sir,—The writer of this will be obliged by your sending reply in the box. We are the yacht *Kelpie*, of Liverpool, having on board survivors of the barque *Albatross*, lately stranded on your island. We want to land. Please tell us where we can bring in a boat. Also inform us if one William Gregson, A.B., is on the island. He is believed to have been left behind alive when *Albatross* sailed. Yours truly,

“MARTIN VENNER.”

The schoolmaster handed the letter to the minister, who had already put on his spectacles.

“It’s just as you thought, Mr. Macrae,” he nodded. “And this Martin Venner is one of those three boys, I believe. We had better go up to the manse and consider what reply to make.”

The schoolmaster took the pencil from the box and turned the blank side of the letter uppermost.

"There is no need to consider the reply, minister," he responded, laying the paper on the flat of the box, and he wrote:

"To Mr. Martin Venner, ss. *Kelpie*.

"Dear Sir,—Afraid the water is too rough for a landing. Do not advise you to try unless you have very stout boat, and can bring her in to landing pier. William Gregson, A.B., is not known in St. Kilda, but a man believed to be one of the mutineers of the *Albatross*, abandoned by his companions, was seen alive near Skeleton Cavern after ship left. Probably dead now, as he could not be communicated with. The writer of this lowered food to him, but it is not known whether he received it or not. Yours truly,

"JOHN MACRAE, schoolmaster."

"P.S.—*Strictly private*. There is someone on island wanting passage to mainland, and prays to be rescued from this maddening desolation."

He wrote the postscript after the minister had read the main part of his reply; wrote it while pretending to have difficulty in closing the box. He tied the box to the rope and then carried it to the water's edge, held it aloft so that those on the yacht might see, and then flung it far out.

"There!" cried Frank Kershaw, "they've thrown back the box. Wind in the rope, there!"

The engineer put over the lever of the steam-winch and the dripping rope came inboard with astonishing speed.

"Belay there!" cried Mart, when he saw the glint of the tin in the clear water. "Steady!"

One of the seamen hauled in the rest of the line by hand. Martin opened the box and read the schoolmaster's letter. Frank read it over his shoulder.

A look of disappointment came into both their faces.

"It's no use," said Mart. "We've been sold!"

"Sold!" repeated Frank. "How do you mean?"

"Why," returned Martin, crumbling the letter in his hand. "I can see it all plainly. That fellow Jansen has done us. He knew that we should come back here if we thought that poor old Gregson was alive. But it was Rossi that he wanted us to rescue. Don't you see?"

Frank looked at him perplexed.

"Then you think it was Rossi that was seen alive near Skeleton Cavern?" he questioned.

"Yes," returned Martin, again opening out the letter and reading it a second time. "Griggs would abandon him, but Jansen and he were pals. Jansen was curiously eager to go back to St. Kilda after we got the new crew aboard. He played a trump card when he made up that yarn about Gregson."

"Well, at least we can be satisfied that we didn't abandon Gregson and let him die of starvation," sighed Frank. "What are we going to do?"

"I suppose we had better make sure that Rossi isn't alive," said Mart. "He's human, and we ought to rescue him if we can. He is wanted in Liverpool, you know."

Mr. Venner appeared at the door of the deck-house,

near which the two boys stood. Martin went to him, but first thrust the crushed letter into Frank's hand.

"Read the postscript," he whispered, "and keep it dark till we know what it means."

Martin and the captain discussed the question as to whether it would be safe to send the electric launch ashore. They finally decided to wait until the next morning, in the hope that the weather would change for the better. So they lay at anchor for the night.

Next morning their hopes were realised, for the rain had ceased, the wind had shifted more to the south, and the waves broke with less than their accustomed fury on the black rocks. So favourable was the weather, indeed, that Martin and Frank determined at once to go ashore. The launch was accordingly lowered and made ready, and a new whale-boat which was to be presented to the islanders was taken in tow, loaded with a great variety of stores.

They made a difficult landing at the stone pier, where they were met by the usual crowd of islanders and dogs.

Upon inquiry, Martin was told by Mr. Macrae that he, the schoolmaster, had made many journeys to the west side of the island in search of the abandoned mutineer. He had never seen him, but he had regularly thrown provisions in the form of oatcakes down the precipice, in the belief that the castaway might find them. He had never been able to go round by boat on account of the westerly gales.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE NEW *ALBATROSS*.

MARTIN resolved to take the yacht round to the bay near Skeleton Cavern, and with the more reason because his father had expressed a wish to see the caves in which the boys had met with their adventures.

Mr. Macrae and two of the young men of the island were taken on board, the anchor was weighed, and the *Kelpie* steamed round under the shadowing cliffs. She went close in, so that the boys might take snapshots with their cameras of the grand cliff scenery and of the roosting birds. The steam-whistle was repeatedly sounded with the purpose not only of startling the gulls and making them fly, but also of giving warning to José Rossi that help was near.

The anchor was dropped in the bay into which the *Albatross* had drifted, and the electric launch carried the explorers ashore, provided with electric hand-lamps, rope-ladders, and all other articles that might be required. Billy Neptune acted as guide through the caves. At the mouth of Skeleton Cavern they found the tackle just as it had been left after the last load of the pirate's treasure had been sent down, and the schoolmaster described to Mr. Venner exactly how it had been worked.

Here, as everywhere else among the crags, search was made for some sign of Rossi's presence, but none was found until they were about to retrace their steps, when Joe Parry's voice attracted them into a side passage where the daylight came in.

"Look here!" he cried, pointing down to the rock floor. "What's the meaning of this?"

On the flat rock many gold coins had been gathered and arranged in precise order, forming the word *ALBATROSS*.

Frank and Mart gazed at the word in wonder.

"That was not here when we went out of the cave," Mr. Macrae declared. "And I did not think that we left any of the money behind."

"Mart!" cried Frank. "It was you that threw the coins here. Don't you remember? You emptied your pockets that time after you had been to the mutineers and found they had no food left."

"Yes," Martin remembered. "But I didn't set them out in that way," he said. "Rossi must have found them and done it."

"Then that is a proof that he was here after we'd gone," pursued Frank. "Here and alive, and well enough to amuse himself by arranging the coins into the name of his ship."

Pursuing their way outward through the intricate corridors that led down to the mutineers' cave, they came upon a great heap of egg-shells. Some of the eggs had been broken in half and their contents emptied, some had been pierced with a hole in each

end ; on some there were smears of the yellow yolk, showing human finger-marks.

“ Rossi has been feeding on them,” Frank declared. “ See ! the top ones are quite fresh ! And there are some oyster-shells, too, and fish bones. He has evidently found lots to eat.”

While they were examining these traces of the abandoned mutineer and drawing inferences from the signs of a recent occupation of this particular part of the cave, Billy Neptune, who had gone on in advance, came running back, all excitement, carrying with him a worn-out boot.

“ Him no dead ! ” he cried. “ You come see one time ! ” He held out the boot. “ Them boot no wet,” he said decisively, as if the fact were an indisputable proof that Rossi was near. On his explaining, however, that he had found it below the tide mark, his discovery seemed to be of value.

They all followed him out upon the beach and looked searchingly about for further signs.

“ See ! See ! ” cried Joe Parry, excitedly pointing along the foot of the cliffs to the reef of rocks beyond which the yacht was anchored. “ There he is ! ”

They saw the figure of a man crawling on all-fours up the steep. Frank and Martin ran, calling aloud. The man halted and glanced round, then sat down, waiting. He wore no clothes but a pair of ragged trousers and the remnant of a shirt. As the two boys drew near him he tried to rise, staring at them wildly.

“ Frank—Frank! it’s not Rossi!” cried Martin.

“ It’s Gregson—*Gregson!*” shouted Frank, running quicker. He went down on his knees at the man’s side and caught at his trembling hands. “ Bill! Bill!” he cried, “ don’t you know me?”

“ Know you!” returned Gregson, in a hoarse voice that sounded like a sob; “ do I not?” He sank back exhausted, closing his eyes and breathing heavily.

Martin beckoned to his father.

“ Jansen told the truth, after all,” he faltered, looking down into Gregson’s wan and pinched face. How thin and ill he is! We are only just in time.”

Gregson opened his eyes as they lifted him.

“ I could ’a sworn it was a steamer’s whistle I ’eard,” he said.

The launch appeared from round the headland. They signalled to the men on board of her, and she was brought in to the rocks. Gregson was carried down and lifted gently on board, and when all was ready she returned to the waiting yacht. While the yacht steamed back to the village bay, Gregson was put into a hot bath, warm drinks were given to him, and when he entered the saloon, dressed in a suit of blue serge, he was like a new man. Bit by bit he told of the sufferings he had endured, of how he had fought with the mutineers, himself against nine, of how he had known by the stores in the boat that the ship had not foundered. He had believed that Frank and Martin had been murdered by the mutineers, never dreaming that they had recovered the *Albatross*, and

sailed away. For days and weeks he had contrived to live upon what he could pick up along the beach—fish that were left by the tide in the rock pools, seaweed and mussels and oysters. Once he had found some scraps of oatcake which someone had thrown down from the heights, and by that he knew that the island was inhabited; but he had never been able to climb the crags because of his many wounds. And then the sea-birds had begun to breed and he had got a store of eggs. Every day he had searched the sea for sign of a passing ship. Yes, it was he who had found the handful of golden guineas in Skeleton Cave, and arranged them on the slab of rock in the form of the name of the *Albatross*. At last, on this same morning of his rescue, he had heard the glad sound of a steamer's whistle. It had seemed to reach him from the bay beyond the headland, and he was trying to climb over when the boys had found him.

And now he was safe on board ship once more. He could hardly believe that he was not in a dream, and that the yacht and her people and the food were realities. When the yacht entered the bay and he saw the huts of the islanders, he was amazed to think how near he had been to the village and yet had not known of its existence.

When the yacht's anchor was lowered in the village bay, the islanders came out to her in their new boat, and their two older boats, which plied to and fro between her and the shore.

Just at the hour of sunset her bell was rung,

warning the islanders off. Watching them getting into the boats, Martin Venner looked for the schoolmaster, intending to ask of him an explanation of the postscript in his letter, but the schoolmaster was nowhere to be seen. Some said that he had gone ashore, others averred that they had not noticed him come aboard. Not until the captain's indication had sounded and the engines began to revolve was he found, and then Martin discovered him hiding in the wardrobe in his, Martin's, stateroom.

"Hello!" Mart cried. "What's this? What are you doing here, Mr Macrae?"

The schoolmaster clutched excitedly at Martin's shoulders and looked pleadingly into his face.

"Don't force me to go back to that barren rock!" he cried. "I implore you to give me a passage to the mainland! I'm sick to death of the loneliness and isolation. I want to live and to work. Take me away! Take me with you—to Liverpool, where I can have duties to do, and work—work!"

"But," objected Mart, "haven't you got work and duties on St. Kilda? What will the children do without a schoolmaster?"

"The minister will teach them until another takes my place," Mr. Macrae pleaded. "But I can endure it no longer. See!" He put his hand in his pocket and drew out some of the guineas that had fallen to his share in the dividing of the treasure. "I have money. I can pay my way in the world. Oh, take me—take me with you!"

By this time the yacht was under weigh and there was little time to spare if the schoolmaster was to be put back on shore. "Stop here a few minutes, then," said Martin, "while I go and speak with my friends about it," and he left the schoolmaster in the state-room while he went up on deck.

The yacht was already out of the bay, going full speed ahead. He found his father, Frank, and Joe on the bridge excitedly watching the gambols of a school of whales two or three miles away on the weather side. He told his father about Mr. Macrae, and asked his advice.

"Let him stop where he is, poor chap," decided Mr. Venner. "I don't wonder at him being bored to death in a place like St. Kilda. Let us take him with us to Liverpool. A man like him, with ambition and the wish to work, would be invaluable in a Liverpool office."

This arrangement was precisely what Mr. Macrae desired. He had a natural gift for commerce, as the firm of Venner, Kershaw, & Co. discovered when they engaged his services. Indeed, they owed much of their prosperity to his remarkable business instincts.

The success of their enterprise was not gained by any sudden leap, but by hard, uphill work and patient effort. Beginning modestly as shipbrokers, the young partners in the concern gradually established for themselves a reputation for honesty and integrity, and by degrees they extended their trade until they could

afford to purchase ships of their own. By the time that Martin and Frank were twenty-one, they had so expanded their sphere of action that they were able to build two steamers for the combined cargo and passenger traffic. The first of these steamers was the *St. Kilda*, Captain William Gregson, and her sister ship was the *Albatross*, Captain Peter Kershaw. They were the forerunners of the famous St. Kilda Line.

There had been hesitation on the part of Martin Venner and Frank Kershaw as to the colour which their ships should be painted. People said that green was unlucky. But both Frank and Martin had set their hearts on green, in remembrance of the old barque which had brought them all their good luck, and so, against all the advice of their friends, they determined to defy superstition and to adopt green as a distinguishing colour for their hulls and funnels.

In the after years Venner's green painted ships were well known upon the seas, and the young partners in the firm were highly honoured for their business uprightness and enterprise.

One afternoon, not very long ago, Joe Parry had occasion to go out by the tender to one of the steamers lying in the Mersey. It was the *Albatross*, the steamer of which Frank Kershaw's father was the captain, and she was on the point of starting on a voyage across the Atlantic, having on board a large number of emigrants and other steerage passengers.

Joe went forward into the steerage with the purser to inspect the accommodation provided for the

passengers there. Among the people who were busy arranging their baggage and discussing the position of their sleeping berths, one man in particular attracted his attention.

"What is the name of that old fellow over there with the white head?" he asked the purser. "Let me have a look at the passenger list. I think I know him."

He glanced quickly down the list of names, and shook his head.

"His name is Smith," the purser told him.

"Indeed!" smiled Joe. "Just call him to you, will you. I want to speak to him."

The purser beckoned Mr. Smith to his side, and the little old man approached. His clothes were very shabby, his eyes were dim behind his steel-rimmed spectacles, he tottered in his walk. Joe was sure now that he recognised him.

"Let me see, what is your name?" he questioned, again referring to the passenger list.

The little old man answered—

"Smith, sir, John Smith."

"Oh! Smith, eh?" nodded Joe. "Very well, Mr. Smith, I hope you will have a pleasant voyage. May I ask why you decided to go to America by this particular line, and this particular ship?"

"It's as good as any other, I suppose," the passenger responded.

"I hope so," Joe agreed. "But—well, you know the name of the owners, I presume?"

The old man shrugged his shoulders.

"I know it's the St. Kilda Line," he said. "That's enough for me. It's no business of mine who the owners may be, so long as they take me across safely and give me plenty of good food."

"Venner & Co. always look well after the welfare of their passengers," Joe remarked.

"*Venner!*" The old man's face went suddenly white; his lips twitched. "Is *that* the name of the owners?" he gasped.

Joe drew him aside to a quiet corner.

"How does it happen that you are at liberty so soon, Mr. Crosby?" he asked. "I thought your sentence was ten years."

Adam Crosby drew a deep breath that was like a groan.

"So it was," he answered. "But they let me out at the end of nine, because of good conduct. But who are you, sir—you that seem to know me?"

Joe told him, and also informed him of the progress and success of the firm.

"Ah!" sighed Adam Crosby. "And I might have had a share of all that if—if it hadn't been for Griggs. What became of Griggs, sir?" he asked abruptly. "Did he get off with imprisonment? I never saw him where I've been all these years."

"No," Joe told him. "Griggs didn't get off. Neither did Jansen, or, indeed, any of them. The whole six of them were hanged."

"How awful!" groaned the old man, and he sank

back against a pile of luggage and buried his face in his hands.

The ship's bell rang. Captain Kershaw and the pilot were on the bridge.

Joe Parry took out his pocket-book and drew out from it a banknote, which he slipped between Adam Crosby's fingers.

"When I was an errand-boy, delivering newspapers at your office, you once gave me a Christmas box," he said. "I give it you back, with interest."

The old man's fingers closed upon the note, and he looked up in gratitude.

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