

AMAZON
ISLAND

HAROLD
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AMAZON ISLAND

By
HAROLD MERCER

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CHAPTER I

THE IMPOSSIBLE ISLAND

"GREAT Caesar's ghost! The people in that canoe are women!"

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Charters made his characteristic exclamation with an excited roar, passing on the glasses he had used to Halpin, as he did to those of us who had not come on deck provided with binoculars. Before they came to me, the simmer of excitement into which the curiosity of our group had risen had swollen; and the skipper, lowering the telescope he had himself been using, smiled with a touch of irony.

"Didn't I tell you?" he demanded, quizzically.

"Yes; but——" It was hard to say who spoke. The existence of Amazon Island had been doubted by most of us. The appearance of the land itself had been an actual surprise, and what we saw through our glasses was a confirmation for the fanciful story we had been told but did not quite believe.

"The skipper has allowed himself to be gulled for once," scoffed Saunders. "This Amazon Island is impossible."

We on the *Seaflower* were a team of gentlemen adventurers. When, nearly three years before, the smart yacht had appeared in Sydney harbour and reports of the activities proposed by its captain-owner



had received publicity, Captain Darnell had been rushed with applications from eager adventurers anxious to become members of the crew. Those of us who were selected, with a careful discrimination, esteemed ourselves lucky; I was particularly lucky myself, since I would have had no chance but for the assistance of my friend, young Professor Charters, who was one of those chosen early.

Captain Darnell's scheme, about which the papers had received merely such information as he desired, was for the exploration and exploitation of waste spaces. It was a search for mineral and other wealth, boring river bottoms, and making, where there were indications to justify it, explorations into the hinterland. An early success came to us in a practically untouched part of New Guinea. There we gathered easily an astonishing quantity of free gold; but it was then that Captain Darnell revealed that, as he had told us, the *Seaflower* was only one part of his organization. Concessions were at once secured and work started; a recently wild location commenced to become a hive of industry. We found ourselves shareholders in a Development Company which had sprung into being directly Darnell had supplied the reports of his experts and his specimens to the financial interests with which he was in touch, our reward being, besides shares, a substantial cash consideration. We handed over our work to the Development Company and its engineers; the *Seaflower* passed to fresh adventure.

Sometimes there had been disappointment; death made a slight toll of our members; but the upshot had been wealth for all of us and an exalted confidence in our leaders.

We had a pride in our vessel too. The *Seaflower*

was a schooner-yacht of 350 tons, fitted with powerful auxiliary motors. Intended for a German royalty and on the eve of completion when the war started, it had been seized for war purposes and specially fitted for that, although the elaboration of the internal details had been allowed to remain. After the war, a curious admixture of floating palace and arsenal, it had become superfluous for ordinary trade, but was an ideal craft for the purposes Captain Darnell had in view when he purchased it. Whenever it appeared the smart little vessel, which lost nothing of its smartness under the skipper's control, was a subject of admiration, and all ship-lovers envied the men who were fortunate enough to belong to its crew.

Darnell in making his selection had seen that the crew was one of experts who could meet any contingency that might arise. Only my reputation for bushcraft had justified my own inclusion in that remarkable combination. We shared the work of the yacht in the ordinary course: a doctor and an artist between them provided the excellent meals that astonished visitors; a metallurgist helped to keep the brass-work in a condition of polish.

The small sum that had made each of us a shareholder in the enterprise had brought us, besides interesting adventures, financial results beyond all expectations. But that in itself had produced an element of disaffection in the ship's company. There were those who felt that, having money at their command, they would like to get to the business of spending it without further adventure, for even adventure such as ours, interesting as it was, becomes monotonous. There was a feeling of disappointment, in which I, with a definite reason for desiring to return

to Brisbane, shared, when, lying in Port Moresby, we commenced to take in fresh stores. That was an indication that, instead of the return to Australia for which we had hoped, the skipper, as we called Darnell, intended to hold us to the full term of our three years' contract. It was a somewhat rigorous agreement Darnell had made us sign before we were admitted as shareholders, and one of its clauses made Darnell's leadership absolute. He was not one to reveal his plans until they were definite; and there was an undercurrent of grumbling as we waited at Port Moresby wondering what further employment was in store for us.

It was while we were waiting that the missionary came aboard—a spare, weary man, in clothes worn shabby, and with definite signs of malaria upon him.

"I'm looking for Captain Darnell," he said, gazing uncertainly about him; and then he saw the skipper, and guessing immediately that he was the man he was seeking strode over to him.

"You are the captain, are you not?" he demanded.

"My name's Darnell."

"I have heard a lot about you, Captain Darnell," said the missionary. "Your name's a household word, so to speak, in the islands now, with the adventures of the *Seaflower*. I thought you seemed to be the very man who would be interested in what I have to tell you. It's the story of a poor fellow who died a few weeks ago. Actually he asked me to see you. It's a rather fantastic story."

"There are a lot of fantastic stories in the islands," smiled the skipper.

"But this is——. Can I speak to you privately?" asked the missionary.

Darnell led him to his cabin; and although it was a long time before they reappeared we had no idea that the missionary's coming was the start of a new adventure, even when they said farewell at the top of the ship's gangway.

But Darnell turned from his farewell to give the crisp, incisive orders to which we had become accustomed. The *Seaflower* was for the sea again, and, although there was no word of explanation to us, we realized that a plan for a new exploit had formed itself swiftly in the skipper's mind. Whatever lingering hopes had been entertained that the skipper, finding no work to attract him, would make an eleventh-hour resolve to return to Australia was at an end.

Yet we sprang to work with an accustomed alacrity. For my own part, in spite of a disappointment rather heavy in my heart, I was intrigued by wonder at the cause for the swift departure. In a very brief space the *Seaflower* was rising to the swell of the seas.

It was not until those of the company not engaged on the watch were seated at dinner that we obtained any satisfaction for the curiosity that had been simmering amongst us.

"What's our destination this time, skipper?" asked Charters suddenly.

"Amazon Island," said the skipper evenly, intent on his dinner.

The brief reply created a silence. The name was new to us.

"Sounds good," said Saunders, with a laugh. "Island of women, eh?"

"According to accounts, an island where women rule the roost," said the skipper.

"That's no different to any other place—*island or continent,*" remarked Halpin.

The skipper smiled.

"We'll find it a very different place, I think," he said. "Unless I'm mistaken, we are about to enter upon one of the strangest and possibly the most dangerous of our adventures."

"But where is the island? Is it on the map?" asked Saunders, who had risen and had been studying a map framed at the end of the saloon.

"Maybe not," said the skipper. "There were old dots of land the old explorers failed to name; some perhaps they failed to see; many they never visited. Stranger things have happened to us than finding islands right off the track that vessels take in their normal course."

"If the island exists——"

The skipper sharply checked Saunders in his sneer.

"If the island doesn't exist, a queerer thing will have to be explained. In the very midst of that part of ocean towards which we are making I picked up a castaway. That was the first hint I had of the existence of the island. He said he had come from the island. The finding of that man had become an almost forgotten memory with me until the missionary came on board this morning at the port. What the missionary said revived my memory and I looked up old notes.

"I'll tell you now what I know of the place: I was in charge of the old tramp *The Iron Hand*, having shipped at San Francisco to fill the place of the first mate who had died, and I was too hard-up just then to worry about the sinister reputation of the old tub. It lived up to it. The captain, who looked as hard

as nails and fit to last another fifty years, when I first met him, was dead the second day out from port, from some disease that, since there was no medical man on board, I don't know the name of; yet, that's one of the experiences which makes me like to have a proper doctor aboard; and, then, we struck a gale that drove us from hell to Kingdom-Come before it was done. When it was through, we were badly battered and the second mate was gone. I had a mixed crew which was not much to look at and worse to smell. We were well out of our course and having difficulties with ocean currents that were liable to twist me in queer problems on my reckoning—that's one of the reasons why the island may not have been found—when I was brought on deck with the news that a derelict boat had been sighted. Finding an island itself would have been no more surprising than seeing that boat there, chopping about on the small waves like a cork and obviously uncontrolled, with a leg-o'-mutton sail tied to an improvised mast. Just as I got my glass upon it, I saw someone was in the boat; there was a movement in it and something that looked like a human face was lifted for a moment above the gunwale, but dropped back again.

“It didn't take long to get the poor beggar on board, in spite of the useless swine I had for a crew; a horrible wreck he looked, with his face cracked and sore with the salt and the sun, and his lips swollen up, and parched and cracking too. He was unconscious when we lifted him on board; but as we laid him in a bunk and moistened his face and lips with water he put a sudden grip on my arm that frightened me. ‘Ye're men? Ye're men?’ he whispered hoarsely—we could hardly catch the words but the terror forcing out what

voice he had was manifest. "Thank Gawd! Keep me from them hell-cats, mister! Keep me from them hell-cats!" And then he swooned right off again.

"It was little of sense you could get from the raving he gave us when his voice came back a bit, as it did, though his strength didn't; but you could get the sense of his raving when you had pieced some of the calmer sense together. It was difficult dragging anything from him in spite of all my anxiety to get the strength of him before he passed out—it was whetted by curiosity roused by the bits of what he said that were understandable. You'd get him talking calmly for a weak word or two, and then he would start calling out in real terror about hell-cats and viragoes, torture and murder. It was like piecing together a picture puzzle; and the piecing may have been wrong in places; but, roughly, it was right. It would have been roughly in any case, for Jeffries was a crude sailor and didn't know much. That was his name for certain.

"What I made of it all was that Jeffries had joined up with some treasure-seeking expedition, easier times than knocking about in the usual trade and the prospect of a special divvy in the event of success, being the attraction. It was no use even trying to get any details of the voyage from Jeffries; he knew no more than the man in the moon—just did his work as a sailorman and didn't worry about anything else. Evidently the expedition reached the spot it was after—the place I call Amazon Island."

"A treasure, too!" jeered Saunders. "Why not Treasure Island?"

The interruption irritated the skipper.

"We've found a few treasures, I think," he re-

sponded shortly. "It's not treasure we're after in any case; I want to find out about——"

"Oh, shut up, Saunders!" commanded Charters. "Go ahead, skipper."

"Jeffries didn't see much of the island at first; he was left aboard. Seemingly there was no idea of any danger to the ship when the shore parties left; but one night Jeffries was awakened by a hullabaloo and found himself seized and a prisoner. He knew that the predominant inhabitants of the island were women; and it was these women who took and bound him—a task, since Jeffries looked like a big fellow if he was in condition. The island women took him and the rest of the crew ashore—what was left of them, for, apparently, some had been killed in the scuffle.

"What Jeffries said about the subsequent happenings was a mass of incoherence; that incoherence mentioned gold and jewels, and women who ruled the coast and people he talked about as 'workers'—slaves, I fancy. Jeffries himself was a close prisoner some time; but no straight tale could be got of what happened to him afterwards. He was flogged certainly; tortured and probably stabbed; the marks were on his body; but he seems to have been in favour with some of the island women, at least for a period. Apparently wholesale murders occurred, strange deaths, horrors about which he could only rave. Anyway, he and two other men, one an officer of the ship whom he was prepared to follow blindly, made up their minds to escape. There was pursuit; the other men were retaken or killed. Jeffries fell among some rocks, evidently thought to be dead; with darkness approaching he revived, but remained still; then when darkness fell, he made his way to the boat they had hidden in

preparation, and so escaped. He had some provisions and water, but they were spoilt next day in a storm. His sufferings after that must have been awful; from what I could judge he had half-drifted and half-sailed for ten days when I found him.

"Vague as the details are of what happened, a fearsome horror must have prompted such a desperate voyage—the man who planned it was not the ignorant sailor Jeffries was, and it must have been because there was something worse than death to face in remaining that he decided upon the reckless alternative. And it's difficult for me to express to you the horror and terror of Jeffries's ravings during the four days before he died."

"He died?" queried Halpin.

"Even if we had skilled medical treatment to give him, he had no chance; when I remember his mangled, festered body on which all the old sores had opened up with malnutrition, I wonder he lived so long—it showed his toughness."

"Whatever the ladies of Amazon Island happen to be," remarked Charters, "they appear to be anything but gentlemen."

The skipper looked around grimly.

"They are not. I saw Jeffries!" he said grimly. "Gentlemen, a visit to an Amazon Island may appear to be something of an amorous adventure; but I want to say this: it may be as strenuous an adventure as any we have met. You have all been loyal to our initial agreement that I am leader. Remember, I am leader still."

CHAPTER II

HOW WE CAME THERE

THE skipper looked at each one of us again before reaching for the whisky-decanter and refilling his glass. And Saunders laughed.

"It's a queer tale," he said. "But here's luck to our adventure with the Amazons. I hope they're pretty."

"I don't see," I said, a little resentfully, for I was still sore with disappointment, "why you should remember this island after forgetting it for so long."

"That's where the missionary at Port Moresby comes in," returned the skipper. "He brought me some papers that reminded me of Jeffries and corroborated his story. Jeffries had the idea that the men with whom the escape was planned failed to get away. He was partly wrong. They had built two boats and placed them in different spots; if they failed to reach one, the idea was that they might succeed in reaching the other. A man named Hunter reached the other boat, and thinking, like Jeffries, that the others had been caught, put out to sea. He, more fortunate than Jeffries, was picked up by a tramp whilst still not too far gone to live. Hunter was dumped at his own request at Noumea and drifted around until he finally settled down on one of the islands. He learnt to become an oyster as far as his experiences on Amazon

Island were concerned, for he found that the stories about it that circulated, when he first arrived, brought adventurers anxious to get him to join them in expeditions to the island. He was terrified at the mere idea of returning to it, and considered that to supply information would only send men to destruction. The strength of that feeling made him a recluse, suspicious of all white men who came near him, lest they should be pumping him. He became almost forgotten in time. When he was dying, however, that missionary, Matthews, dropping in on him, found him anxious to speak, to see if something could be done for his shipmates left on Amazon Island. He felt that, in his terror of the island, his attitude towards them had been that of a deserter, and, later in the day, remorse came to him.

“It was about this that Matthews came to see me at Port Moresby. There were some papers with details that reminded me of all that Jeffries had spoken about incoherently. And the details gave a new queer turn to the whole thing, because the third man concerned in that attempt to escape—the man who did not get away—had been a chum of mine ever since we were at school together—even before; and until we went our various ways on the sea.

“There was a tradition in his family of a buccaneer ancestor who had adventured with Dampier; but he had broken away over some quarrel. He had left a tale about an island where the buccaneers had established a stronghold and planted a great treasure. I presume there had been some attempts to search for this storehouse, but they had gone astray; Thorold and I, as youngsters, used to plan together about making a search. This came back to me when Jeffries men-

tioned Thorold's name—it gave me a kind of clue. It was perfectly feasible that the tradition in Thorold's family should have prompted the voyage."

"So you think there may be a treasure?" said Saunders, a little scornfully.

The skipper smiled.

"If there's an island there's also a treasure," he said, as he rose to go on deck. "Although I said we didn't need any more, that's one reason why we should have a look for the place, isn't it? That, and curiosity."

"I bet it's neither treasure nor mere curiosity that makes the skipper anxious to find the island," whispered Charters to me, as we two made our way to take a turn on deck under a star-strewn sky before turning in. He didn't say more, because Halpin joined us just then.

The cry that land was in sight had come to us at breakfast, with the shock of realization that our discount of the skipper's tale was too severe. One by one we deserted the meal and hastened on deck.

The land, which might have been a smudge of opal-grey cloud on the horizon, expanded as we approached; opening out into a definite and enticing line of coast; and while, facing us, it rose sheerly from the water in a manner that made it look imposing, although its height was probably not great, there showed on each side an indication of small islands with palms, strangely dwarfed beside this mass of sheer cliff. The enticement that is in all strange coasts was doubly felt as we watched the panorama develop, with, shortly, the line of high coast falling away from its length on our starboard, and a low palm-studded island, rich in vivid colours, unwinding to port.

We were going at a low speed with the small waves gurgling and sighing about our keel as the vessel cut through them; the sunlight danced deep down in the clear water. It was altogether a lovely picture, painted in royal colours; and no less a picture must the *Sea-flower* have appeared to those eyes that watched us—for we saw, here and there, moving dots against the green-blue background of the cliff that told us of other human beings with as great an excitement as our own.

The canoe that had first excited our interest had shot from behind a small toe of land that, jutting down into the sea, marked definitely the change from the sheer cliffs that had greeted our approach. "A sawn-off mountain-top," Halpin had commented. "It must have been some curious volcanic action that sheered off half the mountain like that." Even with the slight swell on the waters they beat on this low point in a white surf. As we progressed the higher land fell away, and over the ridge of this small headland we could see the placid green waters of a bay surrounded by slopes rising in tree-decked galleries. With its rich colours it was a sight to please the eyes of a painter; but we were far more concerned about the human occupants than the land itself that was opening up before us. We could see moving forms in open spaces on the little headland, and on a small, golden beach that edged it as it left the shore. My own glasses—hurried dashes to cabins had armed each man with his binoculars—sweeping this alluring little sea nook, had brought the figures upon it startlingly close to me.

They were women, all of them, that came into my view, women whose beautifully-moulded forms showed a bronzed liveness in every movement, and whose

faces were lit with curiosity and expectancy. But what startled me even more than the absence of the heaviness of features expected in the island races, was to find that the forms were seldom more than bronzed; at times there was a positive indication of skin that, although suntanned, was fair, and hair of a blonde colouring. Right into the focus of my sweeping glasses came the splendid figure of one such naiad, standing statuesque on a huge rock. As if she felt my gaze she dived suddenly, cleaving the water in a perfect fashion, to reappear and continue her gaze at the *Seaflower*, whilst she trod water.

Amidst our wondering ejaculations at these sights, our main curiosity was for the canoe ahead of us. Having rowed swiftly into our sight, it had remained motionless, as if acting for us as a steering mark. The canoe itself was a matter of interest. It went far beyond the crudeness of the best canoes we had seen elsewhere; beyond the tall ornamental prows at each end, the sides glinted with what Saunders said, as was found rightly, was a decorative inlay of pearl-shell. It was a large craft of its kind; only the heads and shoulders of the rowers sitting forward with their paddles tilted out of the water could be seen; but between them, standing, and grouped towards the other end of the boat, were figures each with a long spear held upright and with other weapons in their hands; these figures were those of splendid, firm-breasted women who wore nothing but what seemed to be ornaments, some of them possibly a protection for vulnerable parts of the body against weapons, and some to carry portion of their arms. Standing upon what seemed like a small poop at the stern, however, was the most spectacular figure of them all.

The poop served to lend additional command to a form that was magnificent in itself. Her hair showed a glint of redness—a rich auburn evidently—and it was hung about with ornaments that glistened in the sunlight, as indeed was her whole body. This was covered in part with something of a gauzy texture, intended probably more as additional ornament than covering; for the breasts were showing and there was no hamper upon the magnificent limbs. She made a royal figure as she stood still, gazing with an expression that was haughty, yet eager, at our approach.

“If we could capture that Juno,” laughed Charters, “we could float her into another gold-mine. If those are really jewels she is wearing they are worth a fortune.”

“If they are real!” assented Saunders. “By the Lord, she’s a fine woman!”

The skipper had set a man in the bows to wave flags in token of friendship; the signal was evidently accepted, for arms waved back to us. The canoe made way before us as the *Seaflower*, wheeling gracefully, swept round the point and into the bay we had noted from the other side; a wide stretch of water, which, besides forming a perfect harbour made more secure from storms by the large island, apparently of coral formation, that stretched fully across the entrance about a mile away, presented a new beauty as we entered. The sound of a chanted singing reached us as our engines eased still further.

“The sirens!” remarked the skipper, grimly. “I feel like another Ulysses, who has gone wrong. I want all you men to remember the story I told you—the story of men who preferred to face the certainty of death in trying to get away from this place to the

horror of staying. We've found the Amazon Island and we are going to investigate, but we have to be careful."

"There hasn't been a sign of hostility from them; they seem friendly enough," said Saunders.

"Sometimes a tiger looks friendly enough in its enclosure," said Halpin, succinctly. "Only a fool would want to enter it."

"Wind-up?" cried Charters.

"Honestly, it's the one I like least of all of our adventures. I've had experience with women; they're all tigeresses at heart—savage and cruel. And what can a man do against a woman?"

"Kill them, like other savages, if they prove dangerous," said the skipper, incisively. "I want all you men who haven't got your automatics with you to get them at once. I'm having the gangway lowered; I'm going to invite her ladyship on board!"

CHAPTER III

ELIENA

IN our spick and span white outfits, braided with gold, we made a pretty presentable guard of honour, standing on both sides of the entrance from the gangway as that bronze-bodied queen came on board. The occupants of the canoe had hesitated not a moment when, as the gangway was lowered, the skipper signalled his invitation, the energy of his efforts to make himself understood causing us to laugh.

Saunders was given the task of going down to receive the boat, but the agile islanders needed no assistance from him. Four spearwomen, splendidly naked but for, here and there, pieces of pearl-shell armour held in place by fibre chains, and as splendidly unashamed, arrived first, but stood still when they reached the deck and made an opening through which came the regal woman we had seen at the canoe's stern.

"Enter, the leading soprano," whispered Charters to me. The description was good; the proceedings were very reminiscent of a much more than usually undressed comic opera.

On close view, however, the leading soprano rather awed us. She was, indeed, regal in appearance, standing as tall as any of us and with a suggestion

of enormous strength in her whole frame; the jewels that hung about her head and on her body, quivering with every movement, were real, seemingly; their sparkle was remarkable. The diaphanous, silky scarf that was draped about her revealed, but softened, the beauty of her body. An ancient sword, jewel-studded, hung by her side in a scabbard suspended by a chain that appeared to be of medieval workmanship, and was of burnished silver; and also at her waist hung a jewelled dagger. Beside the jewels some flower-blossoms were sprinkled in her hair. She presented a strange mixture of feminine vanity and a strength which seemed unfeminine; yet in spite of this incongruity was awe-inspiring.

She glanced a moment about her, as she stepped on board, and then advanced direct to where Darnell waited to meet her, extending her two hands as she neared him, which he grasped. Instantly she withdrew her hands and placed them on her breast. "Eliena," she said.

"Eliena?" The skipper imitated her action. "Darnell," he said; and she repeated "Darabella?"

"That's a civilized action—that double hand-shake," commented Charters in a whisper. "She probably inherited it from the same source that the sword and dagger came from."

Eliena half-turned sharply at the whisper and saw Charters, his kindly eyes smiling at her through his glasses. He was the only one amongst us who wore them, and they may have given her an idea of his importance, for she smiled at him, and her hands went out to him, too, before once more patting her breast as she said "Eliena." He replied in what seemed to

be the approved fashion, and she repeated after him, "Charaterees?"

The deadlock that might have existed through our inability to understand the island women's language, and their ignorance of ours, was overcome. The skipper had gifts ready to present; noting the real quality of the ornaments she wore I was glad, personally, that they were not the beads with which we delighted the hearts of some savages, but silver cups; and at the clapping of her hands a couple of attendants came with baskets laden with island fruit which they placed at her feet in a humble fashion before retreating hurriedly. She gestured that these were a present to our chief.

It was the appearance of these attendants that gave us probably the greatest surprise, and certainly the biggest shock, of the morning. They were not women; they were certainly not men. In the general moulding of their figures their appearance leaned to the masculine side; but their breasts were as those of a girl not yet of maturity.

There was little short of the eager delight and curiosity of other island people at the wonders our yacht afforded as we showed them around. The showing was limited to a small group, for Eliena evidently had no mind to share the honour of the inspection with her attendants. Three women whose ornaments to some measure vied with her own, who had followed her on board, but whose appearance had been shadowed by her own, went with her, after one of them had conveyed a curt order to the spearwomen to remain where they were—that was apparently the effect of the order, although we could not understand it. Darnell, taking no risks, had whis-

pered a command that they were to be secretly guarded whilst the guard pretended merely to amuse them or to be busy upon the work of the ship.

We knew, of course, that Darnell had in his mind that story of the castaway he had rescued, of the unguarded ship that had been taken unawares by these very Amazons; but we did not regard the danger very seriously as we showed these simple savages the wonders of our nautical civilization. The women were so unconscious of their almost complete nudity that we also ceased to notice it too; and it certainly created no embarrassment such as we might have imagined under the circumstances. As always with the naive curiosity of unsophisticated islanders, the childlike interest of these women was enjoyable, and in showing them in dumb-show the uses of various things we found a medium of conversation.

It was specially amusing to us, as typical of the feminine mind even when it had changed its environment, to notice that their greatest delight was in what to us were the trivial things—the knickknacks with which each of us had decorated our cabins, the snowy whiteness and softness of our bunks, and so on; and Eliena was almost moved from the haughty reserve she evidently thought was necessary to her dignity by a mirror which so attracted her that the skipper signed that it was another present. As she had done with the silver cups—which the skipper informed us in an aside, he had hastily substituted for the beads originally intended, when he realized how banal such gifts might be—she put the burden of carrying her gift on her followers.

Eliena had a keen interest in our quick-firer, which was usually kept concealed in a harmless-looking

turret, Darnell remarking grimly aside that it would be just as well to show our visitors our teeth; and as he had the gun prepared for action, he made signs indicating a tree on a distant point, after his glasses had assured him that there were no human beings in the vicinity of that target. He showed the savage chieftainess how to look through the glasses herself; and when Barker, our gunnery expert, fired, she saw the tree shiver in pieces as the shell burst upon its trunk.

Katahine, one of the women with Eliena, shrank back, terrified at the discharge and its consequences; but Eliena was delighted, and by signs and excited words in her own tongue demanded another exhibition; which Barker, grinning with pleasure at the opportunity of showing his skill, prepared to give. Barker had risen from being a mere boy in the navy to rank as its smartest gunnery lieutenant before bankruptcy, brought upon by the expensiveness of his life, had caused him to sell out; and he loved that gun as a child. His second shot was as effective as the first. The skipper frowned on Eliena's further demands, the more so as she pointed to a canoe floating in the bay, with two occupants, as a possible target. He diverted her attention by showing her the working of the binoculars, finishing in giving her a new delight by indicating that they too were a gift to her.

The inspection had taken some time; and the luncheon-gong, reverberating through the ship, was a new wonder to be inspected—and, it was obvious, coveted. As a result of this introduction to the saloon, with lunch waiting, the island women were shortly seated at our table, curious and almost alarmed about the chairs they sat in, equally curious but somewhat

doubtful about our food, until they tasted it. It was a queer experience sitting down to eat with these bronzed, naked women; but the meal became hilarious and friendly as we initiated them into the uses of forks and spoons, and they, with many mistakes, used them. I state it as a fact, although heaven knows where our visitors concealed them, that our cutlery was considerably short when they had gone, according to the subsequent complaint of Wickham, the steward—who incidentally was a barrister before his enlistment with us, but could be found no place on board in any other capacity.

It was during the merriment, whilst Charters was showing Eliena on the one side and Katahine on the other the uses of the cruet, and from that had turned, to their delight, to explaining the mystery of a tin-opener and a tin of salmon—supplies of which had been brought out to enable the spearwomen on the deck to share the feast—Halpin spoke suddenly from lower down the table. He had hitherto been merely an observer of all that passed, with a look of abstraction on his face.

“I think I’ve worked it out, skipper,” he cried. “The language has a base of English in it.”

“I’ve been waiting for you, Halpie,” said the skipper. “I thought you wouldn’t be long. English, you think?”

“Certain. But probably the English of the people it came from wouldn’t be understood too clearly by us to-day; and it’s been mixed or influenced by some native tongue. I got my cue from the names; I reckoned out that Eliena was probably Eleanor, Maharari, Mary, and Katahine, Katherine. Working on that basis, I’ve planned out a question or so.” He waved a paper marked with pencil notes.

"Ask them something, for heaven's sake," said the skipper, indicating the curiosity of the island women, who had looked up at the sound of their names.

"Eliena," began Halpin; and slowly, like a child repeating a difficult lesson, he reeled out a string of sounds in which there was a distinct resemblance to the language used by the women and in which there were the distinct forms of English words too, now we were prepared to look for them.

The women looked surprised; and at the same time puzzled. Katahine essayed to speak, but a sharp, angry command from Eliena stopped her; and Eliena herself spoke, quickly, eagerly. Halpin made notes, scribbling for all he was worth. Looking over, I could see he was making a shorthand record of the sounds that reached him; and when the island woman ceased he pored over his paper, calculating and weighing.

It was some little time before he spoke again in the strange language, like a man feeling his way, but growing more confident.

We who were anxious to find a means of talking to these strange islanders listened, wrapt with interest, but impatiently, to the exchanges. In a way, the conversation seemed more awkward and difficult than that we had carried on by mere signs. It might, however, carry us further.

"Well?" asked Darnell suddenly, unable to wait longer.

"I've got it, skipper! I'm right! I asked first if she was Chief Woman of this island. She isn't. The Chief Woman, I think, is her mother; but she is a sort of princess, if not the only one. Her mother sent her to welcome us to the island and to bring you to her."

"Tell her we'll pay the old girl a call," said the skipper. "Assure her we're friends; we came by accident; and we'll go away soon, but we'd just like a look round. And you might let her know that we've got guns like the one we showed her that could blow the whole island to pieces if there's any funny business."

"You're making it hard, skipper," said Halpin, with a grin. He resumed his laborious conversation, still using his paper to pencil out the form of his own words and to work out the answers he received.

"She says," he said, breaking off suddenly, "that she wants you to go to-day. The chieftainess, it appears, is touchy and would regard it as a slight if you did not see her at once. She was told to take you back with her. If it was only yourself, she would like you to go."

The skipper rose from his chair sharply.

"All right—we'll go," he said. "But—on terms."

CHAPTER IV

THE WAYS OF THE ISLAND

A DARK look crossed Eliena's face as the terms were, in the same laborious style of interpretation, explained to her; a look that caused me to make a mental comment that she would not be a nice lady to meet with her temper in full blast.

The skipper's terms were, briefly hostages. Two of Eliena's immediate attendants and six of her spearwomen were to remain on board as surety for our safety. The four of us who were going to the shore would travel in the canoe that had been sent for us; but our motor boat, which was already out and waiting, was to follow with an armed crew to pick us up if necessary; we were to be back safely before sundown.

Eliena's anger was probably appeased very much by an extra gift of several tins of salmon and a tin-opener—gifts that, I believe, she considered of higher value than all else she had received that day. As was her custom, she handed the tinned fish to her attendants to carry, but she found a method of fastening the opener near her sword. There were to be exciting times on Amazon Island as she showed the princesses of the royal blood how to open cans, and she only was to be allowed to do it.

The islanders went down to their canoe first; we lingered whilst the skipper gave some sharp orders to Buler, the sailing-master, who always held the ship's charge when Darnell was ashore; the main charge was in respect to keeping a strong and alert guard.

I was assailed by a sort of repugnance upon entering the canoe, which was larger than I had imagined it. The repugnance was awakened when I looked at the rowers, waiting with their paddles in their hands; they were of the same sexless type that I had noticed in the attendants who had brought baskets of fruit to the deck. I shuddered at the sight of them, as I would at anything unnatural; and in a mass—there were a score of them in the boat—they looked so dull-faced and dead that the sense of aversion was increased. I was so pre-occupied by my reflections upon this, that the sensation in the canoe had passed before I realized what was happening; and yet, really, I saw everything.

Eliena had elected that Katahine should return with her, the others of her special attendants remaining as the hostages. Charters was the last to enter the canoe; and certainly Charters had made an impression with these island belles. I have mentioned how Eliena on her arrival gave him special greeting, and how in the saloon he entertained both her and Katahine. Charters was a handsome fellow, anyway, with a sunny, friendly nature that was reflected in his smile; but I think in this case the novelty of his glasses had given his personal charms enhancement. It was perfectly natural as Charters leaped aboard for Katahine, with a smile that showed lovely teeth, to make a place for him beside her.

But the revealed envy of Eliena as she saw this

action was like the snarl of a tigress; and swift as a tigress's spring was the way that jewelled dagger leapt from its sheath and plunged towards the suddenly cringing girl. Amazed as he was, Charters saw the steel coming, and, seizing the bronzed wrist, twisted it aside. I could see that Charters, who was a strong man, had all he could do to hold that vengeful arm.

Suddenly he realized that the necessity for his intercession had passed. The girl, for whom we probably all felt more sympathy than for the others, because she was paler of skin and therefore seemed more akin to us, had uttered a cry of horror and leaped overboard.

Charters uttered a cry, too, and turned to look at the girl as she rose from the water and, with a lithe, confident stroke, swam shoreward. There had been the fins of sharks in these waters, noted as we arrived.

Eliena stood aloof and haughty, again like some superb though over-ornamented statue, upon her little poop; but shortly she spoke to Halpin.

"She wants me to ask you not to be angry," said Halpin, after puzzling over her words. "She says that no harm will come to Katahine."

"This is the sort of vicious swine we have to deal with," remarked the skipper. "Treacherous, passionate and sudden. We need to watch our steps."

We had the satisfaction as we made our way towards the shore of seeing Katahine reach the nearest beach; and we admired the quick fashion in which she had covered the distance. Even the dull-faced rowers must have been interested, for the pace of the canoe, really considerable under the propulsion of the

twenty paddles, increased. We were able to give attention to the shore we were approaching. On a beautiful strip of creamy beach, what seemed to be sports were being held, for there were racing figures and cries of encouragement; but as we came nearer the games were abandoned and those who had been in them moved towards the part of the beach for which we were making. In the water, standing knee-deep, were sundry figures hard at work upon some nets; but these bore a resemblance to the same sexless creatures who were rowing our canoe; those who had been concerned in the sports were apparently all women.

We could see what appeared to be a stretch of flat, cultivated land running into a hollow of the galleried hill-sides; but no sign of human habitation was visible to us from the canoe.

The rowers skilfully ran our craft against a spit or jetty built of stones; and as the spearwomen leapt out we followed their example. As we landed those on shore swarmed around us; seemingly all of those who were near to us were women, lithe and beautiful of figure and handsome of feature; but they were held back by the spearwomen. In the background the strange, sexless creatures looked on curiously, apparently timid of approaching too near; and shortly we noticed some men too. They were few in number and compared very unfavourably to the fine athletic women who were all about us, for they were flabby and frequently obese. They were clothed also, if not amply, to a far greater extent than the women, in a native cloth which had some gaudy patterns.

When we were all ashore, with the spearwomen from the canoe, there was a pause in our progress.

"You two will stay here," said the skipper, addressing Charters and myself. "I need Halpin to talk for me; but with you here and the launch offshore there is a chain between us and the ship. You'll have to use your judgment, but keep your eyes open and your hand on your revolvers. See that you are not taken unawares. There's not likely to be any trouble to-day, but if we don't come back before nightfall—that is, if there's no message from us—you'll have to take it for granted we're prisoners and act accordingly, but not without support from the ship."

Eliena, listening intently, made a sharp inquiry of Halpin, and he laboriously explained the arrangements the skipper had made. She was puzzled to catch his meaning, which he pointed, however, by gestures; and then, rather than raising any objection, she seemed relieved. She gave some sharp orders herself, but as the party was about to move off she caught Halpin by the arm to detain him, and then seized Charters's two hands in hers, talking rapidly and with passion. She paused for Halpin to interpret her words, and when he stared blankly repeated what she had been saying more slowly.

"Hanged if I can catch it all, old man," said Halpin. "What I can make of it is that you've made a hit. She is going to see you again. She's glad her mother is not going to see you because she wants you for herself."

I had to grin at the scarlet face of Charters; Eliena's gesture and attitude were expressive, if her speech was strange. She looked backward at him as she led the way just in advance of the skipper and Halpin. Most of the crowd that had assembled at our landing streamed after the party as it made its way along the

path that wound steeply upward through the trees. Only two spearwomen remained a little way off. Charters was so obviously relieved that I laughed aloud.

"You've made a hit with that dusky beauty, Bob!" I cried. "She claims you as her own. But they must be a queer lot of beasts here when she's frightened lest her mother should get a view of you."

"This place seems like a fantastic dream," muttered Charters.

"It's horrible to me," I said.

Charters laughed boyishly.

"Afraid of your loyalty for Evelyn being tested in this garden of fair—and bold—women?" he scoffed.

"Don't be a fool! These savages!" I said resentfully, nettled. But actually I expect I felt, thinking of Evelyn and the sweetly feminine girl she was, that it was something of disloyalty to be merely in the proximity of these bold woman savages. The flame of my love for her had fallen upon me like a young knighthood; I wanted to keep it clean in every way.

It had been a rapid affair. There had been the night in Brisbane when the *Seaflower*, thrown open for visitors for the benefit of a charity—it was a showboat and its adventurous purpose had created curiosity—had been crowded; a smile had flashed out at me as a girl asked some question about the vessel. Eagerly I had acted as showman, feeling a thrill never before experienced, to such an extent as then, in the privilege. I had learnt the location of her home, and so great was the restlessness that had come to me after she had gone, I had stolen there in defiance of the express regulations of our ship's companionship, and, when I found a welcome, more than once.

It was while we were moving down to the bay on our way to sea again and I was gazing at the shore towards where she lived, with a heart full of turbulence at the thought that I was leaving the only girl I felt I wanted to love, without telling her so, that I became aware of a sensation on board and I was called peremptorily.

The skipper was talking with severity to what looked like a youth, dressed in our uniform but certainly not one of us. A little group surrounded them, but when I got near I saw who it was.

"Evelyn!" I cried amazed.

"You knew nothing of this, Briggs?" said the skipper sharply.

"No, he knew nothing, captain," said Evelyn quickly. She had told me how greatly she would like to be one of the company of the *Seaflower*, but I had laughed at the wish as a girlish whim. I had no idea that she would have a uniform made to resemble ours and smuggle herself on board. Now she was discovered, the courage that had carried her so far had failed her. She was in tears and she moved towards me, the one she knew best on board, instinctively. I too moved forward to stand beside her.

"I knew nothing of this, Skip," I said, "but I'm afraid I've broken my agreement. I've fallen in love."

The skipper smiled grimly.

"The lady will have to go ashore. You can take her in the launch; we will be hove-to for your own return," he said severely.

I felt that it was the end of my association with the *Seaflower*, but the pressure of the skipper's arm on my shoulder a moment later and his whisper, "Come back, son!" reassured me. It warmed my heart to

him and killed an incipient determination to stay ashore.

Considering that she had been thwarted in her plan, Evelyn seemed strangely tranquil. In the launch cabin she leaned close to me directly we took our seats.

"I don't mind having failed; I'm satisfied now I know it's all right between us," she said.

The situation was an amazing and delightful one to me. I had been too timid to speak on such a sudden acquaintance of the feelings she had created in me; going away I had felt a madness of despair at the idea that, not knowing of them, she could forget me when I had gone. When I came back it might be to find her married. I had found the courage, a sort of desperation, to say to the skipper what I had not dared to say to her.

And my saying it had bridged a gulf I might have been fearful to cross in other circumstances.

"I love you, Evelyn," I said. "I was afraid to tell you, but I was mad at the thought of leaving you, without having done so. We will be back in Brisbane again—and if you will wait——"

"Silly boy! Of course I will wait," she said. "It was just a whim my wanting to go on the *Seaflower*; then I felt I wanted to be near you, so that you could not forget me after you had gone. Now I know you won't; and I am happy even if I have to stay behind."

I was in ecstasy, if it was an ecstasy full of the pain of parting. There was just that, the knowledge of the love between us, the swift kiss when I put her ashore, the wireless messages occasionally between us, and the hopes of the future. The prettiest woman on Amazon Island could be nothing to me. Before me

I had the sweetness of Evelyn's face, its smile bent upon me; and I only felt disgust for these brazen savages.

When I got back to the ship it was to learn that Charters had knocked Saunders down because of an offensive remark he had made concerning Evelyn's escapade. The young professor, my friend before we were thrown together on the *Seaflower*, was like that. In his eternal good nature it was impossible to imagine him having a quarrel on his own account, but he was swift in the defence of a friendship or of a woman. Everybody's friend, although my own especially, he was an intellectual giant with the heart of a boy; a man whose powers, intellectual and physical, were hidden under an easiness that might seem softness until it was tested.

Saunders himself was not a bad fellow, although he pervaded a materialistic grossness that offended my youthful idealism. It was not any fear of conflict, for he was a first-rate amateur boxer, but his manliness that caused him to come to myself and Charters with outstretched hand.

"I want you to know there is no ill-feeling. I got what I deserved," he said; and added with a laugh, "We don't all of us get it so suddenly, thank God!"

Shortly after my return to the ship the skipper had sent for me.

"You've broken your agreement. No feminine entanglements," he said brusquely, still bent over his desk as I entered.

My heart sank. One or two of our company had passed out of it because of liaisons formed with women against those express rules.

But the skipper wheeled suddenly upon me, and his face was kindly.

"It's all right, Briggs. The affair is honest—honest as you are; and you're one of the men I rely on most. It might be an asset. Who knows? Anyway we've started our voyage and that's going to be my excuse for overlooking your lapse, my young giant."

His kindness gave me a new ground for loyalty to our skipper, that queer mixture of aesthete and boon companion, religiose and buccaneer, who had organized our adventures and displayed a leadership and vision that inspired the respect of even those who were inclined to grumble at his habit of secretiveness regarding his plans. There was about the tanned face and the crisply trimmed beard an aspect of alertness and efficiency that gave him command in spite of a short stature. And now I had occasion to know afresh the kindness that was in him.

I was disturbed from the reverie into which the recollection of Evelyn had led me to notice that some of those who had followed the procession had come back forming little groups, standing and sitting, to stare at and apparently discuss us. It was an embarrassing situation, waiting there to be stared at, and unpleasantness was added to the embarrassment when a group of the men also returned. Their regard of us was plainly malevolent, and as plainly some of the things they said were spiteful. Of that we were aware even before the guardswomen approached them and with angry words and threatening spears drove them a little farther away where, however, their offensive hostility was no less evident.

"Pleasant creatures," I commented. "They'd like

to deal with us, apparently, if they could. But the men don't seem to be the lords of creation here."

"It's natural, I suppose. We're strangers and these Amazon women are making a fuss of us. You've seen the same thing amongst the local men in Sydney when the girls go mad over the sailors of a visiting fleet," said Charters.

We both hoped that the skipper would quickly return, but our hope was in no way gratified. Under the embarrassment of our situation we found it difficult to keep up a conversation, although the strangeness of our surroundings and the beauty of the scenes around us should have provided substantial themes.

"There's going to be a thunder-storm; we'll be well drenched if the skipper does not return shortly," said Charters.

I had noticed the queer change in the day. The bright sunniness of the morning had been displaced by a heavy, brooding atmosphere.

"Queer thing, there are no clouds," I said.

"It is a queer atmosphere; something like a dust film in the air. And look at those waves beginning to run in, with no wind behind them. I remember seeing something like this when I was in the New Hebrides on a holiday."

"Start of one of those hurricanes?" I suggested.

"No—earthquake," he said. "There was a heavy atmosphere like this for nearly a week, and then the earthquake came. It was a great experience—when one was out of it."

"That's interesting," I said. "It would be a nice thing if this island shook from under us."

"Hardly any fear of that. This place would be on the line of seismic disturbance, and it was probably

thrust up by some upheaval—or some of it was torn down by one; but it's hardly likely a special catastrophe is going to be staged to celebrate our arrival. It—Hullo!"

He shut up suddenly. Following the direction of his eyes, I saw the cause. Seated on the grass some distance away was Katahine, that same lovely nymph who had escaped the blow of Eliena's dagger by her leap overboard.

Her head drooped shyly as she saw us looking towards her; but Charters, glad to see her safe, smiled, and a smile lighted her face. She rose and approached but paused to sit down again some distance off.

"Good Lord, don't let us look at her again!" said Charters. "These women are embarrassing."

"They seem to want to embarrass you more than me," I grinned.

But I followed him in looking ahead, down into the waters of the bay, where our launch was rocking on the oily swell that had arisen. Our pre-occupation was unavailing, for Katahine, approaching a few paces at a time and then pausing shyly, was not long before she had reached us and had thrown herself on the ground at Charters's feet. She put her hand out shyly and touched the gold lace on his white sleeve.

There was something so childishly timorous and appealing about her that Charters could not forbear to smile down upon her; and shortly he was showing her his watch, his pocket-knife and other trifles that filled her with delight to handle. Her boldness had encouraged others to approach and they shared in the delight of these inspections.

"I'm glad a shark didn't get you, Miss Savage," said Charters.

She smiled her pleasure at him, sensing kindness in his tone, and replied in words which of course we could not understand. There followed a sort of game. Patterning our speech on Halpin's, we drew out our words, giving them queer inflections and additions; she did the same. We each tried to get the meaning of the other's words, with occasionally a glimpse of triumph that was not quite certain.

The few faint suggestions of success made the game absorbing. It was disturbed when the alarm came to us, somehow, which caused us to turn to see a troop of spearwomen coming down the path up which our friends with their escort had disappeared. We sprang to our feet defensively as they approached and Katahine stood up also.

In a few minutes it was plain that whatever danger was in this approach was for the island girl. Within a few yards, the leader of the spearwomen spoke sharply; Katahine, to whom the words were addressed, shrank back.

The spearwomen advanced upon her and Charters, hand on his revolver, made a movement to bar their way.

A lump jumped into my throat when I realized that Charters might by an impulsive action precipitate us into trouble.

CHAPTER V

THE GENTLE AMAZONS

EVEN as my hand went out with a restraining clutch on the arm of Charters, Katahine stepped in front of him and gently pushed him back as two of the spearwomen put hands on her arms. The action was obviously a request for him to take no action; but she looked gratefully at him as she was led away by the guard of Amazons. She turned back shortly and waved to us reassuringly.

"I wonder what is going to happen to her?" mused Charters.

"Nothing much," I said reassuringly. "She is of some importance obviously."

"That tigress Eliena tried to stab her," he said.

"What I'm more concerned about is why the skipper hasn't returned," I retorted.

There was a just cause. Sunset was now upon us and there was no sign of our companions. Ominous thoughts about what had happened to them assailed me suddenly.

Darkness was closing in quickly.

"We'll give them another five minutes," said Charters anxiously. "If they don't come we'll signal the launch and get a party ashore strong enough to go and look for them."

But at that moment the skipper and Halpin came in sight, with the same escort of spearwomen that had taken them up the hill. Eliena came straight to Charters and in spite of his reluctance took his hands again.

"Tell her," said the skipper, brusquely, to Halpin, "that he doesn't stay. He'll come ashore to-morrow, but he goes on board to-night."

As we tumbled into the launch amid farewelling shouts from the shore he explained:

"You had the honour of a special invitation to remain ashore to-night. I refused it on your behalf."

"That other girl Katahine," said Charters, "the one who swam ashore. She came over to us and was talking when a party came down and apparently made a prisoner of her——"

"We saw her brought in. She's safe. Kiteene—that's the queen—and Eliena did not seem to have the same views over that young woman's fate, but Kiteene's word goes."

The curiosity of ourselves and those left on board the *Seaflower* about the skipper's adventures was satisfied that night when we listened with rapt attention to the skipper's account of his experiences ashore. Halpin was present for a time only.

"I've got to get down to this language business," he said. "There's a general basis of English in the tongue these people speak, coupled by an alliance to the native speech which makes it unrecognizable. It is the intrusion of definitely native words that creates the main difficulty; and there is a sprinkling of Spanish too, but I can make out a general plan which will

enable us all to understand and speak to these people. That's what I propose to do."

"Get to it then," said the skipper, and then turning to us he said: "It is the language that helped us to a solution of the mystery of the island. The legends the women have are vague and to a great extent mythical; but knowing about the language base helps to prove assumptions we have made. In the old days of the buccaneers, apparently some of them discovered this island and made it their headquarters. From there they could make raids upon the coasts of America or upon the prize-ships of the East Indies. Either these buccaneers wiped out the men of the race they found on the island or they pirated women from other places and brought them here. It is quite possible that white women taken with some of the prizes were amongst the ancestors of the present inhabitants.

"The men, finding life easy, lapsed into sloth and probably drunkenness. There are no doubt plants on the island from which liquor can be brewed apart from the supplies they could have obtained from their prizes. The women were given the work to do, and to keep them fit for it liquor was banned as far as they were concerned. The women, inheriting the enterprise and ability of their white ancestors and kept healthy by activity, became the superiors to the men who were debauched by idleness and liquor; and the superiority of their sex became marked as generation succeeded generation. Finally—it may have been a gradual process, it probably was—the active women took control from the enervated men. They turned the tables completely. Most likely they found the men a nuisance, or they discovered that men who were put to work, and so developed energy and initiative,

did not tamely submit to the position to which they were relegated. So at some time or another the idea developed of creating a number of emasculated males to do the hard work of the community."

"The working eunuchs!" cried Nolan.

"That's it! Only a few of the best male children are allowed to grow to manhood to be the lovers and play-things of these Amazons—and to carry on the race. They are more horrible from what I have seen of them than the spiritless workers themselves—these drones. Obese, flabby and useless, like the over-fed lap-dogs of some women. Their very existence is only at the whim of the women. The Amazons in fact despise them, and apparently they have taken the opportunity to help themselves to new husbands when vessels have blundered or stumbled upon this island. Apparently this has happened more than once, and the vessels have been sunk to keep them from escaping. There you have an explanation for the island remaining out of general knowledge—that and its position far off the usual routes. It is in that light—as potential husbands—that the Amazons have regarded our coming here."

"They are fine-looking women," said Saunders, a twitch in his heavy lips.

"Don't be a damn fool!" said the skipper sharply. "To be the men to these Amazon women is one of the most terrible fates that can be imagined. Their supremacy has not removed the jealousy of women; it has accentuated their worst faults. This place—you can feel it—is a hotbed of envy and spitefulness and callous cruelty. Any weakness towards these women, any failure to keep our guard, and we may find the *Seaflower* scuttled and ourselves condemned

to imprisonment on this island. I have already ordered an armed guard on the launch, and its business is to patrol round and round the yacht to keep any canoes at a distance. I am taking no chances."

A grim grin spread upon the skipper's face.

"In spite of the difficulty we had in keeping up a conversation through Halpin, the queen made me a proposition which you may think flattering, but that seems horrible. If we are prepared to make a stay on the island the Amazons are ready to make a great sacrifice for us."

The skipper looked around impressively.

"They are nice women these Amazons! If we will fill the vacant places they are going to make a general slaughter of all these men on the island!"

CHAPTER VI

QUEEN KITEENE

WHEN the skipper and Halpin left Charters and myself upon the shore, the bends of the road, mounting rapidly and giving vistas of the bay and of the hills behind of devastating loneliness, brought them ultimately to a village in a high flat set in a couch of hills. Although the walls of the houses or huts were of palm-thatch neatly bound, the place had an appearance more distinguished than that of native villages generally; it was trimly kept and the squalor in usual native villages was absent. Indeed on all sides the dull-looking workers were busy, tending small gardens with which many of the huts were surrounded, cleaning away dried and unsightly patches, and weaving fanciful patterns in fresh leaves on the exteriors. One of the workers happened to pause, looking up in interest at the procession as it passed; in an instant a heavy woman of middle-age descended upon him and the stout stick she carried fell with a crack upon his head. With blood streaming down the side of his face, the worker picked himself up and with the docility of a dog resumed his work.

As the procession entered the inner part of the village a group of those same obese men who had given Charters and myself such annoyance, arose from their

lounging positions, and one of them spat on the ground as if in disgust. With a flashing eye Eliena turned to one of her attendants, a woman with as mighty muscles as herself; answering an abrupt command this woman stepped out of the ranks, and striding to the man planted a crushing blow in his face. Eliena hurried the procession forward, but glancing back the white men saw the smitten man, nursing his face, standing between two spearwomen as if under arrest, whilst a woman who evidently claimed a propriety interest in him railed a protest. Incidents such as these conveyed an impression of the overbearing rule of the women who controlled the destinies of this curious island community.

The strangers were amazed at the magnitude of the central structure into which they were led. It stood like a mammoth in the village centre, and although the material was still palm-thatch it was covered in the centre by a domed roof. A feature of it was the regular windows with interior curtains of gaudy native cloth; these windows, which appeared also in some of the other huts, were one of the marks of distinction of the architecture of the village.

The big entrance was approached by steps that apparently consisted of hardened clay, the surface of which had been polished to a glassy brilliance. The floor of the interior was similar; what was apparently coloured gravel or coral pressed into the clay in regular patterns, ground into evenness and also polished, produced an effect of rare beauty. It was curious to see in a native building not only such a floor but the many ornaments and decorations bedecking the central hall into which the visitors were ushered. There were hangings of native tapestries

on the walls, forms and stools here and there, elaborately if crudely carved, and everywhere were decorations of flowers. The hall might have been the boudoir of some civilized woman of bizarre tastes; an essential feminine taste was shown in the multitude of gewgaws and knickknacks scattered everywhere.

Here, seated on a raised floor, a sort of dais, on a lounge stool of exceptionally elaborate carving, they met the woman who was the queen of this community—Kiteene. Halpin opined that the name was the native corruption of "Kitty;" it was a travesty of the name, for the queen was a huge woman. In her the Junoesque beauty of Eliena was amplified grotesquely; her arms and legs were monstrous and her huge breast and body, although strapped into some form by ornamented trappings, bulged everywhere over them. She was a woman who refused to be old, and apparently some sort of dye had been used which turned hair that had once been black and might have been grey into a dark and horrible redness in which there was an absurd decking of flowers. Her mouth was heavy and cruel, her eyes pouchy.

"I never saw a woman look quite as horrible," said the skipper, "and yet there is power in every line of her—monster strength I should say—and a look of command about her."

She advanced to meet the skipper and giving him the same two-handed greeting that Eliena had extended drew him to a seat before what was apparently her throne. To Halpin her greeting was less cordial, but for him also a seat was found on the dais and a bench was placed there, on which were set baskets of fruits which by gestures they were invited to eat whilst Kiteene turned to Eliena for a report.

Whilst Eliena gave it, the two white men, nibbling at the fruit, watched Kiteene's face, and Halpin listening keenly to what was said occasionally whispered an interpretation to the skipper when he guessed at the passage. Eliena's gestures alone were sufficient to indicate how she told of the wonders of the *Seaflower* and the power of the weapons she carried, and frequently a tigress rage showed in the face of the Amazon queen, notably when Eliena seemed to be telling her of the precautions the skipper had made for his safety when he went ashore. The skipper assured us that there were times when the ferocity of the face almost inclined him to make a bolt from this place.

But Eliena at the end of her account, in a sharp-toned exchange between the two women, seemed to warn her that the company of the *Seaflower* was beyond the domination of force. Her manner was ingratiating as she turned to Darnell, surprised at finding in Halpin an intermediary for their conversation.

Although the exchange of words was difficult, Halpin, his skill improving with practice, made a good job of the interpretation of quite difficult passages. It was a matter of curious questions expressed with great labour and with great labour understood and answered; and Darnell gave the explanation of ourselves that we were sea-wanderers who sighting a new land had been curious to see it and were anxious to investigate it, whilst Halpin, putting the questions he framed, was able—with a great deal he failed to interpret—to gain for Darnell some information about the history of the island and the Amazon supremacy.

Early in the conversation Eliena had attempted to seat herself near the skipper, apparently for no other

reason than her interest in what Halpin interpreted; but with the same tigerish fury that Eliena had shown towards Katahine, Kiteene turned upon her, lashing her with a foam of words; and sullenly the princess left the chamber.

Shortly after this the skipper found the ponderous hand of Kiteene falling on to his sleeve or his hand, stroking them. The massive paw made the skipper's hand look small. Darnell took an opportunity to push back his stool in order to be out of reach, and a black look swept her face as she saw the action. But it passed. The queen was trying to be agreeable.

She was eager to make friendship and invited Darnell to bring his company ashore and to see all her dominions. In a matter-of-fact way she made the proposition that her people would be glad to welcome the strangers as husbands and would be willing to destroy all the men on the island. Through Halpin Darnell made it plain to her that the *Seaflower's* company were birds of passage, tied to wives in other lands and bound by religion not to look upon other women. There was a queer smile on her heavy lips as she listened, "as if she was saying," declared Darnell, "that whatever I said we would stay on the island, and eventually she would find a way of ensuring that."

Halpin, a keen anthropologist, was stirred to excitement and still lingered with us. A smallish, square man, who on first sight might have been taken for a prosperous suburban grocer, he seemed on most occasions to be totally lacking in emotion, yet was capable of being moved to almost childish excitement at what he regarded as a scientific discovery, even if it seemed to us to be trivial. In ordinary adventure he showed

no special courage; when a scientific objective was to be gained there was about him an indifference to all danger that was superb—an absorption in the interest of his pursuit that put aside every other consideration.

Already he had been concerned with many observations of native customs that had interested the world. His delight at the association of his name in press-reports with these discoveries being something that always amused us; now his excitement was naturally intense. We had come upon a system of society with a feminist supremacy, produced by special circumstances, apparently eclipsing anything of the kind hitherto known in the world's history.

Whilst the skipper gave us the main story, showing anxiety in impressing upon our company the perils of Amazon Island, there was a running fire of commentary from Halpin explaining the scientific view. The islanders had apparently reverted to the matriarchal system, which was common enough, if not general, at the dawn of human civilization, and has left its impress on the peoples of all the earth. In these matriarchies the children hold rank from the mother. In Fiji, until British rule produced different ideas, the father was not even reckoned as a relative of the child; amongst the Bechuanas the chieftainship passes to the brother, not to the son; with Tuareg Berbers the child takes its rank from its mother; and in Senegal, Loango, the Congo and Guinea rights of inheritance are only recognized through the mother.

Halpin told us, while the skipper with a smile on his face paused to let him have his say, that the insistence upon the chastity of women in the modern social systems of the world was an outcome of the growth of family life by which the matriarchies were

superseded, in which it was necessary, to ensure the paternal authority, that there should be certitude about the parentage of the children. There are curious survivals of an indifference to that principle of feminine chastity, as we know it, in various parts of the world. Amongst the Mongolians, for instance, the perfect host giving due honour to a guest, regards it as essential to yield to him his place in his wife's bed; and in Thibet the woman who marries possesses as many husbands as there are brothers in the family of the man she weds.

Yet the matriarchy, whilst it gave power and freedom to women, taken away by its supercession, by no means meant authority. Halpin gave us, too, an outline of the history of communities in which the feminine authority was supreme. Although the Amazons of the Greeks, living in Pontus near the Euxene, have been treated as mythological, Herodotos and Strabos had both given them serious historical place. The number of towns, including Smyrna and Ephesus, which claim their origin from these same Amazons, gives evidence that there was some basis of fact behind all the Greek fiction about them. Halpin told us of the Amazonian rebellion in Bohemia in the eighth century when the women insurgents under Viasta in an attempt to establish a feminine state made war upon the duke and put to death all men who fell into their hands.

The Amazon River received its name from the tribes of fighting women who were met on its banks; and Halpin told us too of the Amazonian villages in New Guinea. The inhabitants are probably the survivors of inter-village wars that have wiped out all the men in a community, the women who escaped to the bush deciding to carry on by themselves, emancipated from

the thralldom of the male masters for whom they had to work. These women, according to report, to perpetuate their communities, make captives of men, breaking their legs to prevent their escape, even as the Amazons were legended to visit the neighbouring Gargarians so that their race might be continued. As in the case of the ancient Amazons, who sent back the male children, as they neared the age of puberty, to their fathers, the New Guinea Amazons drive out the young males, if they do not destroy them.

Halpin's text was that Amazon communities wherever they had existed were marked by a cruel ferocity. Greek tradition was full of the fierceness of the Amazons; adventures which meant encountering them were tasks for the Heroes and a favourite subject for the friezes in which Greek sculptors delighted. In the same way the New Guinea natives have a terror that is almost superstition of approaching the Amazon villages.

"The ferocity might be the growth from the determination to resist the domination of man, which existed all around them," said Halpin, "but even in our civilization women in spite of a convention of gentleness have a cruel streak, a delight in the enjoyment of power by the infliction of pain when it is possible. They are full of angry jealousies and revengeful retaliations. Remove the convention of gentleness which the desire for the esteem of man forces them to——"

"How about that wrestle with the language problem you promised yourself?" inquired the skipper, dryly.

It was at this stage that Halpin left; and the skipper continued his account of their encounter with the queen without interruption.

The laboured conversation with the Amazon queen naturally took much time; it had lasted for hours when there was a disturbance. Eliena appeared again, at the head of a band of spearwomen, and held by two of them was Katahine, frightened, but attempting to face the queen courageously. There was fury in Eliena's tones and gestures as, the queen turning toward her, she spoke; and shortly the queen spoke to Halpin.

"She wants to know who Charateres is," explained Halpin.

"Charters? Well, tell her."

A look of guilt came into Eliena's face as if she feared Halpin might reveal something of the preference she had shown for Charters. Of course Halpin merely said he was one of our party. Explaining that alone was difficult enough in any case, but from the malice in the queen's eyes as she stared at her daughter she guessed at some ruffled feeling on her part and gloated over it.

"They're mother and daughter, but they hate one another cordially, that's evident," said the skipper. "They glared at one another, spite and envy between them in every inch of their attitude; and to our relief Katahine seemed safe. I believe the old bounder was kind to her just to spite her daughter, who was furious—perhaps also as a gesture to us, who showed we were interested. It pleased us; she being so much whiter-skinned I expect roused our sympathy."

"Charters and I felt that way," I put in. "Beyond that she seems less aggressive, shyer and more sensitive than the others. There's a difference."

The skipper nodded.

"Well, we left them, telling the queen, who wanted

to give us quarters for the night, that we would come again with more of our company."

"And we're going?" asked Saunders eagerly.

The skipper looked at him queerly.

"We're going certainly, but it's to be under strong precautions. Some of us—in turns, all of us. The yacht however is going to be strongly guarded, and those who go ashore strong and on guard too. The man I catch carrying on with one of these Amazons, I'll shoot, myself. We're in a den of tigresses here—these women are treacherous and ferocious—and I'm not going to have the safety of the party imperilled by any one man."

"Why stay at all?" said Saunders with a sneer. "There's nothing to be gained, is there?"

"There are several reasons," said the skipper. "We're not going to run away from one of the queerest spots in the world without investigating it. That's one. Another is that there is probably buccaneer's treasure here and these islanders would have no idea of its value. We are pickers-up of treasure and there is no reason why we should not——"

"Steal it," said Nolan.

"There should be no reason to steal it. We can give these islanders many things they will value more in exchange. A tin of salmon," the skipper added with a grin, "might buy a priceless ruby. Those are two reasons anyway. But I regard our adventure as a perilous one."

At that moment there was a sound of cries and the discharge of firearms beside the ship, and from amongst us there was a swift rush towards the deck.

CHAPTER VII

INTO THE TRAP

WHEN I reached the deck Captain Darnell had already spoken to one of the men on guard, quickly, and from the rail hailed the launch cruising alongside. The light from the yacht beat upon it as Barker, by his machine-gun, stood up and replied.

"There's been several canoes out," he called. "It seemed merely curiosity and they went away quickly enough when I showed them they must keep off. A while ago two of them came together and it took a little time to urge them to go. I didn't think much of that until the sentry up there called and signalled me to get round the other side. We got round at the bow, and when I spotted a canoe round close to the yacht and saw by something about it that it was one I had turned back a little while ago I saw a trick had been played. I gave them a little burst of fire, playing around them to scare 'em. The boys here fired a couple of shots too, and they went off like greased lightning."

Darnell looked inquiringly at Downes, the guard.

"I called Barker," he explained. "I didn't like to shoot."

"Why not?"

"They're women."

"Cut that out," said the skipper sharply. "Sentiments like that may find us with the *Seaflower* lost—without the means to escape from this island; prisoners for life. It's not the end I'm looking for! These Amazons seem friendly, but I figure them as full of treachery. Their harridan queen was warned that we didn't want any hangers-on around the yacht; and I'll let her know to-morrow what has happened and that there'll be real shooting if our wishes are not observed. We're going to take every precaution."

As proof of his words our searchlight, which the skipper had not thought necessary to swing into action hitherto, began to play on the waters around the boat and occasionally on the island. No doubt surprised eyes looked out upon the glaring beacons as they swung around. Grown blasé to the effect of these, to them magical, displays of light upon the inhabitants of savage shores, I was more interested in a thickness in the air revealed by the swinging rays. It was as if there was some sort of fog hanging about: as there was no feeling of dampness it must be a fog of dust. The stars were dim, almost imperceptible. The rays showed also a strange oily swell on the water, on which the *Seaflower* rose and fell.

"That curious atmosphere seems to last," I said to Charters.

"Ye-es," he said abstractedly.

"He's fallen in love with one of the Amazons he saw this afternoon," chaffed Talbot.

"I know the one, too," I said, banteringly. "She's a magnificent specimen, with arms like a feminine gladiator, and she has fallen so badly to charms that are surmounted by four eyes that she stabs at anyone else who looks at them."

"Shut up, you ass!" said Charters. "I was, as a matter of fact, wondering about that girl Katahine. She seems a good deal different to these other island women; there's something so different about her that makes her almost pathetic—living in the circumstances of these islands."

His soft voice savoured of a sentimentality that in a small way alarmed me.

"She's a native," I said quickly. "Young—it's merely that that explains the shyness. When she gets out of her girlhood, she'll be just like the other island women."

"It seems a pity," he said reflectively.

There was the same curious, leaden atmosphere we had remarked on the previous afternoon when a large party of us went ashore next day. The sun shone through, but it was with a strange yellow light, and the view was misted.

The skipper took with him besides the indispensable Halpin, and Charters and myself, who had been with him the day before, Doc Morrison, Harkness, Thomas, Andrews, Talbot and Pryce. The ever-cheerful Doc the skipper regarded as essential to a party going into a strange adventure in which there might be wounds requiring attention; on the ship, where ordinarily his medical skill was very slightly in demand, he was an exponent of what he declared was a more useful and artistic profession. On the *Seaflower* all, with the exception of the skipper, Buler and Skuthorpe, whose task was the command of the vessel, shared the work, and Doc's place was definitely, by artistic merit, in the cook's galley. Doc was besides a splendid athlete; the skipper may also have had some idea of

sports on the island in including Andrews, a huge, amiable chap who obeyed orders implicitly, and but for his size would have been hardly noticeable in any company by reason of his quietness. Talbot was a younger man than myself, still a schoolboy in his eager curiosity about life, but too clean and honest to be a likely victim to the blandishments of the island women. Harkness was a seasoned soldier of wars both international and matrimonial, a useful, dark-visaged man with a hatred of women born of unsuccessful matrimony and a great deal of it. Thomas, our surveyor when work of that description was needed, was a natural member of the party to observe the landmarks; and Pryce, whose ordinary civil occupation was as a botanist, was so keen about his work that, although capable of taking his share in any activity required, he was hardly remembered as one of the company when there were plants to be observed.

It was early evident that this was to be gala day on the island. It was hardly daylight before there were canoes, gaily decorated with strips of coloured native cloth and green bushes, circling the yacht; the canoes themselves had vivid patterns worked in some coloured materials. The occupants, women and girls invariably, except when in the larger ones there were the sexless rowers, wore flowers in their hair and, in some cases, were garlanded with flowers, which, apart from some gaudy and glittering ornaments, were easily the greater part of their covering. In several of the craft there were musicians with instruments of reeds and others resembling tom-toms; the music they produced had a sort of droning harmony. To fall in with the spirit the islanders showed, the skipper had the *Seaflower* decked with bunting.

When we did go ashore, the skipper and half a dozen of us in the same large canoe which had first brought Eliena, and with that majestic savage again in charge, the rest in our own launch, our progress was through a water-lane edged by the canoes, from which shouts of greeting were poured upon us; and the canoes made a procession behind us as we passed.

In contrast to all these signs of joyful friendliness, the skipper's preparations for the trip ashore were grim. We all had to carry our automatics and sharp sheath-knives hidden under our tunics, and there were rifles amongst us too. Grim also was the skipper's voice as he gave his orders: that the company was to keep together and to resist the blandishments of the Amazons to draw them apart. As stern was his order to Lieutenant Buler that no visitors were to be allowed on the vessel and the authority given him to suppress with the utmost severity any attempt to defy this order by any of the crew. "To the extent of shooting the culprit," said the skipper in a voice lifted for all to hear.

No doubt the sternness was necessary, for many of those who had to remain on the yacht were in a state of lively dissatisfaction, showing a rebellion to the skipper's authority such as had never been in evidence at any time of our travels. They included all the men who, like Saunders, the skipper would not trust with the shore party.

These circumstances caused me to be filled with ominous thoughts. I fully appreciated the skipper's fears of the treachery of these islanders; it was obvious from what we knew of them that they hoped for some means of destroying the yacht and so making us prisoners of the island. Thoughts of Evelyn made

me specially concerned about the possibility. That the skipper in spite of my attachment had made no effort to induce me to resign, I regarded as one of the compliments for which my heart thanked him. He knew that that attachment would create no weakness in my service with his adventurous company.

I felt an almost fierce sense of knighthood. I regretted that we had ever entered upon this adventure. There was foreboding in my heart that our means of getting away from the island might be cut off, and the brazen sexuality of the Amazon women, with thoughts of Evelyn in my mind, was absolutely disturbing to me.

The queen Kiteene herself was at the landing to greet us. She had once been a magnificent woman but was now an obese caricature, all the more so since she evidently considered that she was still impellingly handsome. She was obviously posed to welcome us, with her gilded or golden-headed and pearl-studded long spear upright in her hand in an attitude she no doubt considered displayed her regal majesty. She was hung with gaudy ornaments and her height had regality about it; but there was gross indecency about her, from her grotesquely reddened hair to her monstrous limbs.

Immediately behind her were several women, a couple older than herself, but most of them lithe, beautifully proportioned, and young. Amongst them I saw Katahine, who gave a look of pleased but shy, half-frightened recognition as Charters smiled towards her—an attitude contrasting with the bold stares of the other women. Behind were two ranks of statuesque spearwomen.

It was a picturesque scene and our reception was

made ceremonious. Waiting until Eliena had led the skipper to within a few paces, Kiteene suddenly relaxed her pose and advanced to meet him. I verily believe she intended the greeting to be a kiss, but the skipper adroitly avoided it by taking her massive hand and, with the bow of a courtier, lifting it to his lips. The queen was nonplussed but obviously pleased.

Halpin, standing at the skipper's elbow, showed an increasing ease in interpreting the speech of welcome which Kiteene made to all of us, turning individually to each of the party with a questioning pause, to which Halpin gave an answer by giving our names, repeated by her with the queer interpretation her tongue dictated. Then I heard myself addressed for the first time as "Beriggis."

Later the queen, having with regal gestures named the Amazons around her for our understanding, wished the skipper to take a seat with her in a sort of sedan chair, panoplied with gaudy native tapestry, by which the sexless bearers were standing patiently. A frown of annoyance swept the queen's face as he drew back, and Halpin explained for him that he wished to march with his men. The queen's plan had been evidently for us to pair off in company with the island beauties; instead we went ahead in fours, following the rank of spearwomen and the sedan of Kiteene, around which her attendants walked; more spearwomen and those who were not officially in the function falling in behind. A group of children, all girls, flower-decked, danced ahead waving boughs of blossoms and sheaves of flowers.

We who had not seen it were struck with the wonder of the village, quite a considerable place, so much superior to the habitations of most of the native

peoples we had seen. There was a distinct feminine touch about the elaborate and impermanent ornamentation that was everywhere. An enormous amount of work must have been involved in maintaining the freshness of these, but we soon understood that the labour of it was done, under direction, by the sexless workers who we now saw everywhere, working still although it was a gala day. Some of these workers who were employed on light tasks were mere children. Others were old, and yet all of them, although devoted to a life of drudgery, seemed contented enough. The extinction of their sex instincts had apparently removed from them all impulses of discontent.

Quite otherwise appeared the men who, now we had arrived in the village, began to appear in the crowds about us. Apparently they did no work and they were not participants in the active sports which moulded the figures of the Amazons. Even the young men amongst them seemed inclined to flabbiness and obesity, and their looks towards us were always full of spitefulness and ill-feeling. It was rather absurd to see them, dressed as they were, seeing the freedom the Amazons allowed to their own bodies. From the sharp words the queen spoke as her eyes fell upon one man who was considerably less clothed than his fellows, we judged that the exposure of the body in a man was regarded as a gross indecency which offended the conventional spirit of Kiteene!

With great curiosity in our eyes we were shown the chief points of interest in the village, and when we were in the hall or throne-room of which the skipper had informed us, Darnell got those of us who had carried sundry packages with us to unroll them

before the queen. They contained soft coloured silks and Chinese shawls of exquisite colour and design.

The exclamations of delight that came from the queen and her attendants as they felt the delightful softness of these materials and their rapture at learning that these were presents for them were remarkable. Excitedly Kiteene issued orders to two of her older attendants, who departed, and then she spoke to Halpin in a torrent of words he completely failed to grasp.

"She is very pleased with the presents," Halpin interpreted when, seeing his difficulty, she spoke with more restraint, "and she means to show you that she is not to be outdone in gifts. She would like to know what it is that would please you most."

"Ask her," said the skipper, "if she has to spare any of those coins or the gold on that sash she wears."

I had not noticed this individually before, but now I saw that the sash-like ornament she wore was studded with what seemed to be ancient coins and small polished nuggets of gold. It must have been of great value. As Halpin spoke the queen sent Katahine after the other women with a curt order.

When she and they came back, carrying with them what was apparently a casket of Eastern workmanship of ancient days, it was to us that excitement came. For when the lid of the casket was opened, while the queen indicated that this was her return present, we saw that it was filled with glittering golden discs.

"Old Spanish coins!" exclaimed the skipper; even he was moved with excitement. "Tell her, Halpin, that we have large quantities of those silks, and that if she is ready to make an exchange we will be glad to accept coins like these."

Here was another instance of the skipper's prescience: the quantities of these goods we had stored on the yacht had evidently been prepared for just this occasion. We listened with keen interest as Halpin spoke to Kiteene, his excitement growing as with her hands she made measurements of quantities while she answered him.

"She says that there are boxes and cases of such coins as these kept in a place on one of the hill-tops," he said finally. "She would willingly part with them for such goods as these silks."

Darnell mastered his excitement and wore a quiet triumphant smile as he looked around at us.

"That'll be the treasure-hoard of the buccaneers of hundreds of years ago," he said. "There is probably a colossal fortune to be had for a few silken rags!"

CHAPTER VIII

CAUGHT!

It was an anti-climax to the excitement of the morning to find ourselves near a sort of sports arena, a little removed from the village onlookers, at the games that had evidently been organized for our own entertainment. In the parley after the exchange of gifts, it had been arranged that our party should next day be escorted to the place where the treasure was stored in order that Darnell, after viewing it, could decide what quantities of silks he could give in exchange. It was obvious that Kiteene, having no idea of the value of gold or the coins, thought she was on the way to making a bargain in which the Amazons would secure the best of the deal. The transaction was honest enough on our part: we would be giving in exchange something much better prized and more useful to the Amazons than the gold we received.

It appeared that a guard was kept on the treasure, not because there was anyone likely to steal it, but because the guard had been a custom passed down through the ages, from the days when the buccaneers who really knew the value of what they guarded were alive.

The arrangements having been made we were led to the sports arena, where we were feasted. The viands

brought to us were excellent and spoke well for the culinary knowledge of our hosts. There were roasted fish and fowls, all very succulent, and quantities of fine fruit. We were still lingering over this banquet when the sports began.

The feats of strength and agility of the island women were truly remarkable. In the contests we were amazed and moved to involuntary applause by the speed, skill and strength of these Amazons. Whatever distinctions of ranks prevailed on the island, there was certainly a spirit of democracy on the sporting arena. Even the queen contributed an exhibition to the day's events.

It was staged with theatrical circumstance. After the queen strode impressively into the arena, one of her attendants followed, bearing a huge bow with several arrows, and as Kiteene stood in one of those poses she seemed to like so much, several others, by their attempts to bend the string of the massive weapon, showed that the use of it demanded unusual strength. When she was satisfied that this point had been sufficiently impressed upon the onlookers, she took the bow, and having indicated with outstretched hand a tree which appeared to us to be well out of arrow-shot, leisurely fitted an arrow, drawing back the bow-string with an unruffled ease. The string sang as it was released, but the noise was lost in the shout, in which we joined, as the speeding arrow with great velocity found its mark fairly in the centre of a white patch evidently placed as a target. Through our glasses we saw the shaft quivering. It had sunk far into the solid tree-trunk, an indication of the force of its propulsion.

The arrow-shot was an exhibition of strength of

arm, keen vision, and skill, thoroughly deserving of the plaudits, which obviously pleased the queen. She added to her laurels as a markswoman immediately. Suddenly commanding another arrow she fitted it again and elevated the bow. It was only as the shaft was released that we observed that she had seen a bird flying high overhead; it was at this she was shooting. And the next moment a dust of small feathers showed in the bird's trail, and, its flight suddenly checked, it began to tumble to the earth.

The queen came nonchalantly back to the sloped space reserved for ourselves and her retinue and resumed her seat with the attitude of one who knew she deserved applause but could do even better if she wished. As the skipper, through Halpin, congratulated her, she showed curiosity about the glasses through which we had been looking. The skipper thereupon showed her how to look through his, both at her arrow in its target and the bird she had shot, which a pair of excited Amazons had recovered and were now bringing towards us. As she cried out with delight at the magic of the lenses, the skipper indicated to her that this was another gift. Thereafter the glasses were constantly before her eyes.

It was whilst noticing with amusement the play with the new toy, that I remembered how a pair of glasses had been given to Eliena also when she came on board the *Seaflower* and looked towards her. Evidently with discretion, lest her prize should be coveted, she had not hitherto displayed the binoculars; now she produced them, partly no doubt because she felt safe, but more, I am convinced, in a "catty" desire to show the queen her mother that she was not alone privileged as the recipient of such a present. It was

that meaning that Kiteene certainly read when she noticed: the look of venom she cast at her daughter was unmistakable.

In fact, that venom, the constant jealousy and malice that was at the back of it, was manifest even in the spirit of holiday that dominated the island. This country of the Amazons undoubtedly had a cultivation of its own. It was a remarkably well-ordered community and in spite of its sexless drudge class should have been a happy one; but one got a sense everywhere of a seething bitterness of jealousy amongst these emancipated women. Whilst they had learnt to excel in sports they had not learnt to be sporting. There was hardly an event in which one or other of the contestants did not try to win unfair advantages or to unfairly handicap the others; tempers flared up and brawls started—not only amongst the actual contestants but amongst their partisans. Spearwomen obeying the queen's commands were forever running about the arena or its boundaries separating the brawny women who held each other by the hair or were clawing at each other's faces and bodies.

It was an unlovely sight to see these wildcats with their claws out, but to those bloated island men who lounged about this seemed the most enjoyable part of the day's sport. With jeering laughter they urged the Amazons on; but the scornful toleration with which they appeared to be treated did not save them, when a quarrel took long to quell partly for this reason, from a sound truncheoning with the flat-sided clubs, suspended usually by the sides of the spearwomen, which, kept apparently for this purpose, we now saw in use for the first time. The men made no resistance when this force was turned upon them.

They fell back, usually with sullenness and what was no doubt bad language. There was obviously a reason. One youngish man on the edge of one of the brawls, being struck, hit back. Immediately three spearwomen set upon him, hitting with real vigour with their clubs, and shortly the rebel, apparently beaten into unconsciousness, was carried away by a group of workers. Evidently masculine rebellion to the dominant feminine authority was not tolerated.

Following the queen's display, which led to some curiosity on our part about the presence on this island of bows and arrows much resembling those of the old English yeomen—a curiosity that led to no satisfactory solution of the problem—the skipper evidently thought it opportune to show what could be done with our own weapons. The queen agreed; her attendants were eager. Darnell chose me for the demonstration; I happen to be a trick shot.

There was an initial difficulty in keeping back the onlookers in order to provide a clear range for my shooting; not knowing the properties of my weapons the islanders showed a tendency to crowd around. When, however, my shooting began and they heard the reports, saw the flashes, and watched stick targets splintered by bullets, an awe fell on them. It was some time before they recovered from it sufficiently to express their feelings in anything louder than gasps, but soon their exclamations became gleeful.

With my revolver I shot away pieces of a long stick, section by section, until only an inch of it was left sticking from the ground; cut down a line of ten sticks placed near to each other; plugged holes in coins tossed in the air; and worked a "K" on a log of wood with revolver bullet-holes, leaving the

skipper, through Halpin, to explain to the queen that in our written language that stood for "Kiteene." But my best hit was when taking a rifle I shot the arrow Kiteene had sent into the distant tree from the target. It was, seeing that I had meant merely to hit the main target, partly a fluke; but a shout of amazement went up as the shaft fell.

"The queen suggests," the skipper called to me quizzically, "that you might try your skill on a few of these eunuchs set up near that tree."

The suggestion gave me a shock of alarm; having heard the same suggestion gleefully made by Eliena, I had no reason to doubt that the cold-blooded proposal had been actually framed.

"It's all right!" said the skipper reassuringly, "I've suggested some birds. Keep on watch for them; they have gone to get them and they may be released at any moment."

Actually I had to wait a very little time before half a dozen birds of the pigeon species fluttered over the arena. My rifle spoke quickly, for I had very little time, and three of the birds dropped.

As I returned to resume my part as a mere spectator, feeling that I had done my bit to impress these Amazons with a respect for our weapons, I was embarrassed to find the queen's huge hand extended to me and to feel myself drawn to a seat by her side. Inwardly I cursed the exhibition that had brought upon me this attention, and I writhed hotly as the queen's heavy eyes fell languorously upon me. I heard the skipper chuckle quietly as he observed my confusion.

He came to my relief by producing a pack of cards with which, after they had been admired and exclaimed

upon by the Amazons, he proceeded to show a variety of tricks of which he was a pastmaster. As he changed the card the Amazons had thought was the queen of clubs into the ace of diamonds and mysteriously drew cards from under the feet or behind the backs of the Amazons, their wonder at his magic so drew attention that I was able to edge away from the proximity of the island majesty, to my relief.

It was only for a time however that the skipper consented to amuse the Amazons in this manner; the sports were resumed. They became a trifle monotonous, although rousing intense partisanship amongst the island people in every event. Only occasionally did we feel a special interest, as when Katahine, exhibiting a remarkable speed, won a race in time that must have matched those of the pedestrian record-breakers of the world. The fairness of skin of Katahine no doubt stirred us in her favour, making her victory popular with us, a fact that was obviously unpalatable to Eliena and at which the queen herself was not altogether pleased. The former apparently hoped to establish laurels of her own in the wrestling bouts, which shortly commenced. Certainly these Amazons were extraordinarily lithe and skilful in the sport and Eliena was a star amongst them; but each bout was marred by spiteful mis-play, and when Eliena's last victim was carried unconscious from the arena our applause for the victor was perfunctory.

The skipper laughingly declined the queen's invitation for some of our party to try falls with the Amazons; but he called upon Andrews and Doc Morrison who were specialists in ju-jutsu to stage a battle. Shortly the cries of the crowd were raised as they showed them clever holds and evasions.

But I did not see this event for the skipper had drawn me close to him.

"Kiteene has her eyes on you, Briggs," he said banteringly; "I expect you'll like to get away."

"As far as that's concerned, look out for yourself," I retorted in his spirit.

"Seriously, Briggs," he said, "I want you to go back to the yacht. The company is going to stay in the village to-night and start out for a view of this treasure-place early to-morrow. A message will have to go back to Buler about our change of plans, and I've decided that you're the best man to take it."

"Is it safe?" I questioned.

"Safe enough—if you're not a fool. I'm choosing you because I can trust you not to fall for the blandishments of any of these Amazons you might meet on the road. Most of the people seem to be here; the place is safe enough just now, and anyway you're armed."

"I wasn't meaning myself," I retorted. "I mean the company staying here."

He grinned.

"I hope you don't entertain the worst suspicions about us, Briggs," he said. "As a matter of fact I've told the queen that we want a camp to ourselves and we intend it to be a camp—and to ourselves. I've made matters plain to her—for she had another offer to make. I won't shock you by repeating it! The queen knows about your going; and I've told her you can go without a guard."

"As long as I can come back," I hinted.

"I want you to. Come early; we'll move off at about eight."

"What shall I say to Buler?"

"Tell him we may be away two days. Let them know on board that it's a rich win we're after. I'm afraid they're a discontented crowd left there. That's all. Buler already knows what to do if things go wrong with us. Now slip away quietly."

By the shouts behind me as I went, I judged that the ju-jutsu match was enthralling the spectators; and I was glad. The idea of meeting any of these island beauties was embarrassing.

I thought I was well through the village without meeting any but a few of the sexless workers still engaged on their tasks and so little under supervision that they stopped to look curiously at me when I passed; yet just as I was congratulating myself upon having escaped molestation, I heard a soft call behind me. Suddenly aware that the call had come from a dark, handsome young Amazon of the queen's retinue who was now running behind me, I hurried my footsteps, but within a few paces, running swiftly, she had caught me, and seized my hand to detain me.

As I turned to shake her off I recognized the girl the queen had mentioned as Ianda. She spoke softly to me, cajolingly, by her gestures endeavouring to induce me to go with her to one of the huts we had passed, which apparently was hers. I indicated by my own gestures the urgency of my orders to proceed to the yacht, but she refused to be shaken off, impeding my progress, and at last flung herself right in my way holding out her arms to me.

Angry as well as embarrassed I threatened her with my revolver, jerking it from its pouch and pressing it into her body. She had seen the work that weapon could do but she merely stood still, eyeing

me languishingly: a challenging smile on her lips and in her eyes, as if wanting me to shoot.

Of course, although I had expected to frighten her, I could not shoot. Her attitude made me feel foolish. A man feels foolish in any case in repelling the advances of a beautiful woman, and Ianda, if her skin was dark, had a handsome face and a well-rounded body.

What to do I could not think; but there was a diversion. Darting from behind one of the huts came another of the Amazons, one I had heard mentioned as Aelosee. She came with a scream of fury on her lips, hearing which Ianda turned sharply, and a cry of fury came from her, too.

They sprang to meet one another like tigresses. These two women, noticing my departure, had stolen away from the company, perhaps risking the queen's displeasure, perhaps in the case of one of them with her cognizance. Putting aside the first inclination to part the now fighting she-cats, I decided that their battle was no business of mine, but provided me with an opportunity to escape from both of them.

I had not gone very far however before, seeing my departure, they abandoned their fight and joined me, one on each side, endeavouring to cajole me and railing at one another. I strode ahead, sometimes indicating by gestures that the mission I was employed on was imperative. Although it was no doubt natural to them, the brazenness and savagery of their conduct revolted me as I thought of my gentle Evelyn.

Coming up a rise in the road, I saw some little distance away, to the side of it, a small group of the men seated in a circle whilst one who was standing spoke to them with some fierceness. The significance

of these drones being here when all the rest of the island was at the sports did not at once strike me, but their proximity gave me an idea.

"There are your own men!" I cried angrily, indicating them with a gesture. "Don't go on worrying me; give your attentions to them!"

The Amazons looked, and their aspect as they saw the men was one of scorn and disgust. I guessed, then, what later I knew was the truth: the Amazons having dominated the slack, useless men on the island, despised them for being dominated. Having no lovers but these they accepted whilst they loathed them, there was something missing from their lives that left them discontented and full of angry dissatisfaction.

The men had now seen us. They rose to their feet staring and pointing in our direction, and cries of brutal anger rose amongst them. As they came towards us they seized clubs and heavy sticks and stones.

A menacing crowd, hate marked on their faces, they approached. No need to question the reason of their hostility. Our arrival on the island had put them into the background; perhaps they had heard of the queen's callous proposal for their destruction. Now seeing one of the unwelcome visitors by himself, they leaped at the opportunity to kill.

The Amazon women threw themselves before me, defensively screaming commands and threats at them, but it only served to whip their fury, for here with the intruder were two of the beauties of the island. Almost slavering with rage they came on, and one of them heaved a huge pebble which I only avoided by a quick movement of my head.

It was the signal for the attack.

CHAPTER IX

THE ATMOSPHERE TENSIONS

HAD it been an easy matter of a clean-cut fight the issue would have been simple for me with my revolvers, for I carried two which I had reloaded in all chambers after my shooting display of that day. My dilemma was that by killing any of these men I might stir a conflict which would seriously involve the skipper's party on shore.

But certainly my life was at stake. There was no mistaking the ferocious intent of my attackers, and it was humiliating to me to have women standing as a shield before me.

With that feeling in my mind, I thrust the Amazons aside and, revolver in hand, stepped out to meet the assailants, firing a couple of shots over their heads with the idea of frightening them. To such an evil passion were they worked that they seemed oblivious of the bullets, and seeing that the women, whom they apparently feared to hurt, were no longer screening me, several who had heavy stones in their hands prepared to hurl them. It would be hard to avoid injury from that fusillade; one of the stones, well directed, might easily cause my death.

There was no help for it, and I shot in real earnest. I pride myself that, seeing that the best of marksmen

are prone to lose accuracy in conditions of battle, it was good shooting. One man I caught in the hand just as the stone was about to leave it; it did not stop the flight of the stone, but the spasm of pain must have caused a deflection of the direction, for the missile struck Ianda on the breast with such force that she reeled. Two others I winged, catching one in the elbow and the other in the shoulder, and to make up weight I sent another bullet into the foot of a fourth attacker.

These casualties, and the screams of those who suffered them, threw the attackers into confusion and they fell back, the courage of their savage hate evaporating. I was glad to feel that I had succeeded in stemming the assaults without killing any of the attackers, and as I stood irresolute, wondering whether the episode was really at an end, the Amazons, uttering screams of anger, rushed upon the confused mob. In a second clubs were in their hands and, wielded with fury, fell on heads and shoulders. The women, rivals recently, were united at once in avenging the blow which had been insolently delivered to one of them—even if not intended for her; and the men, who showed no spirit to resist this feminine attack, were thrown into a new confusion.

It was my cue to make off and I lost no time in taking it, although I looked around once or twice to make sure that the women were in no danger. What I saw convinced me that the men desired nothing but to get away. Directly a bend of the path put me out of sight, I took to my heels, my fear being that the women would pause to discover my absence, and would follow.

As I ran, I reflected that, as matters had been con-

trived, the incidents would probably have no repercussions at all. The gathering of the island men in this outskirts had all the signs of a conspiracy; their attack on one of the guests of the Amazon queen was a matter which equally they would like to keep quiet, and I guessed also that the women would not want to explain the incident. With the noise of the shots drowned by the cries of those at the sports, and the wounded men hidden, there might never be any general knowledge of the adventure. In any case, I reflected, the wounds I had inflicted had been given in self defence, and even if the struggle became known, no trouble as far as we were concerned was likely to come of it.

Useless and debauched as the island men were, I even felt it in my heart to entertain some sympathy for my attackers. It was the social system evolved on the island that had made them what they were; our coming had pushed them further into the background, and they must have felt, knowing the cruel and savage habits of the Amazons, that their very lives were threatened. It came to me plainly that I had stumbled upon a conclave which was considering the desperate position in which they were placed; it was natural that they should have flamed up in wrath at seeing me, and seen in my loneliness a chance of killing me.

My cogitations were concluded on the little landing-place, whilst I waited, looking back nervously to see whether the Amazons had followed, after halloing to the launch. It came quickly, but not too fast for me. I felt a great satisfaction in being in the boat as, looking backward, I thought I saw two figures far up the road. For fear of rousing curiosity amongst the

launch-crew I did not turn my glasses on the spot to verify my fancy.

The boat-crew were eager enough to know about my return by myself and the events of the day, and I satisfied their curiosity by giving an account of what happened on shore, making a feature of the discovery that there was a buccaneers' treasure on the island.

They were so busy with their questions that I had no time to ask for news of how the day had passed on the yacht, even if I had expected any events worth inquiry, before the launch was alongside; and leaving the ship's personnel to learn what they might at second-hand from the men of the launch I went with Buler to his cabin to convey the skipper's message.

Buler was a very good representative of the silent navy to which he had formerly belonged. Dapper, alert, he seemed to live upon the maxim that an order was an order. He had been on many naval-stations and could discuss the whole world and most things in it in an interesting fashion, helped out by flashes of anecdote, in moments of relaxation; but he seldom discussed a matter of duty. That was something that had to be done some way, somehow, however difficult; he had swift and incisive methods regarding it when necessary. The manner in which he spoke to me, an inclination to complaint unusual to him, showed that he realized extraordinary responsibility at the present time.

"You didn't say to Robinson"—who had charge of the launch—"and the others that the skipper would be away more than one day?" asked Buler, when I had unburdened myself of an outline of the cause of the skipper's changed plans.

"I just said he had decided to remain to-night on the island in order to make an early start to-morrow."

"I'm glad," commented Buler.

"Had any trouble?" I asked quickly, noticing for the first time that Buler's face looked strained and tired.

"The damned yacht is full of it!" he retorted explosively. "I never expected to see it on the *Seaflower*; but it has been there in secret for ages as a result of the skipper insisting on continuing the voyage when we had all made enough money to enjoy life, and many wanted to do it without delay. Now these naked Amazon women have put a fever into the blood of some of them. The skipper doesn't realize the contract he's given me—leaving the most troublesome of our whole company on board."

"I think the skipper reckons you fit for any contract where the control of a ship is concerned," I suggested.

"I hope I am," said Buler grimly, "but I'm damned glad the men still think the skipper is likely to return to-morrow night. It will keep them quiet, and when he doesn't come I can keep the ship busy on preparations for a rescue party—the idea that it's necessary will make them feel that the dangers of this cursed island are not the joke some of them think."

"As bad as that?" I questioned. "You know me, Buler. I've a special reason for wanting to get back to Brisbane, and the idea that a lot of damn fools may jeopardize the chance worries me. Has there been any definite trouble?"

"After your party left this morning," said Buler, "a lot of these Amazons in their canoes returned to the yacht, circling round about it and pleading to be allowed to come aboard. I heard murmurs all round me against my orders that they were to be kept away

and I had to curb Nolan and Saunders and a few others when their ridicule became too pronounced. One by one the canoes departed. I suppose the occupants felt that it was no use hanging about and wanted to see the sports. I felt that I could take a rest and handed over charge to Skuthorpe. It was quite by chance I went on deck a couple of hours later, to see a group of the men leaning over the side. I crept over unobserved. They were talking to a canoe full of these Amazon women, joking with them in gestures.

"I disrated Skuthorpe on the spot, telling him that he didn't know the meaning of responsibility. I've taken Barker off the launch gun and put him second in command to relieve me. He's a navy man anyway and knows the meaning of an order, whether he agrees with it or not!"

"Pretty rotten of Skuthorpe!" I said. "I didn't expect that of him!"

"He's a good man," said Buler justly. "But the best of men have their weak points. Skuthorpe's is women, and on top of that he wilted under the derision of Saunders and the others and relaxed the discipline. I'm sorry I had to trounce the poor fellow; he's taken it to heart and been on the booze. With Barker in charge I feel safe, but whilst I was having a bit of a nap voices coming from the saloon disturbed me. I found a meeting in full blast. There they were, denouncing the skipper as a tyrant, talking about the absurdity of the precautions we are taking and about favouritism in the selection of the shore parties. Your name was mentioned and so was that of Charters.

"I listened for a moment and then I stepped out and gave them the length of my tongue. I told them

just what fools they were, reminding them that we knew for certain that whatever ships had ever reached the island had never got away again because of just such folly as they were showing. I told them that they, selected as men of education and honour for a company of gentlemen adventurers, were showing no more sense than ignorant sailors who had been made prisoners on this island. By the time my address was finished I had lashed them properly, but I still felt that there were sneers. And the fact is the dissatisfaction is there."

"It sounds serious," I said. At that moment regret was in me that I had to return to the shore party. There was danger here—the danger of foolish treachery—and I would have liked to have stayed to fight for the safety of the link with our homeland.

"The air's worrying me, too, for the safety of the *Seaflower*," he said. "This queer atmosphere of the last day is ominous to me."

"Charters links it up with earthquakes," I said.

"Well, he's scientific; perhaps he knows," said Buler. "It's hurricane weather to me. We may have shelter in this bay; I'd prefer a free sea if a hurricane came."

That the dissatisfaction on the yacht was serious I learnt more definitely as later I was amongst the company, usually such a genial one. There was an evident jealousy against the members of the shore party and a tendency to make loose jests about its night ashore. But there was interest too in the story of the buccaneers' treasure, and some attention paid when I stressed those incidents that showed the tigerish cruelty and treachery of the Amazon women.

It was with a feeling of apprehension that I went to my bunk at last; but I was tired and soon slept.

It seemed that my eyes had scarcely closed before I was awakened by being roughly hurled from my bunk to the floor.

The yacht was lying over on a steep slant, but it jerkily veered to the other extreme as I rose to my feet. Amid the gurgle of inrushing waters, the crash of breaking glass and the creak of strained stanchions, there seemed to be a rumbling roar in the air which over-rode all the other sounds.

CHAPTER X

THE HERMIT OF THE HILL

THE first fear gripping my heart was that the Amazons had found some means of destroying the yacht and so had made us—those who were ashore and those who could get ashore from a sinking ship—prisoners for life. It was a despairing thought.

That idea was quickly superseded by one that the hurricane Buler had feared had fallen upon us. I closed the port-hole in my own cabin, through which water had rushed, and hurried to join the rest of the company, already hard at work, in the business of closing the others. Water was running everywhere in the saloon and cabins; it was knee-deep as the *Seaflower* lurched to and fro.

But when I went on deck the air was still, although the sea still caused the *Seaflower* to rock and the sound of waves lashing the shore made loud thunders.

“The night was quite still when I heard a curious roaring sound in the air,” said Sampson, who was one of the guard on deck. “I gave the alarm when it increased, and as the searchlight lit out on that low island off the mouth of the bay it seemed to break into troubled rows of white. It must have been a wave, coming right over the island, and the next minute the *Seaflower* seemed to lift right up under me.

That happened, it seemed to me, just as I heard the roar of the wave plunging down towards us. And then, when that passed, the whole bay seemed filled with tossing waves, just like a stormy sea. There were cracking sounds on shore too."

Quick orders were being given by Buler, and I was about to take a hand with fixing the hoses to pump out the waters that had invaded the yacht, still quivering in the disturbed seas, or in swabbing out the cabins, when Buler called me.

"It's an earthquake, as Charters said," he said. "Somewhere distant under the sea I expect. We've felt the sea effects, but we're trim now if there's any more trouble. You'd better get back to bunk, Briggs, and try to sleep. You have to be on shore early and will most likely have a heavy day. The work in fixing things won't do those left on board any harm," he added grimly.

"I wonder how the shore party——" I began.

"Don't worry," he said. "The island may have had a little shake, but nothing more. It won't have worried the skipper much."

In the morning, however, as I went ashore, I noticed that the incident of the night had worked considerable change in the shore-line. Masses of rocks had been torn down, perhaps by the force of the waves, and the shore was tossed high with seaweed and wreckage—trees torn, no doubt, from the low island to seaward which lay starkly denuded of the palms that had given it such grace; and away from the shore, on the way to the village, hillocks of earth had fallen here and there.

Charters with a body-guard under Katahine was waiting to meet me when I stepped ashore; it sur-

prised me as we approached to see them apparently talking together. I learnt from him, when I had answered his eager questions, that they had felt the island shake, but the tremor had been slight and no damage had been done.

"It was rather a blessing," he said. "Queen Fatty and her court came down to visit us and we couldn't get rid of them; and there were others nosing round the camp too, giving the sentries trouble. But the earthquake settled them. I think they regarded us as responsible—a hint that we wanted to be left alone and might do worse unless they went. A man who can do what the skipper can do with cards might do anything!"

"There's still that queer atmosphere," I commented. It was, if anything, more leaden than the day before. "Does that mean more earthquakes?"

"Possibly," he said. "When there's an earth movement there are usually many readjustments; whether they will hit the island directly is another matter. It's been hit—badly hit—at some time, a long time ago. Half of it torn away I should say. But once we've got this buccaneers' treasure, if it exists, and get away, it won't matter to us what happens to the island! Except for Katahine," he added softly.

At the mention of her name, the Amazon who was walking beside us turned smiling to him and said something, and to my astonishment Charters answered her in the same laborious style as Halpin used.

"Hallo! You speak the language!" I exclaimed.

"I'm learning," grinned Charters. "Moreover, Katahine's learning too." He spoke to her, and turning to me she said: "Goody morinin, Mistere Berrigis." I felt astonished as I replied, "Good morning, Katahine,"

at which recognition of her success she smiled, greatly pleased.

"I coached her in that to surprise you," laughed Charters boyishly, "but I was so keen asking questions about the *Seaflower* that I forgot to give her a chance. It's no wonder she's not like the other island women. Her father didn't belong to the island. He was one of the sailors who came here and had to stay. And her mother's father was another foreigner who evidently was annexed by the queen's mother. The queen was very fond of her step-sister seemingly, and that's why Katahine is well looked after, even against the queen's own daughter."

"With your limited knowledge of the language you seem to have probed pretty deeply into family history," I chaffed him.

"Well, I was curious. Katahine seemed so different to the other Amazons. And she *is*. She's proud of her father although she hardly remembers him. With most of the Amazons the father doesn't matter. Most of them don't know who *is* their father; it's the mother that matters in everything."

"Queer people!" I looked at Katahine and decided that she certainly was different to the others—in her comparative shyness for one thing. When we were talking, although she walked beside us, there was no desire in her to force herself on our attention.

We had not gone as much as half-way along our path when we met a group of three islanders waiting beside the pathway. Their appearance as they rose upon our approach was a surprise to us; for the first time, we saw men of the island, who were far from displeasing in appearance. Two of the three were young men, well-built, slim, and with no evidence of

the bloating that made the drones we saw so repulsive. They were, most obviously, brothers, inclined to fairness in spite of their sun-darkened faces, the features of which were regular and fine. The third was a girl who, by the way she advanced, handclasped with the elder of the two men, was very much in love with him. Although dark, her features, too, were fine, and she looked beautiful, the glossiness of her smooth black hair being emphasized by the red flowers that were fastened in it here and there.

They moved directly on to our path, and hardly had Katahine hailed them in some surprise, each by name, than the girl, whom the island princess addressed as Leneha, began to speak earnestly with gestures towards the younger man, Heneri. He only waited for her to cease before commencing to speak himself with a passionate volubility.

Katahine was evidently embarrassed by what they said. Her replies to their many words were kindly spoken but brief, and several times she shook her head. At that they spoke again beseechingly, the elder man also putting in a word.

Katahine, as if summoning her resolution, shook her head more decisively and, with a sharp order to the body-guard, made as if to continue the march, whereupon Leneha threw herself upon her knees, seizing Katahine's hand to hold her, kissing it, and appealing to her coaxingly. On the other hand, a burst of angry, threatening words came from Heneri, spoken with flashing eyes and heaving chest.

It was all Greek to us in the swift way they spoke, although occasionally a word flashed into recognition, especially the repetition of what seemed to be a familiar name. The situation was one with which

the imperious Eliena would have dealt very abruptly, but Katahine was evidently touched by their appeals, and shortly she turned to Charters and began to explain the situation, much to their satisfaction, for they dropped into silence to give her opportunity. Naturally Katahine's explanation was halting, as she had difficulty in finding the words necessary, but by speaking slowly, separating her words well, she made herself intelligible to Charters and partly to me; Charters put in an interpretation for my benefit when I was obviously at sea.

Afraid of making an approach to the skipper himself in the village, where the queen would hear of their presumption and no doubt meet it with swift punishment, the three had relied upon the kindly disposition of Katahine for an opportunity to make a petition to us which they hoped would go to our leader. Leneha and the elder man were mated in the fashion of the island, in which the alliance lasted only as long as it was pleasing to the woman; but Leneha declared with vehemence that their attachment was to be life long. She was obviously very much in love with her man, a pleasant thing on an island where such devotion seemed at a discount. Her plea was simply that our party should leave the island as quickly as possible. Katahine explained this part with obvious reluctance; but, keenly, Charters asked questions of the three, using his words slowly and with distinction which seemed to make them intelligible to them, and by inducing them also to speak slowly received answers from which he gathered meaning.

The news of the proposition the queen had made to the skipper, which he had regarded as grimly humorous, had evidently spread in the island. It was general

knowledge that our company was to be compelled to stay, and if that plan succeeded there was likely to be a general slaughter of the men of the island. They felt the doom hanging over them, and although Leneha desired none but her island lover she feared danger to him too in the general slaughter. And there was the plea for the young Heneri too. He was in love it seemed with an island girl named Mahariri, whom I remembered was one of the hostages left on the boat on the occasion of our first visit to the shore.

"It appears that young Noel Carter made the best of his opportunities whilst she was on board," said Charters. "The young devil! The girl has boasted about him, declaring that young Noel is to be her lover and scorning Heneri, to whom she was inclined to be kind before the *Seaflower* arrived. The young man's passion for the girl seems genuine, but in her new fascination she would evidently gladly send him to the slaughter to get him out of the way, even if his brother escapes."

"That damned young fool!" I cried wrathfully. "I suppose he saw in the island beauty something to write some of his verses about." The situation with all the dangers that were looming was appalling to me. "Our arrival appears to have mixed up things badly on the island."

"It is not a mix-up only; it's a tragedy," said Charters. "Just imagine how we would feel if we were in the position of the men of the island! As this young cocksparrow—for whom I've got the greatest sympathy—says, they don't intend to go down without a fight. If the men of the island were all like these two, they would make a good fight for it too."

"It looks like bloodshed if we don't get out," I said gloomily.

Charters made a reply, partly through Katahine, that we had no idea of interfering between the men of the island and the women. We were merely visitors, guarding against all traps that would keep us on the island.

"Tell them," he said to Katahine, "that I will tell our leader—our king—what they have said, and I will urge—ask—him to leave soon. To-morrow, if possible."

Katahine gave a gasp as he said this, and her hand fell on his arm. There was a look of piteous entreaty on her face.

Charters looked at her in surprise, and then an expression something like hers came into his own face. It was as if he too was dismayed at the thought of a sudden leaving. He took her hand sympathetically and pressed it.

"Tell them that," he said.

The trio seemed only partially satisfied, but let us go on our way. For my own part I was full of foreboding. Our party on shore with its arms and compact loyalty was strong enough to look after itself but, in spite of the reliance I had in Buler I feared for the vessel that was our only means of leaving the island. The affair between Noel Carter and the island girl worried me.

Noel was a likeable youngster with a penchant for bursting into poetry on the slightest provocation. Tall, fair and good-looking, he would naturally catch the eye of the island girl who had been left on the boat. The danger was that he would see only romance in an attachment fraught with infinite peril to us. It was possible that Mahariri, evidently close to the

queen's confidence, might be working some plan for the destruction of our ark of refuge in leading the young man on.

When we reached the village we found the skipper ready to move off. Charters and I however, before anything else, told him of the encounter we had on the road. He listened gravely, but laughed when we both told him of our fears.

"We are not going to leave the island without a proper look at it, now we are here," he said.

We moved out without further delay, the skipper telling me that I might make my report in greater detail as we went. The queen insisted on accompanying us for some distance, the upward grade being nothing to her—since she rode in her sedan chair and the groaning of the bearers did not distress her. With her came her retinue and the usual escort of spearwomen. It amused us to see some of the silks of yesterday's presentation wound scarf-like about the queen and some of her women.

As we marched the skipper listened with a grave face to my report and asked me many questions of my own observations on the yacht.

"We'll lose no time in getting back," he said. "This old harridan disgusts me, and the sooner we're away the better. I want to see this treasure and get it if we can make terms. And there's one other thing."

"That is?" I questioned.

He smiled at me.

"I think we can trust Buler," he said.

Suddenly I remembered my own personal adventure of the previous night and told the skipper about it in detail.

"The queen didn't seem to know anything about it.

Those are the two ladies I expect. They've been trying to catch your eye ever since we started"—as indeed I was aware Ianda and Aelosee had. "Well, we won't mention it to her majesty. But it seems that the old male *versus* female civil war may restart in Amazon Island in a bloody form. These damned drones evidently realize that the Amazons are planning to put us in their places and abolish them and are plotting to prevent it. I don't blame them. If their plotting is against us, I'd much rather fight the men than the women."

It was probably the skipper's long preoccupation with me that made the queen decide that thus neglected she had gone far enough. She made the parting a lengthy formality, during which she eyed the skipper languorously and drew promises from him for many things, which he gave impatiently. When we went on, Eliena and Katahine, with a small body-guard of spearwomen, alone accompanied us. I was glad to elude the advances of the women who had so embarrassed me the night before, and was relieved when they had gone.

With a few halts for rest and refreshment we kept to the climbing road, little more than a path. Sometimes the trees with which the hill-side was studded gave way to what seemed to be well-tended orchards and plantations; and frequently we got glimpses of cultivated patches in the valleys far beneath, and smaller villages.

We came rapidly to a better understanding of the life on the island as we progressed. The queen once left well behind, Eliena and Katahine, each apparently jealous of the other in any advantage that could be secured in our good graces, dropped back to us, and

the interchange of ideas became remarkably easier with practice. To my own astonishment I found myself understanding the full gist of what the Amazons said before Halpin gave his interpretation. One of the villages we passed was a school village. The children, rarely seen below, were here plentiful, and although the village itself was somewhat far off our track we could see the youngsters romping amongst the well-ordered huts. There were Amazons also playing with them, and looking very happy. With a rather wistful expression on her face, Katahine explained that the Amazons in their young motherhood came to villages such as this and many of them preferred to linger on, some for good, in charge of the school villages. As a sign that the value of milk for the diet of the children was known here, as in our own civilization, we passed a little later a couple of workers, who looked at us curiously, driving a herd of milking-goats—huge animals, and by their appearance well-tended and good milk-givers. Further, where the road passed along a treed ridge between one of the lower hills and the big mass of the island that rose higher, we came to a spot that gave a magnificently beautiful view of the bay below, with the *Seaflower* riding upon it, its little beachy coves, and the land that rose around it; of the sea itself, with small palm islands upon it—a sight to exalt the spirit of a painter. Nearby we saw huts nestled amongst the trees looking out on this fine prospect. This we learned was a sort of honeymoon resort to which the Amazons retired in the glow of young romance with their lovers. We actually surprised a couple strolling through the bush near the track.

Our coming was patently a surprise to them; it was

equally a surprise to us. An impression of the men of the island had been repellent and mainly concerned with their obesity and flabbiness; viewing this specimen apart, there was a certain handsomeness about him, although the flabbiness and effeminacy were still in evidence. To find anything likeable about these drones was surprising, although it seemed that there must be others, like the two young men we had met that morning.

The couple, he considerably clad, as seemed the habit of the island, whilst she was no more covered than the average Amazon, seemed engrossed in one another and disappeared shortly, although not before the man had protested jealously at the tendency of the Amazon to loiter to stare at us.

On the impressions we were now receiving, the island community was a well-ordered one and it had a peacefulness of its own, as well as a civilization that showed original white influences. Mothers it appears took no exception to the emasculation of their male children, which had become the accepted custom of the island except in the case of a few selected man-children, the offsprings of the leading Amazons on the island. They were just as fond of them in their young childhood as of their girl children; their attitude after all was not very different from that of many of our own civilization who look upon their males mainly as the providers of their necessities.

The system of free love dependent upon the whim of the women apparently had its exceptions, for Katahine pointed out in the far distance a hut nestling amongst trees on a prominence where she declared, indicating the number by her fingers, opening and shutting her hands, a couple had lived together for

twenty-five years. The pause to look at this place brought in a laughing play of our binoculars, which pleased even Eliena, who used her own, although she had seemed rather scornful about the discussion of the recluse couple's devotion.

When Katahine mentioned that the couple had two sons, the name of one being Heneri, I immediately sprang to the conclusion that the two young men we had met that morning were their children. That fact might explain their difference from the other drones, for apparently these two, in a place where it was forgotten, maintained, not for convention but for the love that existed between them, the ethics of a family life which had stamped itself upon their children.

The manner in which Katahine counted out the years of that island marriage indicated that the islanders had a knowledge of numbers which is rare in savage people, who can seldom count beyond simple figures. They appeared to have a system of education indeed. The art of writing did not exist amongst them, probably because they lacked writing materials and did not know how to make them; yet they did know the meaning of letters and could carve them on wood or on shell ornaments.

The islanders were, in short, anything but an entirely uncivilized people. Their lapse from their buccaneer forefathers may have been towards savagery, but they preserved many of the amenities their ancestors had known. Their well-ordered houses were furnished; they used tables and chairs and couches raised from the ground; and, with the absence of forks, they had all the civilized appurtenances of eating. Cooking with them was an art, as we judged from the food we had

tasted. The ideas of agriculture were certainly not those usually found, if found at all, with primitive people.

Apparently there was little incentive to labour, the soil responding easily to cultivation, the sea being full of fish and the birds upon the island numerous. There seemed to be plenty of sheep, goats and rabbits on the island also. The little work that had to be done was done easily by the workers; quite superfluous jobs were found for most of those we saw. There was a natural appeal to indolence. The men had fallen to its spell when they were masters; the women by developing sport and by rivalry in ornamentation had found occupation for the idleness of the hours.

High up on a hill we came suddenly, in a cleared space, upon the church.

That it had undoubtedly been in its original form. It was a curious building of roughly-shaped stone, with its walls built back to join a sheer cliff-face. Peeping through the wood-work were wooden joists, which suggested that they had come from the wreckage of some old ship. The facade of this strange edifice, the roof of which was palm-thatched as far as it was needed, was surmounted by a cross; but the stones were smeared with coloured decorations very much resembling the totems common in island villages—a strange mixing of Christianity and paganism.

But stranger than the place itself was the figure that stood before it. A garment resembling a cassock, but made of goat-skins, fell almost to the sandalled feet. It had a cowl which, however, had been thrust back, and we saw in the sunlight a head from which the white hair fell in matted locks. Above a heavy grey beard two keen eyes, in a face that was brown, seem-

ingly more from the weather than by nature, gleamed upon us.

The Amazons immediately prostrated themselves before this strange figure, which with a few rapid strides approached and then spoke, in words which although delivered with difficulty were plainly English:

“Go back! Leave this cursed place while yet you may depart. You do not know the evil that is in it!”

CHAPTER XI

THE TREASURE

THE sudden introduction to this weird apparition had startled us all, but the skipper, quickly recovering, questioned him eagerly.

"You speak English?" he demanded. "Then you are not island-born!"

"Go back! Leave this cursed place while yet you may depart! You do not know the evil that is in it!"

It was repeated like a lesson painfully memorized.

"We do not mean to stay on this island. We are here to look at something; then we go back. Our ship is well guarded. In two days we will be gone. But you—how did you come here?"

There seemed to be understanding in the keen eyes, and there was a muttering between the bearded lips as if the old man was practising with words of which he was uncertain.

"Ship *Euphrates*," he said at last, with difficulty.

"You came here in the *Euphrates*?" said the skipper speaking very distinctly. "How long ago?"

"Forty—fifty years," came with difficulty after much thought. Then he thought again for words. "Sunk. Prisoners all. *You* may escape." The last word was very difficult.

"We will escape," said the skipper. "You are the

priest?" The old man knew that word and nodded. "You can tell us all about the island."

The old man paused, ponderingly, then felt for a word again. "Come," he said, with beckoning hand. At his gesture Halpin, Charters and I prepared to follow the skipper, but the priest held up his hand. "Only you," he said.

"You stay here—and keep together," said the skipper. "I'll have a yarn with the old man. Come if I call."

As the skipper entered the door of the strange church, on the heels of the old priest, the Amazons rose with awed faces from the ground.

"They seem scared of the queer old bird," commented Charters. "This island is full of surprises. Who is he?" he asked, turning to Katahine and Eliena.

To my surprise they both answered, understanding the question, but it took Halpin to interpret what they said. The priest was "the very good man" to them; he could perform miracles by lifting up his hands to heaven and his power was to be feared. As far as they could tell us he had always been there. At stated periods all the islanders assembled apparently in some sort of worship before this church. Although eager to talk, it was little the Amazons could tell us.

"I wish the skipper would return," said Charters. "It's two now, and if we have much farther to go it will be nightfall before we start to go back."

"Personally I'd be glad to be back on the *Seaflower* and away," said Halpin. "I've got creepy feelings about this island."

What he said fitted my own feelings, but I did not wish to express them. Although I would be glad when the island was past history, I felt an eagerness,

now that we had come so far, to see the reputed treasure.

"Strange old church!" I commented. "It seems to date back to the pirates who apparently started this colony."

"Nobody turns more readily to religion than your pirate—commercial or otherwise," laughed Charters. "Ah, here comes the skipper!"

He came by himself, signalling to us to resume the march as he emerged. We clustered around him curiously when he joined us.

"The old man is a sort of priest. He was mainly concerned in trying to induce us to hurry off the island. Repeated his appeal time after time! It is so long since he has had anyone to speak to in English that he has forgotten how to form the words; but I got out of him that the ship he came in, the *Euphrates*, reached this island in some way and was scuttled whilst the sailors were on shore, lured by the island women. It seemed that many of the island men of the time who objected were slaughtered. Our friend, who had a religious complex, was revolted, and he made his way to this church where, at that time, there was another old priest, much as he is to-day. He joined him, and since his death has been carrying on."

The skipper had more to tell us but was interrupted by the interest of the scene now spread before us. We had come right through the hill, along a pass between heights going still higher, and the sea was in sight. In a few minutes we had reached to almost an edge from which the hill fell away to the sea many hundreds of feet below in a series of precipices that suggested no foothold, although there were probably tracks that we could not see. It was almost terrifying



to look down to the sea so far below; it showed us the extent of our climb that day.

We had emerged on that side of the island the sheer cliffs of which had first come to our view. Through a break in the hills we came on a broad ledge with the precipice downward to the sea on our right, another precipice rising to the left. Occasionally the cliff from above jutted forward hanging almost over us and narrowing the width of the ledge to a few yards.

"That curious yellow mist still hangs over the lower atmosphere," said Charters. "You can't see the sea clearly."

"An aftermath of the earthquake," I said carelessly, and turned eagerly to the skipper for further information about the old priest.

"The islanders have a superstitious awe of the church and its occupant, and it was only to escape from the ordinary life of the place and its penalties that our friend, and apparently the one before him, sought the refuge. He admits that they have had no power to change the habits of the island; apparently in any case he was not equipped to do so, being merely a plain sailor. The religion that exists is an island paganism imposed upon a faint base of Christianity. But in this church has been preserved some authentic history of the island. This priest got it from his predecessors and I got it from him, as haltingly as he could speak. Buccaneers established a depot on the island, either taking the women of the original inhabitants, whom they slew, or bringing here women from other islands with probably a few white women captured in the course of their piracy. There may have been generations of the pirates—generations that, born here, thought of no other homeland and, capturing new

ships, carried on. Then what we already understood to have happened came to pass: the men gradually settling down to sloth and debauchery were overcome by the women they had compelled to work for them. The tables were turned. The old priest says that there is a legend that the change was wrought mainly by a white woman who was brought to the island. The male taskmasters were wiped out, with the exception of a few.

"Then the idea must have come that the young males when they grew up would reassert the masculine authority. To guard against that, the present customs were evolved. Liquor is still brewed. It is taboo to the women, and the woman who breaks the taboo is despised, if not killed. Its indulgence dopes the comparatively few men into satisfaction with their conditions and thus aids the maintenance of the Amazon supremacy.

"The old priest speaks of four ships that have come to this island within his memory. In each case the Amazons have succeeded in sinking the ships and capturing the crew for new husbands, wiping out the old or helping the newcomers to wipe them out in the conflict that naturally arose, with a callousness that fills him with horror to speak about. There have been, it appears, horrible cruelties and tortures besides the slaughters. Superstition about the priest and his office have rendered him immune; but even with the superstition the old man says it was impossible for him to interfere to prevent the orgies that have taken place. There is a lot more that I want to ascertain from the old man," added Darnell musingly, "and I think when we have viewed this treasure we will camp here for a time on our way back whilst I talk to him.

It takes time to ascertain his thoughts. He can understand what is said to him but finds it hard to speak words grown unfamiliar to him."

"If the old man hates the island so," said Halpin, "do we take him away with us?"

"I suggested that we might," said the skipper thoughtfully, "but the old man seemed unwilling. He has grown old and feels he might as well die here now, and he thinks that if he went the last restraint would be removed from the island women. Anyway he was not eager. What he is eager about is that we should get away. He almost went on his knees begging me to turn back without going any farther."

"He knows of the treasure, of course?" I asked eagerly.

"Yes, but almost desperately he urged me not to seek it. He said there was a curse upon it. He almost scared me about it. When he saw he could not stop me he fell on his knees as I prepared to go. He was praying when I left him."

My forebodings came back to me heavily as he spoke, and they must have affected the others too, for it was Talbot who said:

"The treasure doesn't mean so much to us; we've got enough to be satisfied."

"Not so much that we need throw away a huge fortune that may be got cheaply," retorted the skipper. "And," he added to Charters and I who were near him, "there is something more than the treasure I want to find out. The priest couldn't tell me."

His eyes rested musingly on Katahine, as I had seen them resting several times that day.

"That girl," I told him, "is the daughter of one of the men who came recently to the island. She is

proud of her white father—most of these island women only think, in the reverence for a parent, of their mother.”

“What?” exclaimed the skipper, turning sharply upon me.

“She told Charters,” I said, startled at his eagerness and the excitement in his manner. I do not know what might have come of it. At that moment a call came from Eliena and Katahine, who had gone ahead. Their pointing hands, indicating spearwomen guards some distance in advance, proclaimed that we had reached the end of our quest.

Our pace accelerated at once, and the skipper went with Halpin in advance, where he talked to the Amazon leaders, seemingly with great interest.

We lost sight of the guards we had seen as the ledge went inward in a bay in the cliff which, however, we soon traversed. Then, coming round a jutting bluff again, which allowed a mere few feet to the edge, we came upon two spearwoman guards who challenged but fell back to let us pass at a command from Eliena.

There were a few yards more of narrow road. It led into a big space surrounded by what looked to be unscaleable cliffs, where the upper cliffs bayed back. No more desirable spot could have been created for a stronghold in which to hold treasure. Around were tall cliffs probably as unapproachable from the other side as they were unscaleable on this. The cliffs to the sea were the outward bulwark. There was no approach to the place except by the narrow path, merely a few feet wide, by which we had come, and a rill of water, splashing down from the cliff, tumbled across the enclosed flat to give the place a water-

supply. Evidently those who had selected the spot had been more concerned with the security of their treasure from any raid than about the difficulty of its removal if it was necessary to leave the island.

There were three neat huts in the centre of the flat, from one of which, on our approach, with her guards, came a handsome Amazon, Junoesque as Eliena herself, to whom she spoke on terms of equality, looking at us curiously whilst they talked. Then she turned, leading the way across the flat until she halted in front of a cave. Underneath the darkness of the entrance we saw a door set firmly, the wood old, but still solid.

Eliena halted, too, and with a gesture held out a rusty massive key to the skipper.

"She says," said Halpin, interpreting her rather awed, hurried speech, "that she will not enter. We are to go in and see what is to be seen."

"Well, there's nothing wrong with that," said the skipper. "There can be no trap in this. There is only a superstitious awe about the place which the tradition of keeping a guard long after the value of the things guarded has been forgotten has inculcated. Just in case, keep your hands on your revolvers. We'll all go in together."

Our hearts were a-tiptoe as the key rasped in the heavy rusted lock. We were going to look upon a strange sight—as strange a sight as could be imagined in modern days.

In spite of the power of the skipper's wrist, the key was hard to turn; but the lock snapped back at last, and as we pushed the heavy door swung inwards. Half a dozen torches flashed as we poured in, and we gasped at the sight they revealed.

The cave was a big one—far bigger than the entrance had suggested—and it went far back. On all sides were cases—big iron-bound boxes made apparently to store valuables—rotting bags and barrels. As if to give an indication of the wealth they contained, sparkling discs shone here and there on the floor, spilled in the handling of the contents of the chests; and there were scattered plates of silver and gold. All our dreams of Aladdin's cave had come true suddenly.

With a tug the skipper and Talbot flung back the lid of a chest near us. There were heaped bags in it, such bags as money is held in. The skipper's hand went down to one, and as he seized it the rotting cloth ripped in his fingers and the contents spilt into the glare of the torches bent upon them.

Not gold, but merely pieces of stone! From chest to chest we raced, throwing up the lids, and in each we made the same discovery.

The treasure-chests were there, but the treasure had gone!

CHAPTER XII

THE SKIPPER DISAPPEARS

My first thought as the revelation came to us that the wanted treasure had gone was one of treachery; but that was soon dispelled. I rushed to the cave door myself, revolver in hand, but the door was as we left it, and the three Amazons stood in the same position, superstitiously nervous in their attitude, but showing no evidence of any ill intentions. The skipper, Halpin with him, pushed past me, and there was astonishment and dismay as the women heard what they had to say. It was with obvious fear and trembling that the skipper induced Eliena and Katahine to approach the cave, their spearwomen at their heels more reluctant than themselves, to verify the truth of his report; and then they would come no nearer than the door, whilst the electric torches—of which in themselves they stood in fear—showed them the dross the cases held. We carried to them handfuls of the stone so that they might feel it.

They seemed stunned, terrified at the prospect of the report to the queen they must make.

"There has been treasure here, there's no doubt about that," commented Talbot.

"Enough to pay Australia's national debt, by the appearance!" said Charters who could jest in any

circumstance. Perhaps he felt, as I did, a relief that there was nothing now to cause us to linger on the island; and yet with me there was disappointment too.

"It has gone anyway," said Halpin. "And how?—that's the mystery. How long have these Amazons been keeping guard on a worthless treasure?"

"Not long," said the skipper. "No dust was shaken from the first chest when we opened it; there was dust on some of the others."

He gave a sudden exclamation.

"The priest!" he cried. "Why was the old man so frantic to stop us from coming here? I'm going to see that priest! Harkness and Morrison, you come with me. We'll make a dash back to the church! You're both good runners. You, Charters, will take charge of the party; you, Briggs, second in command. Don't waste time, but there's no need to hurry. You'll find us at the church. If we happen to be led on another trail and we're not there wait a couple of hours for us; then push on, even if it's night, and get back to the boat. We may have gone on ourselves."

With the aid of Halpin he explained his intentions to Eliena. She and Katahine were glad to leave the cave. As we followed, and Charters turned to lock the door again, we saw the skipper, Morrison and Harkness hurrying across the flat with the Amazon captain, who was to bid the sentries let them pass.

As our main party passed the sentries, our comrades, the skipper in spite of his years in the lead, were already as far away as that spot from which we had first espied the guard. Running hard they disappeared around a point.

We set a good pace, Eliena and Katahine walking with Charters, Halpin and myself in advance. I

noticed the vicious gleam in Eliena's eyes as Charters spoke to the other Amazon, and attempted to attract her attention by talk, using Halpin as an intermediary.

"It's strange," said Charters to me suddenly, "the skipper turned to me just before he went, and said, 'Look after Katahine!' Just like that, as if he was interested in her!"

"I told him her father was white," I said. But I wondered.

We were proceeding, unsuspecting of danger, when suddenly it revealed itself to us. We had reached one of those narrow strips to which I had referred when a sound above me as of a small avalanche startled me. A huge boulder crashed on the ledge a few feet from me and, rolling, went over the edge. At the same time a shower of stones rained about us.

"At the double!" shouted Charters.

"Single file and keep close into the cliff!" I supplemented.

For, in an instant, we were aware that that falling boulder was no accident when others fell about us. Fortunately, coming down the cliff-face, the boulders met obstructions and bounced outward; close into the wall of rock there was some safety although a stone that was not large hit me on the shoulder causing me such sharp pain that for a time I thought the bone was broken.

Instinctively the Amazons appeared to understand the command given and obey it. I heard a gasp and a cry behind me, and turning my head as I ran I saw poor Talbot falling spreadeagled over the edge, one of the Amazon spearwomen struck by the same boulder going with him with a despairing scream. The blood

that had threatened in our adventure had started to flow, and God knew where it would end.

It was a relief when we came to a part where the ledge widened and the cliffs were pushed far back. When well into safety we mustered the party again, but the relief was only momentary, for spears, arrows and stones began to fall, and although they were ill-fired, and fell harmlessly, they came not only from the cliff we had passed, but from the one that was ahead of us, where another section of narrow road to be traversed commenced.

On the cliff we had passed we saw two of our enemies. They were the men of the island who had evidently learned of our movement and plotted this trap to destroy us. The men we saw were gibing at us and pointing back as if to indicate that they had seen the death-fall of poor Talbot and the spearwoman.

My rifle was at my shoulder in a moment, and at least two other firearms spoke with mine. One man staggered and fell backwards; the other lurched forward and fell, toppling down the cliff until he lay an inert mass almost across the path by which we had just come. As I searched the cliff-top for more enemies I heard another rifle speak, and turning swiftly saw that Thomas had had a similar success on the opposite cliff, down which the body of his victim was slithering.

Eliena, who had been passionately shaking her fist at the cliffs in a fury at this insurrection, gave an exultant exclamation at this success.

The flight of missiles had ceased, our attackers evidently being terrorized by their casualties, and scared lest in launching their weapons they might expose themselves. But we were not out of the wood

by any means. We had to pass that narrow strip, about twenty yards in length, and beyond the path again narrowed twice.

We arranged to carry out a plan that had worked well with us in similar positions when dealing with savage and ill-armed attackers. The bulk of the party were to maintain a steady fire at the cliff-tops whilst one by one we raced across the danger-zone, those who got across immediately taking up the fire when reaching a place of safety.

I took the first run myself; Charters was to remain to the last. Because of the feelings of ill-omen I had entertained about our adventure on the island, my heart palpitated as I started the sprint, with the rattle of guns sounding behind me. Not a boulder fell, however, as I raced across; only when I was through a spear fell near me. Turning swiftly I fired at a leering face I saw above, and from the scream that followed I had evidently found a mark. Thomas was almost immediately beside me, and our rifles soon decided the men on the cliff-tops that shooting at us was unsafe.

Now that we had joined with the protective fire from this side, the passage was safe except for the rear men; so safe that shortly the whole of the Amazons crossed in a body. The last men of the party, Charters among them, also came over in one rush, which probably was the best way, since had one man been left by himself, and by the dying down of the fire from that side the men on the cliff had guessed his loneliness, he might have been caught, before he entered the passage, by some attackers our guns could not reach.

Whilst we were waiting for the last of the party, my ears were filled with the objurgations of Eliena against the men who had dared take up arms against

us. Her tigerish ferocity needed no interpretation, but Halpin, who had come over early, whispered to me, "She is saying that these men will be flayed alive and torn to pieces! Nice lady, Eliena!"

I looked at Katahine. She was stiff-lipped and brave, but there was a look of strained, almost pitiable, anxiety in her eyes until Charters was safely across.

Our success here gave us confidence, but as we approached the next narrowing we were met by more missiles, our attackers boldly showing themselves as they hurled their spears and shot their arrows. One shattering volley of our fire, which was answered by screams of pain from above, and the assault was over. Although the crossing was again carefully covered by fire, the passage was safely made. So was the next—the last one of which we had fear.

Naturally the necessity of having to fight and force our way through had delayed us. The shadows of evening were already drawing in when, relief in our hearts, we turned toward the church. My hope was that we would find the skipper waiting for us there so that we could press on down to the boat. I remembered sections we had passed on the way up where any attackers would have an equal or better advantage to that on the cliffs.

I wondered a little that the skipper, who should have heard our shots, had not come to meet us, and vague fears that he and those with him had been caught in the trap that had threatened us assailed me.

There was nobody before the church when we came within sight of it. We "halloed," but there was no response. Remembering our recent experiences, Charters ordered a firing-party to fire desultory shots at the cliffs above the church; and then he, Halpin and myself approached the door.

It was open, and we entered. Inside, except quite near the door, was pitch darkness. We swayed our electric torches into the gloom and called. There was only the echo of our voices.

"They must be here," said Charters anxiously.

"Unless," said Halpin, "they suffered the fate of poor Talbot."

"I won't have that!" said Charters sharply. "We'll search."

The church was a pewless concern of very small dimensions. Fully half of it was occupied by an altar and a communion-table, on which reposed plate that must have been enormously valuable, although it was tarnished with neglect. Part of this was in the cave in front of which the church had been built, and behind all was an opening at the back of a tattered curtain. It led into a long rock tunnel off which were some little cell-like recesses, evidently used by the priest as his living-quarters.

But of either the priest or our companions we could find no signs.

We pressed our way along the tunnel. It seemed to go on unceasingly. At last Charters restrained us and called again. Only a mocking echo came back.

"The rest will be alarmed if we stay longer," he said. "We'll have to go back and return again. This may go in for a mile into the mountain."

Despondently we made our way back. It was when we had got back to the entrance of the cave that Halpin's foot struck something that shuffled along the floor at the impact. His torch flashed on the ground and the next instant he had picked up something from the floor.

"An empty cigarette-box!" he cried. "They've been

here! Harkness always carried his cigarettes in boxes!"

It was a relief to us as a sign that they had come through the journey that had been so perilous to us. But where had our companions gone?

We found our party outside, anxious about our prolonged absence: the night had fallen. With the aid of Halpin we consulted with Eliena and Katahine, telling them that we intended to make camp, for so after rapid consultation we had decided. There were dangerous paths if attackers were in wait for us, on the way to the bay, and in any case we wished to wait awhile for the skipper and those with him. We had provisions with us—always we were supplied with rations for emergencies—and would not suffer from hunger.

The Amazons fell in with our wishes, even to the condition of separate camps, but they stipulated that the camp should be made some way from the church. The whole party was weary, both the Amazons and ourselves, and we were glad of a halt. Fires were lighted and guards set and appointed for relief, and those of us who were not immediately on duty soon fell to sleep after we had eaten.

I slumbered heavily, almost drunk with sleep, yet susceptible always to any movement around me, I was disturbed by the restlessness of Charters. He had risen and was pacing about, when he saw me looking at him sleepily.

"What's the matter with you?" I growled.

He came to squat beside me.

"That girl Katahine. She's practically a white girl, don't you think?" he said.

"What's the idea of waking a tired man to ask him a question like that?" I retorted.

"I'm worried about her. She's sweet, kind; different to the others. She ought to be taken away from this island before she becomes like the harridans who rule the place—like Eliena is becoming."

"You're a damnable fool, Charters," I said crossly. "There must be some colour in her veins."

"I don't know that it matters much—the little that there might be," he said dreamily.

I was alarmed to find him so concerned; but the one thing I cared about just then was sleep, and it took possession of me again.

There was no disturbance in the night. It rather surprised me, wakened to take charge of the watch just as dawn was breaking, that we should have slept with such security, but my heart was full of ill-omens for the day.

And the skipper had not returned!

The night had not been cold, and our slumber on the ground was no great discomfort, but it amazed me, looking over towards the Amazons' camp, to see them apparently oblivious of the cold nip that came with the morning.

The dawn advanced with beauty, throwing a pink gleam on the hills. It drew my gaze to the rise behind the church. Telling Thomas to keep a sharp watch, I began the climb, and shortly stood high above at a point that gave me a splendid view of the island below. I could see, even through the bank of dusty mist that again hung about, the broad waters of the bay in which we had anchored the *Seaflower*. And then my heart stood still.

The *Seaflower* was no longer there!

CHAPTER XIII

ON THE *SEAFLOWER*

THE men on the *Seaflower* had their point of view of course. Especially, as I found afterwards, Noel Carter. It was not anything like that of Lieutenant Buler, who thought only of the orders given to him for the control of the ship.

Noel Carter was one of those upon whom the task of entertaining the hostages left upon the ship devolved. The problem of keeping them amused and making them feel more like guests than prisoners had to be solved. They were shown, infinitely delighted, the wonders of the *Seaflower* again, in greater detail than before, even the engines and the magic of the laboratory being displayed.

Noel Carter was well contented with his task. He was perpetually amused by the expressions of childish delight that came from the island women when shown the properties of some trifle that was a wonder to them—a pocket-torch perhaps or a cigarette-lighter—which seemed more magical to them than the greater things the vessel boasted. But he was also interested in the splendid beauty of the island woman who moved beside him, who happened to be Mahariri. Her hair, though a dark colour, glinted with red hues; her well-formed face was intelligent and of an olive shade that

was distinctly attractive; but it was the little movements of her barely covered but heavily ornamented limbs and body that most attracted his admiring glances. It struck him that she was an epitome of grace.

It was towards the end of the day, when the return of the shore-goers, which would mean the release of these hostages, was momentarily expected, that Mahariri rose again from her seat on the deck and by gestures indicated that she again wished to see the sights of the vessel. This time she was particularly interested in a globe of the world in the saloon, its coloured patches, meaningless to her, and the way it could be made to rotate being the main cause of her interest.

Hopelessly handicapped by his inability to talk to her, Noel Carter tried to make Mahariri understand the meaning of the globe, indicating the position in which he supposed Amazon Island stood, the position of other lands, and the way we had travelled over the sea to it. To Mahariri of course the real amusement of that globe consisted of spinning it round, watching the dazzle the colours upon it made as the swift rotation blended them; but bored by Noel Carter's futile explanations she sought other distractions. She found it in Carter's curling fair hair.

Carter looked up in surprise and some embarrassment as he felt the hand of Mahariri ruffle his crisp curls. The embarrassment was in anticipation of the laugh that would come from his shipmates; but there were only the two of them now in the saloon. Whilst they had lingered over the globe, the others had passed on to inspect other more interesting items.

But a laugh did come, a laugh of delight at the

soft silkiness of his hair to the touch. The touch and the inviting smile set Noel Carter's blood on fire, and the next moment the olive-skinned Amazon was caught in his arms with his kiss pressed on her lips.

Noel Carter was startled at his own action, in a minute; he released her and she fell back, her face full of astonishment. At first he thought she was going to be angry, perhaps raise the ship with indignant cries and bring ridicule and rebuke upon him. But quickly a look of delight came into her face: she leaned forward, her arms out, invitation on her lips.

Carter's blood beat tumultuously in his veins as he held Mahariri closely clasped in his arms.

The voice of Buler, speaking sharply, warned him of his approach and the pair were standing apart, Carter doing his best to hide a feeling of sheepishness, when the acting-commander entered the saloon.

"Where are the rest of these women, Carter? You've no right to be separate from the general party you know," said Buler suspiciously.

"They've just passed along," said Carter.

"Well we'll find them," said Buler. "The skipper hasn't returned yet. If anything has happened to him the hostages will have to pay—even if they are women. I'm going to see them locked up in case of accidents."

"Oh, but, Lieutenant Buler——" Carter began to protest.

"I'm not going to have these women loose about the ship after nightfall in any case," snapped Buler; and he added as Carter again spoke, "I'm in charge, Carter! Bring that one along whilst we find the others."

His veins tingling with the memory of how they had been stirred, Carter had no chance of further

close contact with Mahariri; he, in fact, thought it politic to remove himself from her side when the others were assembled, a little afraid that the warm-eyed glances she continually cast towards him should be observed by any of his companions or by Buler himself.

As good a polite explanation as could be made by gestures having been made to Mahariri about the imprisonment, she and the women with her submitted with complacency and certainly no fear. The prison being one of our white cabins, in fact, they were rather delighted with their surroundings.

In any case their incarceration did not last very long, for we of the shore-party had no sooner returned than the hostages were sent back by the launch. More fearful, now that the skipper was on board, of some action of Mahariri's exposing his lapse Carter took care to be absent when the women were escorted to the launch, but he could not refrain from watching the departure from a vantage-point. Mahariri before she descended to the boat looked about the decks searchingly as if seeking someone who, Carter felt sure, with a queer sensation in his heart, was himself. Then seeing Halpin she moved quickly to his side, talking volubly and gesticulating.

"She's asking about someone—someone tall with curling hair," he heard Halpin say in an amused voice. "Wants to know his name."

"That would be Noel Carter. He was showing her around to-day," someone remarked.

"Of course—Noel Carter!" said Halpin, and he repeated the name slowly for Mahariri's benefit.

Carter's heart seemed to be doing curious gymnastics as he listened; in it was a wild exultation. The inci-

dent caused him to be hailed with a storm of banter as he entered the saloon for dinner, but he laughed it aside.

The island woman had stirred him to a strange restlessness. He felt little inclined to eat, and listened only slightly interested to the account given by the skipper and Halpin of their visit to the Amazon village. Only he was filled with a great wish to be one of the party that was to go ashore next day. It would give him an opportunity to see again, in the flesh, the woman whose lithe movements and easy grace were continually before his mental vision.

He was on deck when there came the sudden tumult at the time the trespassing canoes were fired upon, and after that he was called for guard duty at the stern of the *Seaflower*. He watched the glint of the waves, the stars, and the dark shadows of the shores, and whichever way he looked it was to see in fancy the Amazon woman smiling at him.

"No-eelcar!"

The voice, glad and thrilling, broke into his dreaming as, leaning on the rail, he gazed into the waters. It seemed a figment of the fancies going through his head, and it was all the more startling because, when he became convinced that it was real, he could not remember having seen anything pass on the water in spite of a watch which, with all of his abstraction, had been careful enough.

"No-eelcar!"

The call came again and it was from the water directly below him. More than that, it struck his heart with a recent familiarity. It was Mahariri!

Her face, with a glint in the eyes and a flash of teeth, shone out from the glossy blackness of the

waters under the stern. In a moment, as with a grip of his heart at the danger she had risked in swimming through water probably shark-infested, he let down a rope to her and bent down to seize her hands directly he could reach them, she was on board. Wet as she was, with the water dripping from her long hair, she fell into his arms as she slipped from the rail on to the deck, a happy, gurgling laugh on her lips.

"Ssh!" he cried; and she seemed to sense the need for quietness and secrecy, for her voice was dropped into the softest of whispers. "No-eelcar!" she crooned as if the mere speaking of the queer thing she had made of his name was a delight to her.

At first he was full of dismay, but that passed in the ecstasy that swept him. She had swum the shark-infested sea to reach him; in the way she touched his cheek and his hair, caressingly, dwelt a significance of overwhelming affection. There was something wonderful about it all, this great swell of passion for him in a handsome girl he had seen for the first time that day.

She had no right to be here. Remembrance of the loyalty he owed to the skipper came to him by spasms, with them flashing suspicions. Perhaps he was being made a dupe in one of the plots of which the skipper was so fearful. But Mahariri was too genuine; her body seemed to thrill with the ecstasy of being near him. There could be no simulation in the evidences of her passion that was in the thrill of her crooning whispers and the caress of her touch.

He almost forgot that if this island woman was found here with him he would be regarded as a traitor of the basest sort. That memory came back

to him from time to time with discomfort, but he shrugged it off.

They had no words that they could exchange, but she whispered her soft crooning island love words, and he responded with his English endearments. They understood each other; and that was enough for them.

Shortly he found himself understanding, too, what she was telling him by gestures, laughing happily as she did so. She in her passion for him resolved to see him again that night and had come in the canoe that had dared so much that shots had been fired to frighten its occupants away. The canoe had gone, but not before Mahariri had slipped overboard and, swimming under water, had reached the counter of the yacht. She had worked her way around the hull listening for a sound of his voice and looking for a way to climb on board; then to her joy she had seen him looking over the rail and joyfully had called for him.

It seemed that the dangers she had risked were greater than he had thought at first. The realization thrilled him.

The sound of voices talking as the speakers approached reminded him of the danger of discovery. The swift manner in which he sprang to his feet probably communicated to her a knowledge of his fear. Mahariri appeared to understand, anyway, the danger her presence meant to him.

She flung herself into his arms for a last embrace saying something hurriedly in her native tongue, and then in a flash slipped overboard. The dive was so perfect that it made scarcely a splash in the water.

Noel Carter knew she had done it for him, to save him from a danger she realized. The thought overwhelmed him again. He knew also, somehow, that

the words she had spoken to him covered a promise to come to him again—he did not know when, but probably the next night. And in that thought he was glad—glad in spite of the agony of fear that gripped him regarding her safety. It seemed that she had disappeared beneath the water for good, so long a time did she remain out of sight. Then something dark broke the surface such a great distance away that it was evident she had swum under water as far as possible to escape risk of observation. He would not have seen her, now, had his eye not been straining anxiously for her reappearance. She swam quietly without breaking the water palpably; only a phosphorescent gleam now and then marked her movement. Noel Carter prayed inwardly for her safety, full of admiration for her courage and endurance.

He had been so tensely rapt in watching her progress that he had forgotten the people who were approaching.

“Well, Carter, nothing moving down here?”

He wheeled to find Skuthorpe and Nolan regarding him, he thought, curiously.

“No canoes about; it would be a bit late for them, or early,” he said warily.

“My own opinion,” commented Skuthorpe, “is that all these precautions against the Amazons are bunk. They’re friendly enough and we could guard against any little tricks they tried to play on us without all these fool restrictions that make kids of us. But the skipper’s orders have to go, however we feel inclined to kick.”

Carter was glad next day to find he had not been selected for the shore-party. The grumbling broke

out on the *Seaflower* almost as soon as the party had left. The men chafed under the restrictions imposed upon them. Favouritism was openly charged in the selection of the members. Halpin might have been essential, but Charters and Briggs were making a second shore trip for no reason other than the skipper's preference. There was an inclination to jeer at the ideas of the island's dangers of which the skipper had made so much.

Carter was untouched by a discontent strong enough to seem general. He lived through the day in an exaltation of the hope of the night, and was not even disappointed when he did not see Mahariri in any of the canoes that paddled around the yacht, although eagerly he scanned each one, thinking she might be in it. Failing to see her in any, he ceased to be interested. His whole interest in the island had centred in one woman. If she could wait for the night so could he. He had no doubt of her coming.

There were restless, stirring times on board: talk of open mutiny, of seizing a boat and going ashore in parties in defiance of orders; even of seizing Buler and keeping him as a prisoner so that a less tyrannous authority could be established. The hothead rebels may have been small in number but they made their presence felt.

"But the brute will shoot. He said he will, and he's the sort of man to carry out his threat," said Nolan.

It was that, the realized invincible determination of Buler to carry out orders, that put a check upon the discontented. There was a bitter outcry, however, when it was known that Skuthorpe had been disgraced and placed below under open arrest for no worse an offence than allowing, during his charge of the

ship, some of the canoes to approach whilst those on board bantered their occupants.

From the surge of this discontent Carter was aloof. He was serene in his hope of the night.

Only the tidal wave which swept upon the *Seaflower* in the night disturbed his equanimity. Although the disturbance passed almost as quickly as it had come, Carter felt that this sea-disorder had created a new danger sufficient to daunt the courage of Mahariri. A fear of some supernatural power moving in the waters would be a barrier she might not dare to pierce.

The world seemed empty when he told himself that it was hopeless to expect Mahariri's coming. He would be on his post at the stern waiting. . . . What a lonely night it would be!

His heart was sick with the thought of it. It was strange that this island girl in a few short hours should have grown to mean so much to him that life was an emptiness in the prospect of her absence.

His heart thrilled with ecstasy as from the water below him came a soft murmur: "No-eelcar!" It was hardly more than the whisper of the water against the vessel and yet a sound that made the world beautiful again. Looking down he saw the face of the island girl laughing at him from the water. She had evidently been awaiting him.

And so she was in his arms again, gurgling joyous laughter, before he had been five minutes at his station. Whatever new fears she might have felt, she had come through them all to be with him! He was thrilled with more wonder than ever at the thought.

His infatuation for this island girl had become a strange madness with him. It had wiped from his mind all thought of his duty to the ship and its com-

pany. Now and again as he reclined on the grating, with her coiled in his arms, he tried to think past it to the time when the *Seaflower* would be leaving the island behind. To leave Mahariri was unthinkable. He would smuggle her aboard perhaps, braving the wrath of the skipper. That train of thought carried him as far as his staid and proud parents. He could vision them as he brought to them the beautiful but wild woman, with the colour of dark races plainly visible in her.

The vision could not be faced to its ending. Perhaps he might desert, elect to remain upon the island. It would mean possibly becoming like one of the despised beachcombers they had seen on so many of the islands.

But nothing seemed to matter excepting the delight of the moment. Why think or worry?

Mahariri, half asleep in her contentment, moved her lips to his with a happy murmur.

A mocking laugh brought Carter tensely to his feet.

CHAPTER XIV

STOLEN LEAVE

"HELLO! You're one of the lucky ones! You don't have to wait until you get ashore!" laughed Saunders softly.

He stood before Noel Carter and the startled girl, with Skuthorpe and Nolan beside him. The idea that Skuthorpe had been restored to his authority occurred to Carter.

"Well, you've caught me," he said resentfully. "The girl means no harm to the ship, I'll stake my soul on that! What are you going to do?"

"Tush, son! We're not hostile—only envious of your good luck," said Saunders. "It was Skuthorpe's idea, coming up to have a look at you. He had an idea you had someone with you here last night."

"We don't want to put you away," put in Nolan, and approaching the rail he looked over. "Where's the canoe?"

"There's no canoe," said Carter, "Mahariri swam out."

The three men measured the distance to the shore with their eyes and laughed incredulously.

"Oh, come!" protested Skuthorpe. "We don't mean any harm to you. All we wanted was the chance to get a canoe. We've tested the chances of getting a

boat but there's too much risk. We want a trip ashore and a canoe is just the thing."

"Why shouldn't we have a look at the island just as well as those lucky swine on shore?" demanded Nolan.

"I tell you, Mahariri swam out, and she'll swim back again," retorted Carter.

They looked at Mahariri, who seemed to understand the subject of the argument for by gesture she indicated the action of diving and swimming and pointed to the shore. She nodded her head as she did so, smiling at them all the time.

"Here's an idea!" cried Saunders. Tearing a leaf from his notebook he drew a picture of a canoe which he showed to Mahariri, who nodded her head again to show that the sketch was recognizable. He pointed to the shore and made a line, after indicating the canoe, from the shore to a spot many yards behind the yacht, and then from that spot to the stern of the boat. After that he indicated with his finger himself and the others in turn, including Carter.

"The canoe leaves the shore as if it has no concern with the yacht, keeping a distance at which it will hardly be seen in the darkness, anyway, unless the searchlight strikes it. Even so, nothing will be done unless the sentry draws attention to it. It will come into the *Seaflower* from dead astern and the only sentry to see it will be the one on this post—that's you, Carter, and of course you won't see it! The next sentry might detect it possibly, but that will be Nolan. The canoe will go back the way it came and we'll have our trip ashore."

"When the relief comes the whole thing will be plain if the sentries are missing," objected Carter.

"What do we care? They can't murder us for merely stretching our legs ashore," retorted Nolan.

"Buler can get out the launch to bring us back; then we don't stretch our legs ashore," retorted Carter.

"I can overcome that," said Saunders, "I'll put the plan to Duprez and Angel, telling them not to raise a hullabaloo if the sentries are missing. They're the relief sentries for these posts and good fellows. A promise of a trip ashore themselves to-morrow will satisfy them. If we're not seen about, the idea will be that we're in our bunks, for a time at least."

Puzzled at first, when the scheme was again gestured to her, Mahariri clapped her hands softly in understanding and delight.

"I'm damned if I like it!" said Carter emphatically. "It's desertion—treachery."

"It's treachery also to have an island girl on board against all orders," said Saunders dryly. "We don't want to say anything about that, but Buler would like to know."

Mahariri saw that Carter was objecting and put her hands coaxingly on his arm. It was that, more than the threat, that carried the idea with him. He nodded to Mahariri his agreement. With a cry of delight she kissed him and then dived overboard swiftly as she had done the previous night, but this time to the admiration and wonder of three additional onlookers.

"You lucky swine, Carter!" cried Nolan. "She's a wonder, that girl! Look how she swims!"

"I'm going to get together some food and have a yarn with Duprez and Angel. They were playing cards a little while ago," said Saunders.

In a surprisingly little time the men, watching keenly, saw a dark shadow moving in the mist and knew it

would be the canoe. It would hardly have been noticeable at all at a few further feet; but the canoe became plain from where they stood as it turned and made towards the stern light of the *Seaflower*.

It was small. Carter had a disposition to remain on board, keeping Mahariri with him; but her disappointment was so plain that he allowed her to cajole him into that frail overladen craft. It proved quite capable of bearing them all.

So it happened that before I set out on my return to the island village, to join up again with the skipper's party, more of our ship's company were ashore than was guessed by either the skipper or—until later in the day—by Buler.

Obsessed as he was with his infatuation for Mahariri, it was with a heart full of misgiving that Carter made the journey; and that misgiving was increased shortly after they had stepped ashore.

"We'll leave you—and the lady—Carter," said Saunders. "Our plan is for a wander inland. If we're not back by night, or if you want to go back earlier, don't wait for us. We'll find a means of getting aboard."

"You're not going to be more than one day away? That's not playing the game," protested Carter.

"Might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb," laughed Saunders derisively, moving away. "It's all very well for you; you have your lady friend already. We——"

Carter was powerless to hold them. He had had the idea that on the return to the ship the blame for the escapade would be shared amongst the four. To have to face the music by himself filled him with dismay. But their absence meant a serious depletion

of the *Seaflower's* company. He had an inclination to return to the *Seaflower* at once, admitting his fault and reporting the defection of the others. The thought that he had been made a traitor and had then been betrayed made him miserable.

Mahariri, noticing his worry, smoothed his forehead with her fingers and kissed him. He forgot his misery as she extended her hand to him to lead him away.

He seemed to forget everything as they rambled in beautiful places or rested side by side under the shade of trees—everything but the intoxication of the day and of Mahariri. He was astonished to find how his infatuation for the girl had grown. He thought of her in lines of verse; he was even able in the moments when his mind wandered to thoughts of the future to picture those parents of his proudly receiving a girl so beautiful.

It was a day of magic to him. Even when he noticed that the air was oppressive and heavy, that was quickly forgotten. Nothing but Mahariri mattered—his Island Queen!

Mahariri had led him to secluded places hidden from the observation of the *Seaflower* and apparently unfrequented. Tired with rambling they rested on a knoll overlooking a pretty miniature beach.

"I love you!" said Mahariri happily. She had picked up the expression from him, guessing that it was at least a phrase of endearment. The way she spoke it was to Carter bewitchingly beautiful.

"And I love you, Mahariri," he said sincerely. "I think I shall love you always, until I die."

It was a satisfaction to him to say such things even if she could not understand them.

He was leaning towards her, to kiss her, when she gave a cry and sprang to her feet, speaking angrily.

Before he realized what was happening a heavy stone, intended for his head, missed and crashed to the ground. But a weight of puffing human power did fall upon him, gripping his arms and legs and bearing him to the ground.

He struggled manfully, but three men at least were over him, and the fight, especially as he had been taken at a disadvantage, seemed hopeless, although he heaved, kicked and struggled. It was a blind struggle, with a mass of humanity shading everything from his sight, but through a gap in the writhing bodies he saw for a moment Mahariri, vibrant with anger, striking at the men above him.

Surprisingly their strength, one by one, seemed to fade out; he was able to throw them off and drag himself from under them. He reeled giddily as he rose and saw a new rush of fresh enemies coming. But between him and the rush stepped Mahariri, a heavy stone raised above her head with both hands—the same stone that had been intended to crash his brains out—and the attackers fell back. Four island men were rising, reeling, from the ground. Mahariri had evidently played havoc amongst his first attackers.

Mahariri dropped the stone swiftly and catching his arm swung him round, pushing him down towards the little beach where lay a small canoe drawn up on the sand. They raced down to it, attempting to push it down towards the sea.

It was heavier than it looked and moved slowly. The attackers were coming at them again now: a mob of island men, angry and venomous, of about twelve all told.

Carter felt for his automatic, a weapon the skipper had ordered each of us to carry whilst we were at the island. To his dismay it was gone, evidently worked out of his pocket in the gruelling struggle that had ripped his clothes to pieces.

The canoe was the only hope. A strength of desperation enabled Carter by himself to move it, and once shifted from its embedment it glided down the sands to the water quite easily, carrying Carter in the impetus of his push with it. Directly he could check himself he wheeled ready for the attack and heartsick at a swift thought of what might be happening to Mahariri.

She had taken the opportunity of his preoccupation with the canoe to rush back a few paces towards the attackers and was standing defensively between them and himself, proudly erect, lashing them with an angry tongue. They checked for a moment, and then with clubs upraised and an angry growl they came with a rush.

Carter was already making a dash to be by her side, feeling that he must face what would be the end with her when there came a diversion that favoured them. There were two young men in the crowd of a finer mould than the others, who had been urging them apparently to merely seize the woman and make their attack upon Carter, to whom their gestures pointed. When they saw the upraised clubs bent towards Mahariri they threw themselves in the way of the attackers trying to check them. They were carried forward in the rush, still struggling to check it, until it reached Mahariri.

Carter arrived in time to distract the attention of

two of the men whose clubs threatened Mahariri. They turned upon him, but he dodged under their swinging weapons and flung his fists with stinging strength into their flabby faces. They went down, but Carter found himself at grips with the two others, seeking for an opportunity to punch and yet avoid the clubs that were swung at him. Mahariri who had hurled herself on to a half-hearted attacker and wrenched his club from him, was proving no mean ally. Together with the assistance given by the two young men who were still opposing the attack upon the woman, they were able to put up such a resistance that the strength of the attack lulled, the men falling back.

Obeying a touch on his arm, Carter turned and raced towards the canoe, by the side of Mahariri. He looked back as he reached it to see the men after a brief parley coming in swift pursuit.

There was no time to be lost: the distance was short and the men were almost upon them. Pushing the canoe into deeper water, in which it rode free of the sand, he tried to induce Mahariri to enter it.

Instead Mahariri with a sudden movement pushed him so that he fell into the little craft. The pursuers splashing through the water had reached her as she stooped and with a shove, into which went all her energy, sent the canoe gliding into the deeper water.

When Carter recovered his senses and his upright position it was to find a gap of water between himself and the shore. Mahariri had been seized and dragged back on to the sands where she stood in the centre of the men a prisoner, but free from assault. The two young men who had fought to protect her before were standing near her protectingly.

Some of the men were gathering stones on the sand and a fusillade of these missiles began to hit the canoe and fall on the water about him.

Carter felt that he could not desert Mahariri. There was no paddle in his canoe, but using his hands he made to paddle back.

An agonized cry came from Mahariri. Wrenching her arm from the grip that was upon it she signalled frantically to him to move farther out. He could not catch the word she shouted at him, but it was plainly, in English, "Go! Go!"

He obeyed her entreaty. She had given the canoe the impetus which had sent him to comparative safety, knowing that she would have no time to leap into it herself. To return would only be to nullify her effort for him. She was safe apparently. There was no wish to do her harm, or if there was there were two of the men who had shown a desire to protect her; but him, as an intruder, they wanted to kill.

So Carter, changing his impulse, began to paddle away as fast as, with only his hands, he could. The stones were falling dangerously, but it was not long before he was beyond that fusillade.

All the time he gazed back at the woman he was leaving, his heart torn by strange tumult. There was something of pathos and tenderness in the way she looked after him, glad at every yard that carried him to better safety. When her captors made a move to remove her, she shook them off angrily. Her attitude gave Carter a harrowing feeling of a pathetic and final farewell.

But Carter immediately plucked up courage, revived new hope again. She would be free once more, and

that night again she would be with him on the *Seaflower*, whispering with delight her version of his name, "No-eelcar," which sounded on her lips so infinitely sweet to him.

If only he could get past the wrath of Buler so as to be at the trysting-place again!

CHAPTER XV

THE CRATER

CONSTERNATION reigned in the camp, springing to life under me, when I descended and imparted the news. I hardly recalled how I had come down from the height; my legs were trembling under me at each step. How were we to hope for deliverance from the island if the yacht was gone? We were marooned, sentenced to spend our lives on this generally unknown speck of land.

To the others, unattached, it was bad enough; to me, with the thought of Evelyn waiting for me in Brisbane, it seemed that the end of all things had been reached.

"It can't be true!" cried Halpin.

"It's only too true," I retorted. "Do you think I merely took one look and then left? I searched all the water I could see and there is no sign of the yacht. Buler would not go away and leave us marooned. It is obvious that he had not been able to hold the men to the orders, and the Amazons have succeeded in sinking her to cut off our escape!"

The news was too bad to be believed even then, and several of the party made the climb to see for themselves. Our faces were blank as we looked at

each other, and the awakened Amazons approached and stared at us, wondering at our agitation.

"We don't want to let them know that we are worried," said Charters assuming a cheerful expression. "Even if the yacht is gone we may find some way of leaving the island. There's always life while there's hope. In the meantime, since the *Seaflower* is not in the bay to go to, we will obviously remain here until we find some trace of the skipper or where he has gone."

This decision, with the main reason given as a desire to find the skipper, was conveyed to the Amazons, and although the insubordination of the men of the island still rankled with Eliena, causing her to fume into gusts of rage, and she undoubtedly desired to take measures to punish it, she also seemed glad of an excuse for postponing her report about the disappearance of the treasure. The Amazons at any rate were unwilling to return without us, as we suggested they should, assuring them that we would have no difficulty in finding the road when we were ready to return.

We were proceeding to make arrangements for Halpin and Thomas to take charge of the party in order that Charters and myself could pursue the search for the skipper, when attention was directed to a new arrival—one of the island men who climbed up the hill towards us with great labour, with his hands held over his head in sign of truce. He halted some way off making signs, and seeing that he desired to parley Charters made peaceful gestures to him to approach.

The man was elderly and had a beard turning grey. He had cunning shrewd eyes, and in spite of his paunchiness there was a certain air of dignity about

him. There was a movement as of protest from the Amazons as Charters and I took a few paces forward to meet him.

"The man is Eliena's father," said Halpin, joining us. "The lady objects to his coming, seemingly."

She did certainly. The look of disdainful scorn, mingled with angry resentment, upon her face was not nice to see when the relationship was known; in fact the old man had hardly begun to speak, turning to Halpin as if apprised that he was the interpreter, before she strode forward with an angry remonstrance.

Halpin interpreted her objection roughly, which was the only way he could grasp her meaning, made plainer by her gestures than the torrent of her speech: the men of the island were too despicable to talk with us who, in our usefulness, were more like women than men (this was meant as a compliment); and they were liars with whom it was unprofitable to talk. Even as Halpin interpreted she let loose a tirade at the old man, ordering him off. He spoke back a sharp rebuke. Certainly his attitude, whatever he said, was one of dignity compared with that of his railing daughter. She turned away in sulky anger when Charters, through Halpin, made plain his intention of hearing the man, and thereafter she made the understanding of what he said more difficult by angry and ill-tempered interjections.

The old man's shrewd eyes gleamed with triumph, and Halpin's difficulties began. For the old man was an orator and proud of it, and it was some time before he realized that his flow of island rhetoric was meaningless to us, even to Halpin. Perhaps he was satisfied with stirring the fury of Eliena, as many of his sentences did. But presently he apparently realized

that we were no wiser about the object of his mission than before he started, and Halpin got a chance.

"He is a delegate from the men of the island," our interpreter said. "They either have revolted or intend to revolt, against the rule of the women, and by his council he has been sent to ask our aid. Most of what he says is denunciation of the rule of the women and a warning of what they will do to us also if we do not resist. If we help we will have a share of the island and the women on it."

"Tell him," said Charters, "that our hope is to leave the island at once; that we do not want any of the island or anything to do with its women."

A look of satisfaction gleamed in the face of our visitor as the words were interpreted. He spoke again immediately with great volubility.

"He wants us," said Halpin, "to make an agreement that we will not fight on the women's behalf."

"Oh, we're neutrals—you can tell him that."

"If we will agree to keep out of the struggle he will give us anything that we desire. He mentions a treasure on the island that has stirred the longings of white men who have come here."

This interested us with the hope that the old man might have some knowledge of the disappearance of the treasure; but it was soon plain that he believed that it remained in the store-house we had found so empty. Charters would give him nothing but the assurance that we wanted to have nothing to do with the disputes of the island. That seemed to satisfy him for, as he left, with an exchange of insults with Eliena, there was triumph on his face.

"Now that's over," said Charters, "we will get on

with the search to discover the mystery of the skipper's disappearance."

But as he and I prepared to move away Eliena came forward, as voluble as had been her father. It was necessary, she said, for us to return to the chief village for there was evidently going to be trouble with the men.

"But the men of the island are few," said Charters. "Lazy as they have grown, they are hardly likely to create serious trouble."

"From what she says—I didn't catch it from the old man—they have the workers with them. They have, it seems, worked them up to a sense of wrong in being made what they are, and probably feminine rule has always irked them."

"That explains why our attackers of yesterday were so many!" I exclaimed. "It looks like a real revolt."

"Tell Eliena," said Charters to Halpin, "that our job is to find the skipper, and we intend to stay here to do it. There is no reason why she should not go."

The scene became dramatic; for a moment Eliena appeared inclined to insist upon our return, but the respect inspired by our guns curbed her anger and prevented the trouble that seemed likely. Shortly Eliena abandoned her attempt to influence us, but marshalled her spearwomen in marching order.

Then the drama became one between Eliena and Katahine. Katahine wished to stay, but with flashing eyes and biting tongue and gestures towards the village below the other Amazon taunted her, as Halpin whispered to us, for her failure in her duty as an Amazon—there was trouble to be quelled and she was shirking.

At length Katahine, taking a step towards Charters

as if to take a farewell, checked herself and walked to take her place in the Amazon ranks, looking wistfully back at him as they moved off.

"Come on, Charters, we must try to find the skipper," I said, catching his arm to stop him from the day-dream he had fallen into as he looked after the departing Amazons.

Full of anxiety to discover whether the tunnel at the back of the church could afford any solution to the mystery of the skipper's disappearance with his companions, we entered it again, flashing our torches along the walls and floors as we progressed and "halloing" at intervals. Here and there was sand on the floor, and from this we got some encouragement.

There were the distinct imprints of booted feet in the sand!

The tunnel seemed to be of interminable length, but we pressed on, continually disappointed at our failure to meet any fresh clue to our comrades. Suddenly Charters gripped my arm.

A booming thunder rumbled along the tunnel and the ground shook about us. It shook again almost immediately, and then a third time, and again the rumbling boom came to us.

"Earthquake!" gasped Charters. "This isn't the sort of place to be in in a really severe 'quake. We'll have to abandon the search."

Apprehension gripped me too, but I conquered the desire to run as hard as I could to reach the open air.

"The tunnel withstood the last shock," I said. "The skipper may be somewhere in here, injured. We'll go a little way further, anyway."

Both our hearts were palpitating as we moved forward. The thunder rumbled to us again and again;

but although there was sometimes a tremor in the rock under us, there was no real quake. Soon the thunder became louder, as if a door that stood between it and us had opened.

"There's some opening ahead!" I cried, and anxious to get our job over I ran until, just in time, I checked before a dark pit that yawned in the floor.

Creepily we gazed into the blackness beneath us, and as we stood there, with startling suddenness, a boom of sound, hitting us almost like a blow, came from below. Shortly, as our torches flashed, we were able to discern a stairway formed in the rock descending in a spiral around the pit.

"The gateway of hell!" I exclaimed.

"Our friends may have fallen down here," commented Charters, firm-lipped. "I'm going down."

I followed him in what I can best describe as a frenzy of courage. With each step I took downward I was trying to shut from my mind horrible thoughts of the tunnel along which we had come falling under the pressure of earthquake, entombing us in this horrible place. And every moment a thunderous rumble, growing louder it seemed on each occasion, startled us afresh. The air, too, was stifling and unpleasant to smell.

Our torches showed us the bottom of the pit but nothing lying on the rock surface, such as we had expected to find. We descended to the floor and discovered an opening into a further tunnel.

"We might as well go on" I said, with gritted teeth, and took the lead as I spoke, flashing my torch before me. The tunnel descended steeply with occasional steps roughly made in the stone; and distinctly now along this tunnel the thundering booming rolled

up to us, the rocks about us quivering with every burst.

The feeling was on me that if I paused for but a moment the terror of the place would seize me and send me in headlong flight. Yet we must find what had happened to the skipper if we could.

Ahead of us soon loomed a reddish-grey disc which betokened an opening. It brought us hope and yet unmentionable fears, and our pace slackened with caution as we neared it, reassured by the certainty that the opening was into the daylight.

When we reached the entrance we stood enthralled with a wonder that was terror also. We were deep in a pit whose precipitous sides reared high on every side, strangely coloured. Below were billowing masses of a steam that was sometimes yellow, sometimes red, and sometimes mere dirt-coloured. As we gazed there was an ear-splitting crash and the billows seemed to leap up to meet us. The heat from them was like that of a blast furnace and the fumes were stifling.

"The inside of a crater!" gasped Charters as we shrank back. "But look, there has been a track lower down."

It was there plainly enough: stone stairs which started to descend from the cave-opening in which we stood, and that, looking over the edge we could trace down bit by bit until they disappeared into the billowing mists now sinking again into the depths below.

"It is a track right enough, but where to?" said Charters. "Apparently it is one that has been used by the priests, but nobody could use it now. Another twenty feet down and we would be suffocated, if not burnt to death."

"Is it possible the skipper went down that way?" I questioned.

"May be," he said. "This looks a very old crater and has been quiet for ages; that evidence is on the rocks. The activity below may have started within the last few hours—some crack caused by the recent earthquake may have revived the old terror."

The next moment I thought the earth had split. There came an awful roar from the pit below and terrifyingly the clouds leaped up as if springing to seize us. We felt the hot blast of it scorching us. The earth seemed to shake, and a horrible feeling that the ground upon which we were standing was sliding into the boiling cauldron came to us.

CHAPTER XVI

THE REVOLT

ONE of the worst nightmares of my life is the recollection of that flight of ours along the way we had come, whilst the rock through which we moved creaked and moaned and shook, the thunders behind us roared louder and louder, and whiffs of the sulphuric atmosphere from which we fled pursued and stifled us. As we ran new thunders were made by the crash of falling rocks and we were thrown to the ground sometimes by the shaking of the solid rock on which we sped.

At last we were in the sunshine with our companions around us, almost as scared at our appearance as we were ourselves at our experiences. But it was good to be here again, out of the clutch of the rocks that threatened every moment to crush us.

"Did you feel the earthquake?" demanded Charters.

"There was a shake—not very severe," said Thomas.

"We were concerned about what had become of you."

"We have seen the inside of a volcano working up into a fury," said Charters, "and when that volcano bursts this island will be an unhappy place to be on."

I let him tell the story of our adventures and the presumption we had reached of the fate of our comrades—although we had not said so to each other we

both believed them engulfed in the inferno from which we had fled. I felt too sick to talk, and when I thought of our situation I was still more sick at heart. The skipper who had led us in so much successful enterprise was gone; so were Talbot, Harkness and Morrison, all good fellows: our yacht had vanished, and in the island from which we could not escape civil war and seismic violence were both threatening. At that moment I gave up the thought of ever seeing Evelyn again.

"We must move down to the bay," I heard Charters say suddenly. His composure, once shaken worse than my own I think, had returned more quickly. "There's the chance that the launch may be there—to find that may be something."

"While there's life there's hope, and we'll make a fight for it," said Thomas.

We made no delay in moving off, on the path by which we had ascended, and we tried to cast aside thoughts of the desperation of our plight for the general cheerfulness. I could not help thinking of those fools on the ship whose folly must have been responsible for our condition.

We had not travelled far before we met a new surprise, coming unexpectedly upon the Amazons who had left us only a few hours before. They had been in conflict; in despondent attitudes they were scattered about the ground, many of them bleeding from wounds, whilst Eliena, a bleeding gash on one of her own magnificent breasts, addressed them fiercely. Katahine was stooping over one of the Amazons, dressing a wounded arm, and two lay on the ground looking as if dead or dying.

Eliena, although as it proved she had been too proud

to return to plead for our aid after an unsuccessful battle, turned with fierce joy to welcome our coming, but made no move until we reached her, when she began to pour out her story.

The Amazons, it appeared, hurrying their return to the village, had been ambushed and surprised by what, as Eliena insisted upon impressing upon us, was a vastly superior force, and had been compelled to fall back. She had been urging her spearwomen to a new effort when our approach gladdened her. She claimed our aid to help her force the path.

It was distasteful to us, but a participation in the island war was being forced upon us. Charters, having learned where the opposition was to be met, insisted that the Amazons should march behind; he sent me forward to act as scout.

It was work to which I was accustomed, and I advanced with caution, questioning every thicket with a rifle bullet before I advanced. I got the shock of my life however to hear the small sharp sound of a revolver report even as a bullet pinged through my cap. In an instant I was behind cover, waiting for my attacker to reveal himself.

If revolvers were in the hands of the men of the island, it meant that the companions we had left on the yacht had been overcome and their arms seized! That was the thought that worried me as I watched; it robbed us of the prospect of co-operation with our comrades from the ship in future action to ensure our freedom, even if we had to stay on the island. The thought suggested itself that whilst the Amazons had succeeded in scuttling the yacht, those who had escaped from it had fallen into the hands of the hostile men of the island and the rebellious workers who

followed them, and had been destroyed. It was hard to believe that the alert Lieutenant Buler should have allowed himself to be taken by surprise, but the sudden sinking of the yacht might have created a confusion in which anything was possible.

A surge of revengeful wrath swept me as I accepted the theory. We would have no mercy for these islanders if they had murdered our comrades.

But whilst these oppressive thoughts were in my brain, my eyes were alert, and shortly I noticed a movement behind a rock that abutted on the pathway ahead. In a moment my rifle had spoken and a dark figure seemed to leap in the air and crumple. Instantly two other figures leaped from the hiding-place and fled. The shots sent after them were not seriously aimed for their destruction, as, satisfied that there was safety so far, I dashed to the rock that had concealed them.

The insurgents had cut down trees and erected a stout barricade of tangled trunks and shrubbery across the track at a space where a hanging bluff overhead and a deep declivity on the other side into a gully narrowed it. From the vantage I had gained, for I had climbed the rock, I could see this plainly, although a party approaching along the track might have come right upon the obstruction before they noticed it. I could see on the bluff itself, too, numerous figures, partly concealed but easily discerned by eyes like mine, used to scouting work.

The obstruction across the road was a considerable one, and would be hard to remove. The insurgents had the advantage of having with them the workers, inured to labour; and that advantage was seen here.

I wondered what the Amazons would do without their labourers.

As the main party approached, I signalled to them that the advance was safe, and shortly was in consultation with Charters. A touch of my own anger was communicated to the men when I told them my suspicions about the destruction of our comrades of the ship.

That suspicion was confirmed when the insurgents, realizing that we knew of their presence and would not make a rash approach, commenced to send their missiles in our direction for there was the sharp bark of revolvers now and then. It was a curiously inexperienced fire, for we were beyond range of arrows, spears and revolver shots; and if the insurgents had possessed themselves of any rifles they did not know how to use them. That was a comforting thought.

The only way through was the way around. The realization of this increased the anger of Eliena, who appeared to have been boiling with rage at the thought that the despised men and the still more despised workers had dared to raise the banner of insurrection. We told her that we would soon drive the obstructionists from their stronghold. Leaving the track we scaled the hill so as to attain a position overlooking the bluff, upon which apparently the main force of our opponents was disposed.

It was not long before we had attained the position we sought. The slope was steep and heavily wooded, the big tree-trunks making a screen between us and our enemies; but occasionally there was a slit of clear view in which one of them would appear—to his sorrow.

We began to advance in skirmishing order, firing

through the trees when a target presented itself. Our enemies were helpless against us, although their missiles began to fly amongst the trees as we got into range. If one of them showed himself, seeking a sight of the attackers, it was usually the worse for him. As the trees between us became fewer, we saw the confusion and terror that had arisen amongst the defenders.

Another few minutes and they would have been in flight; but we had reckoned without Eliena and her Amazons. Thrust into the background when we began our attack, we had forgotten them, but the desire for battle with the insolent insurgents must have been seething in the breast of the chieftainess. It took us by surprise when, with Eliena at their head, Katahine immediately behind her, their spears thrust forward, the Amazons swept past us taking no heed of our shouts to stop.

There was something magnificent about that Amazon charge, but as war it was crude. We dared not fire any more for fear of shooting the women, now between us and the enemy, and the defenders who had been preparing for flight sprang up, glad of the chance where hate could express itself in hand-to-hand blows.

With wild cries, above which the voice of Eliena rang, fierce with battle ardour, the enemies met.

CHAPTER XVII

EARTHQUAKE!

"KATAHINE!" cried Charters, as slinging his rifle behind his shoulder he dashed forward, revolver in hand. We followed hard on his heels.

A confused few minutes of chaotic struggle and all was over. The insurgents melted away—those who had not fallen; and their stronghold was ours. The ground was littered with bodies, both of the Amazons and their opponents, some of them still writhing, others ominously still; but certainly our own party had suffered no casualties.

I noticed this with satisfaction as I turned from pursuing those who had fled. The first sight that struck me was Charters standing with Katahine in an attitude that was protective and lover-like. She broke from him suddenly however and flung herself on the ground beside a form that lay stretched there.

It was Eliena, that fierce island Juno, her body full of gaping wounds, the head of a broken spear which she had apparently torn from her flesh in her out-flung hand. She was dead undoubtedly, and over her Katahine was weeping very un-Amazon tears. Whatever their quarrels, these two had been comrades, had grown up together, and there was affection between them.

Charters seeming engrossed in the work of consoling the weeping Amazon, I took charge and proceeded to clear the battle-field, conveying the helplessly wounded to two huts we had discovered nearby through Halpin's interrogation of some of the spearwomen who remained. We dressed their wounds with the first-aid dressings with which we were always equipped on such expeditions as this.

The Amazon spearwomen, whilst they carried their own wounded mates willingly, declined with gestures of disgust and hate to as much as touch the one man and several workers who were amongst the wounded. We placed these in a separate hut, and a couple of the workers, being more stunned than otherwise hurt, quickly recovering, were left in charge. I got Halpin to despatch a body of the unwounded spearwomen in search of food and attention.

Whilst we were busy upon this work a new fear was upon us. Tremor after tremor had begun to shake the island; the day had darkened; and high up a cloud of smoke, rising from the peak of the island itself, hung, spreading across the sky. There were queer rumbles as the ground shook. The volcano with which Charters and I had such an intimate acquaintance was getting busy. I could vision those billows of gas rising higher and higher in the crater.

Charters suddenly appeared, Katahine walking beside him.

"Thanks, Briggsie," he said. "The dead must look after themselves. We will hurry down to the bay to see if by chance we can find a launch. One must certainly have been brought ashore."

"Katahine?" I questioned.

"She stays with us," he said, shortly. "The skipper

asked me to look after her. Besides she knows a track by which we can reach our old landing-place without going through the village. We do not want to be mixed in any more of the island quarrels."

That intimation gave me profound satisfaction; and shortly I was ahead of our party again, receiving shouted directions from Charters as he obtained them from Katahine. They took us along the track by which first we had come but branched off some distance down, where, instead of descending steeply, we made our path along a wooded ridge.

Incessantly the island was full of rumbling and the earth trembled; occasionally there were loud crashes as of tumbling rocks or falling trees. The day grew still more dark. We walked in terror, the fear in us that we were but experiencing the commencement of some fearful cataclysm.

Myself I could see no hope ahead. The yacht had gone; and, even if we found a launch, of what use would that be to us in the vast desert of sea in which this was a solitary oasis? It appeared that our lives were linked with the fate of the island.

Sardonic Fate! It had raised us to riches only to destroy us! In another week our contract for our three years' service with the *Seaflower* expedition would run out. It had brought us affluence, fortunes having rained upon us from the successful prospecting and exploring ventures into which the skipper had led us. As a result of our development work new districts, almost new states, had grown, giving the riches we had discovered in them to the world. I who had bought into the expedition, allowed in on sufferance at first and as the result of the pleas of my friend Charters, with the only hundred pounds I had in the

world, had every reason for satisfaction: from being an outcast from my father's house I had achieved affluence. Our adventures too had been crowned with rich experience and thrill, and the company of gentlemen adventurers had been agreeable, in spite of that undercurrent of dissatisfaction that had arisen amongst those who had desired to spend the money they had accumulated, and had been disgruntled at being held to their contracts.

Our experiences had been pleasant, although adventure now and then had produced a corollary of tragedy. For a time I had had my fill of adventure, and my attachment for Evelyn had made me look forward to the end of our voyaging—although the thought that someday it might be renewed was always with me.

And now it was ending, with Fate laughing at us! We had come through so much, had become rich enough to live in ease and gilded comfort, and upon our last adventure, a freak one that had seemed but a fantastic round-off to our journeyings, destruction was facing us.

I tried to shake off the morbid bitterness of my thoughts, rather unsuccessfully, for they kept recurring.

On a bit of high ground I got a view of the flat on which the big village stood, and a fresh surprise. Smoky flames were leaping up amongst the trees. Evidently the war on the island had had its outbreak here; and the insurgents, probably in the ascendant, had fired some of the huts.

Our path being certainly clear of enemies, I waited for the party to catch up, in order to point out this to them. But, just as they were nearing me, looking

with curiosity at my pointing arm, I felt myself thrown violently to the ground.

The whole world seemed to dissolve itself in thunders. I knew of nothing as I fell but one vast, rending, tearing sound. The darkened atmosphere seemed shot with lightnings, the earth heaved, and right beside where I fell, the ground split in a vast crack. A nightmare had fallen on me.

As my senses returned to normality, I looked around and saw that the whole party had been hurled to the ground. Katahine was clinging, terrified, to Charters.

The earth continued to quake as I picked myself up and stood groggily upon it. From all sides there were rumblings, crashes and the sound of rending. Trees tottered and fell; a whole cliff on our left crumbled amid clouds of dust into the valley that stood between the mass of the island and the ridge on which we stood.

"The volcano has exploded—burst its top," cried Charters, picking himself up and extending a hand to Katahine. "Let us push on, as hard as possible. If there is a launch, or even canoes, we may be safer on the water than here, until the island settles down."

We went ahead in a nightmare rush, finding it hard to keep our footing on the trembling earth, sometimes thrown to the ground but rising immediately and pushing on. The falling trees were a horror to us, lest we should be crushed, but miraculously we escaped.

We were beginning to descend now rapidly to what should, I judged, be the landing-place. With every minute's escape a miracle, it seemed doubtful if we would ever reach it.

Unexpectedly I came upon a body sprawled on the

ground, and paused amazed. It was the body of Saunders who, when last I had seen him, had been creating trouble on the *Seaflower*. A wound in his chest, from which a pool of blood had flowed, showed the cause of his death.

Charters caught up to me but hardly paused to look at the body.

"Come on!" he commanded. "We must hurry."

Even as he spoke there was another roar worse than the one before, if that was possible. We were all thrown off our feet again by another great paroxysm of the earth but picked ourselves up desperately from the reeling ground. Glancing back and upward I could see nothing but dense dust and black clouds, with an occasional glare of red fire at the back of it. Turning the other way the sea seemed to be boiling, waves tossing chaotically all over its surface. Dust and cinders were raining down upon us.

I felt stunned and bruised—and hopeless; but almost by instinct I kept with the party as we plunged down towards the bay. Thomas had taken the lead now and as he came on a little knoll he stopped abruptly, his hand pointing forward.

"Look, look!" he screamed, as if in terror.

Wondering what new horror he had discerned, I hurried forward with the others.

CHAPTER XVIII

PURSUING THE TREASURE

At this stage, in order to connect with the subsequent happenings, it is convenient to mention what happened to the skipper, as I subsequently learned. As he, with Harkness and Doc Morrison, sped along that narrow road from the treasure store-house to the church, they experienced no attack such as afterwards fell upon us. Either they had passed just before the insurgents who assailed us arrived, their speed took the islanders by surprise, or the attack was reserved for the main body, the three being allowed to pass in order to preserve the element of surprise.

The skipper therefore reached the church without adventure. The door was shut, but, after banging upon it for some time without securing any response, Darnell and those with him found no difficulty in forcing it. As the priest did not come at their call, they searched within and found the tunnel at the back of the edifice. Along this mysterious corridor they went carefully, wondering at its extent, until finally they came to the pit.

There were then none of the boomings that had so startled Charters and myself. As they stood at the edge of the pit they debated whether to descend or to return and wait for the main party. Remembering

the two hours wait that had been enjoined upon us, the spirit of exploration won, and so finally the skipper, Doc Morrison and Harkness looked down into the pit of the crater which had been such an inferno when we encountered it. The awe-inspiring gulf was not, as we found it, thunderous with sound, but full of an awful silence.

They found here what we had not seen; a goat-skin bag filled to the brim with antique coins stood at the mouth of the cave as if ready for removal.

"An explanation of the mystery!" exclaimed Darnell. "But what patience! Beyond the pit that led us down here, that passage must have been continued right into the old treasure store-house. The entrance was probably behind those stacked chests; we will investigate that later."

"Shall we go on now?" asked Morrison. "Charters will be wondering where we have gone if the party reaches the church and we are not there."

"I feel inclined to pursue the trail while it is hot," said the skipper. "The way down is plain enough, and the descent and return should not take too long; I told Charters to remain for a couple of hours if we were absent. That gives us a margin."

Harkness plunged his hand into the bag and let a handful of the coins run through his fingers.

"You think," he said, "that the priest emptied the treasure-chests into bags like these and carried them to some place of his own?" He lifted the bag—not a large one—exerting all his strength in the effort. "It must have been hard work."

"It has been the work of a life-time—probably more than one life-time," said the skipper. "My idea is that this old priest took up the job from the man he

succeeded; and there may have been someone before *him*. The driving of the tunnels themselves, for a man working by himself, must have been a life-job for a man with infinite patience and oneness of purpose. Whoever started it, too, must have been an engineer. Perhaps attached to the church in the first place was a brotherhood using the cloak of religion for an organized attempt to rob their fellows of a treasure too strongly guarded for a direct attack."

"Do you think if we follow the trail down," said Morrison, "we will find all the treasure in some new store-house? Religious fanaticism may have been at the back of the whole idea—an effort to remove and destroy wealth which was regarded as a cause of quarrels and temptation."

"If that was the idea," said the skipper, "the contents of this bag might easily have been heaved into the pit. But it had been left here for removal and that track down has had use. We will see where it goes"

They began the descent of that awesome pit of which they could not clearly see the bottom owing to the big rocks that jutted out. Lest there should be some other outlet, they carried the bag with them, taking it in turns to pack the heavy weight.

Down and still down, the track went zig-zagging along the side of the cliffs, crossing to the other side of the pit and coming back again. The place was awe-inspiring. It was almost terrifying to look up, to see the massive walls of rock seeming, as the clouds moved across the little tent of sky far above, to be actually moving over to crash down upon them. The distances were deceptive. Another twenty feet down would suggest, as they looked, the end of the descent; but

when that distance had been covered there were still further depths to be explored.

"Perhaps it would be as well," said the Skipper, pausing and looking up to the small black speck far up on the cliff wall, which was the cave through which they had entered this pit, "if Harkness went back and told Charters what we are doing. Even now he will be wondering what has become of us, and it looks as if we will be some time yet."

But Harkness demurred.

"We can't have far to go now," he protested. "And isn't it better for us all to keep together? Supposing, by the time I get back—it is going to take some time climbing all that way—the party has already moved on, I will have to wait by myself for your return; and we may find a new way out."

The skipper did not press his suggestion, and they proceeded on the descent. A steamy vapour, irritating to the nostrils, was now coming up to them and the atmosphere was hot, and there were vague bubblings and gurglings coming from the depths into which they could not see. Just when they were beginning to doubt whether the descent would ever end they came to a big cave into which the track they had been following led direct. The opening was an enormous one and apparently natural.

Some of those rocks," said the skipper, pointing to the boulders on the floor and eyeing the roof dubiously, "have fallen only recently. Probably the earthquake brought them down. But I suppose the roof is safe enough. We'll see where this leads, now we're here, anyway."

They pressed in, the cave narrowing and decreasing in height as they progressed, eyeing loose-looking

rocks that hung from the roof with some misgiving. Shortly it became necessary to bring their torches into use again. Looking back the entrance was a mere grey patch far in the distance.

There came to them a rumbling roar and the cave appeared to shake. Startled, they looked back, to see a column of steam shoot past that distant window in the rock and fall back again.

"Pleasant!" remarked Darnell. "I hope that isn't repeated too often whilst we are down here."

It was. They had progressed no more than thirty yards when the disturbance occurred again and with increased violence. They could see nothing looking backward now—the cave had taken a slight bend which obscured the distant entrance. As they stood looking at each other a huge mass from the side of the cave, several feet away, lurched inward and fell with a rending crash, bringing down some of the roof with it. The whole cave was filled with a strange roaring.

"Just as well we were not under that!" said Morrison grimly. "Isn't it best for us to get back? That pit is evidently an old crater which seems to be returning to activity. If it gets going properly our escape may be cut off, and the vibrations will cause this cave to crash in."

"Perhaps you're right," said the skipper, "but we'll go a little farther. This cave surely leads to some other outlet."

They had not gone far, however, before the rocks around them shook again and once more the cavern was filled with the echoing crashes of falling rocks and groaning earth.

"We'll go back," said the skipper grimly, and with a swift turn led the way; not far, however, for his

torch flashed ahead of him and he pulled up suddenly with an ejaculation of dismay. There was nothing but piled rocks ahead of them, for where the side of the cave had fallen in only a few minutes before the whole roof had now crashed down.

"Look out!" cried the skipper, wheeling suddenly and seizing the arms of his companions to impel them to flight. The roof above them was creaking ominously and he had caught the first sound. Dropping the bag of treasure they had carried so laboriously they fled along the cave, as, with a heart-scaring roar, the roof behind them crashed down.

Realizing that the roof about their heads was holding, they looked back for a moment and shuddered: for many, many yards the cave was choked with fallen rock barring their escape by the way they had come.

"Keep going!" said the skipper through gritted teeth. "There must be another outlet from this place."

Their torches showing the path for their feet, they hurried forward, reassured when for a space there were no loud disturbances. Occasionally the rocks appeared to tremble about them, but there was no sound but the rasp of their feet on the stone floor and their breathing, until an alien sound struck in suddenly.

"That's the cry of a man—in pain!" cried Doc Morrison. He began to run, and by the time the others came upon him he was tearing at a mass of boulders strewn on the floor.

Groans came from under them. They had found the old priest again at last!

What looked like a replica of the goat-skin bag they had found at the cave-mouth above was tossed on the floor and its contents spilt. A mass of boulders

had crashed down on the unfortunate man, pinning him by his arms and side.

It took herculean efforts to shift the rocks sufficiently to remove the poor crushed form from underneath. When that was done they carried the hurt man, as gently as possible, along another twenty yards, fearful of another fall of rock in the same place. Then Doc Morrison stooped over the still unconscious priest.

"I doubt whether we can do much for him," was his verdict. "I've done what I can to fix him. We'll have to carry him with us."

It was difficult work and made progress slow, but shortly they were encouraged by a freshening in the air. What had been a faint sibilant sound was soon definitely the murmur of waves.

The cave opened out suddenly and light gleamed ahead of them; but it was a dim light, for night had fallen. They could see however the gleam of water and the white break of waves.

They were in a large cave looking out on the sea. The place had evidently been given much use. It was littered with wood, including some substantial pieces. There was a couch of dried fern spread with native cloth, on which the body of the old priest was laid. The flashing torches revealed some strange-shaped lamps in which there was oil. When these were lighted, a yellow light was flung about the cave. It showed tools and utensils scattered amongst the rocks, stacks of native vegetables and flour, and many bags of goat-skin stuffed evidently with valuables.

Placing lamps on a rock that enabled their gleam to fall upon the couch, Morrison proceeded to give the crushed man further attention whilst the skipper

and Harkness walked to the mouth of the cave. The water gleamed some feet below; the night was a dark one and it was difficult to see much else.

"We'll have to stay here for the night," said the skipper. "We're lucky to have such a place to camp in. In the morning we will probably be able to find some way up the cliffs."

"It will be a stiff climb," said Harkness. "It is a terrible height to the top."

"That is our one way out, unless there is a way round," said the skipper. "I hope Charters and the others are not worrying."

He started a fire in a place where many fires had apparently been built, and then wandered about the cave looking at the strange tools and other contents. Thoughtfully he looked at the goat-skin bags.

"Those don't explain the missing treasure," he said. "There are only a few here. But we will have to leave investigations until the morning."

Doc Morrison had done all he could for his patient and was sitting, using a stump of wood as a stool, watching him, when the skipper stood beside him.

"Is he going to live?"

Doc Morrison shook his head doubtfully.

"I want to try and have a word with him," said the skipper, "it's urgent. Is he likely to become conscious?"

"He may. I'll let you know if he does," said Morrison.

It was much later, when the three men had eaten and were dozing into sleep, that the feeble moanings of the injured man changed to a cry. Morrison called to the skipper. The old priest was lying with wide open eyes staring at his surroundings.

"Lie still," said the skipper. "You have been hurt; we will look after you. Some rocks fell on you in the cave."

"Thank you, cap'en," said the old priest.

Darnell started. He had been at pains by slow speaking and gestures to make his meaning plain to a man who had forgotten his native tongue, but evidently the mind of the old man had played one of those strange tricks the mind often does play. The easy use and understanding of the words he had forgotten had come back to him in his final extremity.

"I want to speak to you if you can talk," said the skipper.

The old man nodded feebly. "Is it about the treasure, cap'en?"

"No, that can wait. Do you remember a vessel that came here nearly twenty years ago—the *Thule*?"

"The *Thule*? Yes! It came on a treasure hunt. Whilst most of the crew was ashore, the rest, lured by the island women, got out of hand and landed too. The *Thule* sank at her moorings, scuttled——"

"Never mind that. Remember one of the leaders—Thorold?"

"Him? Yes! Fine gentleman he was. He took up with the queen's half-sister, but the queen took a fancy to him herself. He made a plan to get away: built boats out of old ships' timbers, saying the things were for the Queen. But one of the *Thule* sailors he had arranged to take with him told the woman he was hitched to, and the woman told the queen. The night he had planned to get away he was intercepted on his way to the boat, and, furious at the slight to her, Kiteene had him tortured. He died."

The old priest had grown excited as he told the

story. He became incoherent now and went off into vague mutterings, his eyes closing.

The skipper put his hand on his uninjured shoulder, shaking him gently.

"Thorold had a daughter—a baby daughter. Is she alive? I must know," he said urgently.

The old man had lapsed into a semi-conscious condition. His eyes looked up, glassily, at the skipper, who repeated his question urgently. Then understanding came to him.

"Katahine!" he murmured, and his eyes closed.

The skipper turned to see Morrison and Harkness sitting up looking curiously at him.

"That's what I came here to know apart from the treasure, my personal mission. Thorold was my chum as a boy and my friend all my life. He died trying to get his daughter away from the island, and when I got the story from Hunter's papers I promised myself that I'd rescue her for his sake."

"And now you know," said Morrison with grim sarcasm, "we may never be able to get away from the island ourselves."

They were saved, however, from the anxiety they would have felt had they known that the yacht had disappeared.

CHAPTER XIX

ESCAPE

THE old priest died during the night. Some movement from his couch disturbed them. By the time they reached it the life had passed from him.

They had slept again, being wearied, when the light of dawn beat into the cave. At about the same time that I, standing on a height far above, discovered the disappearance of the *Seaflower*, a shout from Harkness woke the other two. He was standing at the mouth of the cave staring down into the water below.

The object of his astonishment was a raft floating on the water and piled high with goat-skin bags. It was a huge cumbersome affair, made of long logs of wood fastened together with native fibre and decked with rough slabs of board hewn solidly from trees.

"The poor old priest evidently had a hunger for the treasure. He wanted to take it all with him and built his raft accordingly," commented the skipper. "But where in heaven did he expect to get with that monstrous thing? One man could not possibly manage it."

"We may be able to punt it round the island," said Morrison.

"Even that will be a big task," said the skipper.

"No; our way is a climb up the cliff. It'll be handy for us—this raft—when we have got to the yacht. The launch can tow it out."

Directly they had breakfasted they set about the search for a pathway up the cliffs. It was laborious, exhausting and nerve-racking work. The tide being low a small sandy beach was exposed in the little cove before the cave in which the raft was moored by heavy fibre hawsers; from this they scanned the cliffs looking for the most likely paths. There was terror in the thought of scaling those crags and standing clinging like a fly to its awful heights, and worse terror was time and again felt in the effort to find a way up. Often the start would be auspicious, but inevitably the climbers would reach, high up, some bare face of rock overhanging them, possibly, past which there was no possible farther passage.

To be clinging to some narrow ledge of rock, hundreds of feet above, and look down upon the crags below, was a sickening experience even to men with the iron nerves of the skipper and his companions; and the descent from each unsuccessful venture, with drops over edges to mere narrow ledges of rock, from which a slip meant a plunge into eternity, was even worse than the ascent.

The indomitable courage of the skipper who, in spite of his advanced middle-age, showed himself as lithe as his younger companions, alone saved the party from despair.

To add to the terror of the climb they frequently, as they clung to the cliffs, heard rumblings that seemed to be travelling through the rocks; sometimes the rocks themselves quivered. The day had advanced considerably, and they were probably a hundred feet up in

a last desperate effort when the first serious shock of earthquake came to them. They had to throw themselves flat on the ledge they had reached, clinging desperately whilst the rock appeared to sway beneath them, and every moment they expected it to slip and plunge them to death on the rocks below. A fall of a mass of cliff a hundred yards from them, with a reverberating roar, added to their nightmare fears.

"We must get down," said the skipper. "Worse shocks may come and bring down the cliffs in masses. It'll have to be the raft for us."

They hardly waited for the quake to cease before they began to scramble down the cliff again. Its face was creaking and groaning, and the ominous rumbles came to them plainly and continuously now. Another mass of rock roared its way into the sea almost a quarter of a mile away.

Harkness was just lowering himself over one rock to find footing on another below when a fresh quake came, and with a cry his grip slipped from the shaking stone. He struck the ledge for which he had been seeking and pitched outward with a cry.

Fortunately the skipper and Morrison had both reached a firmer base below and were able to catch and hold him, although for a moment it appeared that the impetus of his fall might carry them also to death. As it was he fell heavily; and when the quake had passed they resumed the descent. His leg was useless. With nervous haste they assisted him down, handing him from one to the other. It was with a feeling of profound thankfulness that they found themselves in the water below, which with the return of the tide had now covered the little beach and was surging in restlessly.

"We must hurry," said the skipper. "If any mass of this rock falls upon the raft it finishes our last hope."

Harkness between them, they plunged into the wild-tossing waters and scrambled on to the raft. All along the cliff-face now there was a weird groaning and great masses of rocks pitched or rolled downwards, making noises like the explosion of cannon. One great rock plunged into the water only yards from the raft.

With feverish energy the skipper and Morrison cut the shore moorings, and finding some long poles, roughly shaped as paddles, made strenuous efforts to push the huge raft seaward. Harkness, despite the agony of his injured leg, sprawled on the raft, tugging at a hawser that moored it to a sharp rock some distance off-shore.

It was some little time before they could get any movement out of the unwieldy craft. The tormented waves, agitated apparently by some submarine force, fought against them, but once a seaward movement was started the raft moved more easily. In the meantime the threat of the falling rocks became more imminent. The moanings of the rocks mingled with the roar of avalanches of earth and boulders.

It seemed eternities before they had reached the seaward rock and cut the rope. For a terrible moment the raft showed a tendency to drift back inshore. It was no longer possible to touch bottom with the poles, but whilst the skipper, leaning over from the edge, made what he could of the leverage on the rock, Harkness dragged himself across to another side and, with Morrison, used the paddles desperately.

The ponderous structure slowly responded, swinging round with the rock as a base until the side that

had once faced the shore headed seaward. A series of rending crashes rushed out upon them from the cave that had been their camp of last night. Then the roof of the cave fell too, evidently completing the collapse of the tunnel, and with an unearthly sound, as if the earth itself was screaming, a whole mass of cliff-face above it leaned forward as if to precipitate itself upon them.

With blanched faces the men ceased their efforts, waiting for the end that seemed inevitable. But in a moment the danger had passed. Instead of falling outward from the top the cliff crumbled amidst a roaring chaos of sound. The wave that struck the raft as the mass of cliff fell into the water was the intimation to the occupants that for the time at least they were safe. The huge wave, and those that followed, actually assisted them, driving the raft farther out to sea; and the skipper and Morrison, finding some sails of doubled native cloth and a spar, rigged up a sail, which assisted them in spite of the faintness of the breeze. Even with that and the frantic efforts of the skipper and Morrison at the oars—agony had driven Harkness into a semi-consciousness and he was unable to give assistance—the progress of the raft was little more than a slow drift.

Clouds of dust hung all over the cliff-face, where thunders made by the falling rocks continued; and high up above a murky smoke-cloud was beginning to spread across the top of the island.

“I hope Charters and Briggs got their party off the island and that Buler will waste no time waiting for us,” said the skipper anxiously. “There’s going to be hell to pay on the island with that old crater in action.”

The sea boiled round them as they toiled, resting only now and then when complete exhaustion seized them. In their desperate efforts they had no time even to take stock of the provisions they carried on the raft to guard them against starvation.

Suddenly all the mingled thunders were lost in a roar that drowned all else, as above the spread of smoke leapt a great flame of fire. It struck awe into their hearts as they saw it, and presently saw masses of rock hurtling through the air, screaming like shells as they fell. Huge waves came rushing out from the shore towards them tilting the raft until it seemed likely to capsize, or breaking upon it and drenching them with spray and water.

The eyes of the skipper and Morrison had been fixed on the shore, anxiously and fearfully, watching the developments, their hearts sick with the thought that their comrades might be overwhelmed in the cataclysm that had fallen upon the island. Their own case was hopeless on present indications, but they did not think of that. It was a cry from Harkness that caused them to look round, and it was the gladdest sight they had ever seen that greeted their eyes. Tossing on the choppy seas, there was the yacht *Seaflower*, about a mile away.

For a moment a fearful doubt assailed them that as there would be no expectation of seeing them there they would not be observed. They yelled loudly, waving their arms, aware as they did it that their voices could only raise a feeble sound against the chaos of noise that was behind them.

But the huge raft was an object that made itself plainly visible on the waves, and they were seen. It

was not long before they were once more on the deck of the *Seaflower*.

"Last night," said Buler, who had drawn the skipper aside to explain matters, "we lost Saunders, Nolan and Skuthorpe. Carter, too, but he came back; they had slipped over the side into the canoe of some of the Amazons. I found that other members of the crew were extolling this exploit as something heroic. The fact that they were ashore was increasing the dissatisfaction of those left on board.

"Knowing that if you were near enough to do it you would have sent me word that you were staying on shore, I made up my mind that you were some distance in the island and would not return until this afternoon at least. So, to get the men away from the temptation that the island women, always hanging about the yacht, presented, and give them the idea that there was work for them to do, I determined on a cruise round the island. It seemed the best way out of the difficulty."

"It is lucky for us that you adopted the plan," cried the skipper. "And that treasure-laden raft will give the men an idea that that was what you were after."

"Well then, skipper, shall we get the bags aboard?"

"No, no! Damn the treasure!" cried the skipper. "Let the raft drift—we may pick it up again. What we've got to think of now is getting the boys off the island. There is no time to be lost. We must get back to the bay."

"It will be dangerous."

"Damn the dangers!" cried the skipper fiercely.

Thomas, who first saw the *Seaflower* battling its way through the chaos of waters to find its old anchorage,

had terror in his voice as he called out; so used had we become to expecting horrors that he was actually terrified lest this should be a haunting delusion. There were dangers still to be faced: the danger to the *Seaflower* itself in the change of the sea-floor which was indicated by the fact that the islet that had faced the bay had disappeared and where it had been was now a mass of troubled surf; the danger to the launch that had to fight its way through choppy, maddened waters; the danger of our own waiting on the landing-place whilst the volcano spewed down its ashes, and even the ground around us was torn in awful rents under successive shocks of earthquake.

Even when we were on board, thankful as we felt, there was still danger. Huge waves rushed, as if a dementia had struck the ocean, this way and that, and the evil currents that had set in were full of threat. We could see no sign of the Amazons or any of the islanders; the earth upheaval had caught them in the middle of their feud and, terror-bound, no doubt, none of them appeared on the shore. It was hopeless to wait in the idea of rescuing them.

Of Skuthorpe and Nolan we felt that they had probably shared the fate of Saunders. They and poor Talbot made the tally of our losses in this strangest of our adventures.

Yet the skipper was unwilling to leave a helpless people to their fate without making some effort on their behalf, if it was possible. The *Seaflower* cruised slowly about the island looking for a landing-place which might be a substitute for that of the bay, from which we were glad to escape and which was now dangerous to approach.

We did not find one, but on the far side of the

island we saw that the land was a spur detached partially from the main mound which was the seat of the volcano. To this spur little damage had been done, and our binoculars revealed to us human movements which showed that some at least of the islanders, who were not residents there, had sought it as a sanctuary. With satisfaction I remembered that it was in this part of the island where the couple I had made up my mind were the parents of Heneri and his brother lived. They, no doubt, had survived, and their sons may have returned to them.

The island had food supplies on this spur in its agricultural lands, and at least one of the big child-villages had its place upon it. Our presence had only brought discord and bloodshed. Under the shadow of the calamity that had fallen upon them the islanders might work out some better scheme of living. They would probably do better without our help, since even if we could land again our presence might only revive the hostilities it had already stirred. That was the decision the skipper finally reached.

Whilst he was still hesitating about our action, I came upon Noel Carter in a remote part of the deck gazing over the rail at the island with his face almost buried in his hands. I knew, barely, that he was in disgrace for having stolen ashore without leave, and having always had a liking for the youngster, I felt sorry for him. So I clapped my hand on his shoulder with a robust: "Cheer up, Noel! That affair will soon be forgotten."

"It will never be forgotten by me," he said sombrely.

I was surprised to see tears glistening in his eyes as he turned them to me.

"She is there! Somewhere in that island. Mahariri!" he added dramatically.

The mention of the name of the girl about whom the young Heneri had been so concerned startled me, and then I learnt the story of the strangely sudden love affair between the island girl and the man whose name she had transformed into "No-eelcar." Carter seemed to be glad to talk to someone who could listen sympathetically. Mahariri's carelessness of all dangers in her passion for him had made a deep impression upon him.

"I love her," he said in a choking voice. "If I had known, I would have gone back and died beside her rather than have left her. I'd have got her away to the ship if I could."

"What good would that have done?" I asked him consolingly. "You couldn't take her back to Australia—a coloured woman."

"I would have if I could!" he retorted recklessly. "What do I care about that? If she had colour in her blood, her soul was white, and she was beautiful!"

I gave his shoulders a sympathetic pressure and left him still gazing with mournful longing at the island.

The yacht was moving in the direction of the raft that had been cast adrift as the *Seaflower* rushed to our rescue. Night was falling, and the fire that shone through the smoke-cap that hung like a pall over the island made it terrible, although the first violence of the outbreak had subsided. Our last sight of the bay had given us a background of fire also, where the flames leaped above the trees in the direction of the village. The roar of the inferno that part of the island had become shrieked out to us even when we were on the open sea. Human strife and the awful powers

of earth had combined to make a terrible ending of the island that had seemed so fair when first we saw it.

I saw the skipper, Katahine and Charters standing together at the rail, the island girl the skipper had sought for the sake of an old friendship and Charters hand in hand.

They were happy! And thinking of Evelyn waiting to welcome me in Brisbane, I also felt a great thankfulness in my soul, drowning the pity I could not but feel for the unfortunate people of the island.

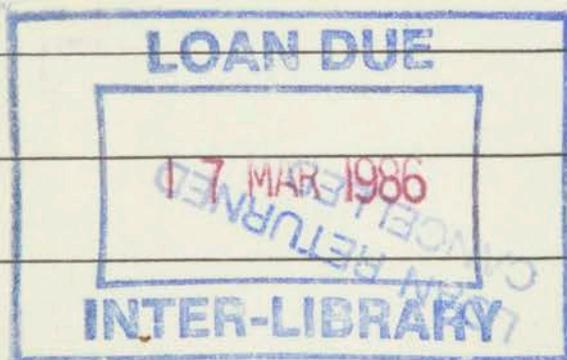
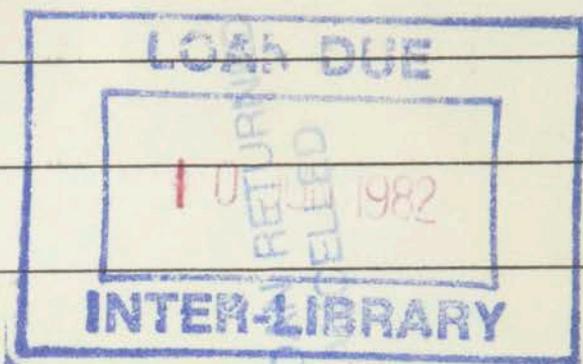
And yet there were some feelings of soft regret and wonder in the closing of a chapter of such strange adventure. My thoughts went to the old couple whose devotion to one another had made such a contrast to the general condition on the island; to their sons, so finely distinct from the other men of the island; and to Mahariri, the centre of the love episode that had so overwhelmed young Noel Carter. I hoped that in time happiness would come to the passion-riven girl and Heneri.

Hard hit as he was, Noel would recover. Yet the last I saw of him, late that night as the island rapidly disappeared from view, was a pathetic shadow still standing by the rail, hungrily gazing at the land which held the woman who would linger forever in his life memories.



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