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[Illustration: They Were at Last Under the Overhang of the Mysterious
Schooner.]

The Cruise of the Dry Dock

By T.S. Stribling

Illustrated by Herbert Morton Stoops

1917

The Cruise of the Dry Dock

Lovingly Dedicated to My Mother

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CHAPTER I

THE DRY DOCK

"She's movin'!" cried a voice from the crowd on the wharf side. "Watch 'er! Watch 'er!"

A dull English cheer rippled over the waterfront.

"Blarst if I see _why_ she moves!" marveled an onlooker. "That tug looks like a water bug 'itched to a 'ouse-boat--it's hunreasonable!"

"Aye, but they're tur'ble stout, them tugs be," argued a companion.

"It's hunreasonable, just the same, 'Enry!"

"Everything's hunreasonable at sea, 'Arry. W'y w'en chaps put to sea they tell we're they're at by lookin' at th' _sun_."

"Aw! An' not by lookin' at th' map?"

"By lookin' at th' sun, 'pon honor!"

"Don't try to jolly me like that, 'Enry, me lad; that's more hunreasonable than this."

By this time the cheers had become general and the conversation broke off. An enormous floating dry dock, towed by an ocean-going tug, slowly drew away from the ship yards on the south bank of the Thames, just below London. The men on the immense metal structure, hauling in ropes, looked like spiders with gossamers. A hundred foot bridge which could be lifted for the entrance of ocean liners, spanned the open stern of the dock and braced her high side walls. These walls rose fifty or sixty feet, were some forty feet thick and housed the machinery which pumped out the pontoons and raised the two bridges, one at each end. The tug, the _Vulcan_, which stood some two hundred yards down stream,

puffing monotonously at the end of a cable, did seem utterly inadequate to tow such a mass of metal. Nevertheless, to the admiration of the crowd, the speed of the convoy slowly increased.

Tug and dock were well under way when the onlooking line was suddenly disrupted by a well-dressed youth who came bundling a large suit case through the press and did not pause until on the edge of the green moulded wharf.

"Boat!" he hailed in sharp Yankee accent, gesticulating at a public dory. "Here, put me aboard that dry dock, will you? Hustle! the thing's gathering way!"

"A little late," observed a voice at the newcomer's elbow.

"Yes, I hung around London Tower trying to see the crown jewels, then I broke for St. Paul's for a glimpse of Nelson's Monument, then I ran down to Marshalsea, where Little Dorrit's father--make haste there, you slowpoke water-rat! Rotton London bus service threw me six minutes late!" he concluded.

The American's explosive energy quickly made him a focus of interest.

"What are you trying to do?" smiled the Englishman, "jump out of a Cook's tour into a floating dock?"

The American turned on the joker and saw a tall, well-set-up young fellow with extraordinarily broad shoulders, long brown face, stubby blond mustache, who looked down on him with amused gray eyes.

"In a way," grinned the man with the suit case. "I'm knocking about all over the map, trying to see if the world is really round. Got a job aboard that dock--going with her to Buenos Aires--Say, slow-boy, is that dory of yours anchored, or is it really coming this way?"

"Coomin' that way, sor!" wheezed the waterman from below.

"That's a coincidence," observed the stranger, twirling his pale mustache. "I had a berth on her, too." He indicated a huge English kit bag at his feet.

"Then you'd better get a move on if you're going!" snapped the American, instantly taking charge of the whole affair. "Shoot your grip here!" He stood ready to receive and deliver it to the boatman who had landed below.

"Had about decided not to go," frowned the Briton with an odd change of manner. "It looks--er--so nasty over there--still, if you can endure it I suppose I--" the final phrase was lost in the swing at his big kit bag.

The American followed the luggage hurriedly; the tall fellow lowered himself calmly and with a certain precision into the stern of the dory.

The boatman set out toward the gliding mass of iron.

The blond youth surveyed their distance from the great dock and marked its deliberate but deceptive speed.

"I doubt whether we catch it after all," he remarked with slight interest in his voice.

"Then we'll take a train to Gravesend and get aboard boat there," planned the American promptly.

A smile glimmered on the long brown face for a moment. "That's very Yankee-like, I believe," he said complimentarily.

With the brisk friendliness of his nation, the Yankee drew a morocco case from his pocket. "Leonard Madden is my name," he said as he offered a bit of engraved card.

The Englishman started to reach inside his coat but paused. "I am Caradoc Smith," he replied gravely. Then, as an afterthought, he drew a small silver-mounted flask from his pocket, unscrewed the cap, poured it full of a liquor and offered it.

"To a pleasant acquaintance and a profitable journey, Mr. Madden," he began ceremoniously.

A slight flush reddened the white skin at Madden's collar, but did not show on his tanned face. It always embarrassed him to be forced to reject friendly overtures.

"Sorry," he shook his head; "don't use it. But the wish goes."

The Englishman looked his surprise. "Then, if you don't object--" he lifted pale brows.

"Certainly not; do as you like."

Smith tossed the capful down his throat. "You know, I've met several Americans," he commented more warmly, "and half of them don't use alcoholics. Strange thing--can't fancy why."

Madden went into no explanation. They were nearing the dock by this time and their boatman began a hoarse calling for some one on board to toss a line.

It was like shouting for a man in a city block. The basal pontoon rose twelve feet above their heads; beyond this towered the thick side walls spanned by the bridge. The waterline of the whole dock was painted a bright red, some four feet high, and above this rose an expanse of raw black iron, punctuated with long rows of shining rivet heads.

The boatman was rowing at top speed and bellowing like an asthmatic fog horn. "We'll never git nobody," he wheezed. "Nobody seems to stay around

this section of th' dock, sor."

Madden raised a lusty shout; the great structure was slowly increasing her speed.

"Yell, Smith, yell!" he counseled between shouts. "We may not be able to get a train to Gravesend in time!"

"I'm not that eager to go," observed the Englishman with a shrug.

The dory was falling behind. Madden leaped up, ran to the oars and began pushing as the boatman pulled. Their united efforts just kept the blunt little dory in the hissing wake of the dock.

"Help! Line! Aboard dock! Lend a line!" the two of them roared discordantly.

"We're not going to make it!" cried Madden desperately. "Lend a hand here, Smith!"

At that moment a dark head with sharp black mustaches popped over the stern of the dock.

"Ah-ha! A race!" cried the man above in a French accent. "Come, Mike, zee the English sporting speerit! Voila! What a race--a dory and a dry dock!"

"Throw us a line!" shrieked Madden, "you blithering--think this is fun?"

"Ah, pardon, a thousand pardons! I hasten!"

He disappeared and a few seconds later a coil of rope came hurtling down. Madden caught it and his toil was over. A moment later another sailor, of distinct Irish physiognomy, dropped down a rope ladder to the boat. They paid the sweating boatman a double fare, climbed up and hoisted their bags with the line.

Only when on board did the lads appreciate the enormous size of the dock. It would have been impossible to throw a baseball from one end to the other. The black sides rose above them like an iron canyon. Ranging down these precipices were innumerable huge iron stanchions for the shoring of ocean liners. Toward the forward end of the dock was a two hundred ton pile of coal, for the use of the tug, but it was dwarfed to the size of a kitchen supply by the black expanse around it. On the other side there were erected a few temporary wooden houses to serve as kitchen, dining room, and quarters for the crew on the voyage. There were a group of men loitering about these cabins.

The newcomers still stared at their gigantic surroundings when the interested Frenchman said politely:

"It ees large, beeg, yes?"

"Where's the boss?" inquired Leonard. "We've got jobs aboard this craft."

"He is making out the papers now, I think, and ees in a bad temper, too."

With this discouraging information, the two young men started for the officers' cabin. As they entered the place they met a crew of typical London longshoresmen coming out. Inside, a stocky purple-cheeked cockney stood at a little desk and glowered at them with small red eyes.

"Ow's this?" he growled sharply, and in some surprise. "You are not in th' crew Hi picked hup."

"No, we applied at the office--"

"Hoffice, hoffice," snarled the man. "W'ot do they know about men, settin' hup there with their legs cocked hup? W'ot is it ye want anyway?"

Leonard silently offered a paper he had received from the British Towing and Shipping Company. The mate wrinkled his half inch of knobby brow as he read the paper in a low undertone, after the manner of illiterate men.

"And by the way, my man," began Caradoc in stiff condescension, "we would like one of those cabins to ourselves."

The mate flung up a club-like head and threw back his blocky shoulders. "_My man!_" he gasped. "Ye call me _my man_, ye little cigarette-suckin' silk-hatted Johnny--orderin' private cabins! W'ot ye think this is--a floatin' 'otel?"

Madden bit his lip to keep from smiling at the odd play of anger and surprise on Smith's long expressive face.

"No harm meant, Mr. ----" began the American soothingly.

"Malone--Mate Malone!" stormed the angry officer by way of introduction.

"You understand how friends prefer to bunk together instead of with strangers. We thought we would ask you about it."

This soothed the irascible fellow somewhat. Still glowering, he spraddled out of the cabin with the boys after him, and presently indicated one of the small temporary cabins with a jerk of his thumb. As to whether his intentions were kindly or cruel, Madden could not determine, but their lodgment was a low kennel-like place, the smallest in the row. Nevertheless it was very clean and smelled of new lumber. It held four bunks, two on a side. The boys dropped their luggage inside with the pleasure of travelers reaching their destination.

"Got no fire arms nor whiskey?" growled the mate, looking through the

door at his new men.

Both answered in the negative.

"All right; step lively now. We want to raise that waterline 'igh enough to work in the waves before we reach th' Channel."

The lads shut the door after them, then started under Malone's direction for whatever work he had.

They found the whole crew swinging along the hundred foot front of the dock, broadening the brilliant red waterline with all possible dispatch. The reason for attacking the front first was obvious. In case of rough weather, the way of the dock would pile the waves higher ahead than anywhere else. Leonard and his new friend lowered themselves on a swinging platform over the twelve-foot pontoon and joined in the work.

Tug and dock were now passing through the congested traffic of the lower Thames and the enormous English shipping spread in a panorama before them. Here were barges, smacks, scows, sailing vessels; big liners plowing through the press with hoarse whistles; rusty English tramps, that carried the Union Jack to the uttermost ends of the earth. Even a few dreadnoughts lay castled on the broadening waters. On both sides of the river, dull warehouses and factories stretched out rusty wharves, like myriad fingers, to receive the tonnage that converged on this center of the world's activities.

American curiosity almost prevented Madden from working at all. He painted intermittently, between wonders, so to speak. As for Caradoc, he made no pretense to labor, but propped a broad shoulder against the supporting rope, stuck a cigarette under his white mustache and fell to regarding the waterscape in a serious, preoccupied fashion.

"Say, old man," warned Leonard in an undertone, briskly plying his brush, "that mate looked down at us then. He'll raise a rough house if we don't get a move on and keep our section up."

Caradoc came out of his muse, tossed his cigarette into the swirling water a few feet below him. "Impudent chap!" he snapped.

Madden laughed. "His trade is to get work out of men and it requires impudence."

Caradoc grunted something, perhaps an assent. The two fell briskly to work and soon made an impression on the blank iron wall. At first the American chatted of this and that, rehearsing his own aimless ramblings as men will, but presently he observed that Smith was painting away and paying no attention to his partner's chatter.

"What's the worry, old man?" queried Madden lightly. "'Fraid the paint'll give out?"

"I presume they have sufficient paint," answered Smith stiffly, as he

flapped his brush across the bright head of a big rivet.

"Why--yes," agreed Madden, a little taken aback, "but you look like you might be getting up a grouch at something--"

"About time to pull up, isn't it?" interrupted Smith.

The brusqueness in the speech grated on Madden, but they hauled up their platform without further remarks on either side. The Englishman seemed to work slower than the American, but somehow covered as much ground.

The coat of red paint had risen considerably on the dock when the bosun's whistle gave a faint shrill from the deck. The whole string of painters facing the pontoon's bow began hauling up their platforms. The lads followed their example.

Malone was hastily pulling his crew together in the mess room on the middle pontoon. He came by waving his short heavy arms in the direction of the long eating room.

"Get along aft; you're to sign the ship's papers!" he bawled monotonously. "Get along!"

Most of the men walked faster when the mate flung his arms at them. Leonard felt the impulse to step livelier but held himself to Caradoc's deliberate stride.

In the mess room the boys found a compact, black-haired, serious-faced young man of unknown nationality reading the ship's articles in an expressionless tone. Nobody listened, although various penalties were prescribed for desertion, quitting ship without leave, disobedience of orders, each with its particular fine or punishment. When the reader finished, the men walked around one by one and signed the register. Then a copy of the articles was pointed out on the side of the mess room, and again no one observed.

The performance was hardly completed when the gong rang for supper. There were not more than a dozen men at mess. Most were of stolid English navy type, dirty uncouth men whose gross irregular features told of low birth and evil life. The foreign element comprised an Irishman named Mike Hogan and the Frenchman whom the boys had met when they first came aboard. The crowd called him Dashalong. Upon inquiry, Leonard found it to be Deschailion. The young man who read the articles was named Farnol Greer. However, he proved a silent, taciturn youth, who seemed to converse with no one and to have no friends.

In the long narrow eating cabin mingled the clean smell of newly sawed lumber and the odor of poor cookery. The meal proved rather worse than ordinary steerage food. After the first taste Smith put it by, grumbling. Leonard, who was hungry, consumed about half of his.

Beef stew and boiled white fish formed the menu. Perhaps there is nothing quite so slippery and disheartening as boiled white fish grown

luke warm or cold. The navvies ate ravenously enough, but Hogan and Deschaillon were not so wolfish.

Mike speared a bit on his fork and regarded it sadly. "This fish reminds me uv a fun'ril," he observed, "an' yonder lad looks to be chief mourner," he nodded toward Farnol Greer.

"He ees not mourning over the feesh," declared Deschaillon gayly. "He ees struck on heemself, and found his affection ees misplaced."

Madden laughed. The spirits of the Celt and the Gaul seemed to improve as their fare grew worse.

"Oh, av course a frog-atin' Frinchman loike you, Dashalong, would think any kind av fish a reg'lar feast."

Deschaillon leaned over to inspect his portion. "Now eet does very well--to wax zee mustache, Mike." He twirled his own.

Caradoc grunted disapproval of such doubtful table talk, arose and left the rough company and rough fare with supercilious condemnation.

"Your friend's appetite sames as dilicate as his wor-rkin' powers," observed Hogan as he watched the Englishman stoop and disappear through the doorway.

Madden smiled. "We didn't work any too hard this afternoon, did we?"

Mike and Pierre proved droll companions, ready to jibe at anyone or anything in perfect good nature, so that it was an hour before Leonard strolled outside. As he had no further duty, he climbed a long ladder to the top of the high dock wall and walked forward toward the bridge.

By this time the sun had set and left the world filled with a luminous yellow afterglow. The estuary of the Thames had widened abruptly off Sheerness, and far to the south was the dim line of chalk cliffs that England thrusts toward France. Overhead stretched a translucent yellow-green sky with the long black line of the _Vulcan's_ smoke marking it.

Leonard moved across the bridge slowly.

There was almost perfect silence over the great structure below him, save for the slow creaking of new joints in the iron plates, the softened chough-choughing of the tug ahead.

There were several paint barrels piled up on the bridge, slung there no doubt by machinery, to prevent the men having to toil up with it from below. The boy leaned against one of these barrels, gazing into the yellow flood of light that bathed everything in its own saffron. His heart beat high with a feeling of the hazard of the ocean. He tried to fancy what would happen to the huge dock as it adventured through tropic seas. His imagination readily conjured up a kaleidoscope of

incidents--cannibal proas, shark fights, sea serpents, typhoons, mutinies, what not.

And at every turn of the tug's propeller all this bright dashing world of adventure drew nearer and nearer. For some reason he recalled what the bystander on the dock had said--"Everything is unreasonable at sea," and he laughed aloud.

As a sort of gloomy echo of his laugh, his ear caught a groan from the other side of the paint barrels. With the utmost surprise and curiosity, he straightened up and moved silently around the pile.

Then he saw the tall Englishman leaning across the bridge rail, face in hands, staring at the line of land silhouetted in black between the brazen sky and the reflecting water. Smith's whole attitude was so suggestive of trouble that Madden moved forward in generous sympathy.

The Englishman heard the movement, straightened, looked around; his long face wore a look of suffering in the colored light.

"Sorry you're so blue, old man," sympathized the American, making a guess at the cause of his bad spirits. "Let's have a turn around this old tub and forget homesickness."

"Home!" echoed Caradoc gruffly. "It's--it's all England I'm leaving. It's England and honor and--" he stiffened suddenly and snarled out: "Do you think I climbed away up here on this bridge hunting your company?"

Leonard was utterly nonplussed by this shift. "I'm sure I meant no harm--"

"Certainly not," sneered Caradoc. "You Americans have the undesired friendliness of stray puppies--you have no conception of personal reserve--you turn your souls into moral vaudevilles."

A flush of indignation swept over Madden. "That's no decent return for a friendly approach!" he declared hotly, "and I'd rather be a puppy than a hedgehog any day!"

Caradoc made no reply, but seemed to erase Madden from his mind and shifted slowly around to his staring and his thoughts.

This last bit of impudence fairly clanged on Madden's temper. He felt a desire to tell this coxcomb just what he thought of him. If Caradoc had remained facing the American, Madden might have done so, but it feels foolish to rail at a profile. Madden wheeled angrily, tramped across the bridge, then down the high side of the dock toward the ladder. From far below him came Hogan's voice, a concertina, and the sound of clacking feet. Apparently the Irishman had induced someone to dance a jig.

CHAPTER II

ADVENTURE BEGINS

Fortunately for the British Towing and Shipping Company, the next few days were glassy calm, and as the *_Vulcan_* coughed along the South England coast, the crew had fair opportunity to raise the coat of paint out of danger.

They had finished the ends by this time and were now working on the high exterior sides of the dock. The labor was distasteful to Leonard, not within itself, but it is disagreeable to dangle in midair over a huge iron wall, blue water gurgling below, and sit beside a man who has affronted one by calling one's manners puppyish and one's soul a vaudeville. Even if one really be fond of puppies and enjoy vaudeville, the implication is unpleasant.

On the third morning after, Caradoc wielded his brush listlessly and looked sick. His fine shoulders sagged and his eyes were hollow in his long face. Leonard, whose spirits naturally mounted with the sun, found it hard to continue the three days' silence. He wanted to talk about the splendid English coast with its gemlike villages set in green, the red-sailed fishing smacks, the social gulls feeding in the long trail behind the dock. It is difficult to be reserved under such conditions. Then, too, Caradoc was so obviously ill, Madden felt sorry for the fellow.

As for the Englishman, he paid little attention to his working mate, but languidly splashed the iron wall, and himself, with red paint. After some two hours' work, he stood up on the platform as if sore, made an irresolute start, finally climbing the rope ladder to the top. Madden wondered about the queer fellow, but was rather relieved by his absence. Within twenty or thirty minutes, however, he was back, but in perceptibly better spirits. He worked briskly for a few minutes, then dropped brush in pail and turned to Leonard as if no shadow had crossed their acquaintance.

"Well, Madden, we can hardly blame the old Phoenicians for guarding the secret of the Cassiterides, can we?"

The American almost fell off the platform in surprise.

"Why--er--no, I don't blame 'em," he blurted, not having a ghost of a notion what the Englishman was talking about. "No, I--I never blamed 'em a bit--never did."

"Those were poetic days, Madden."

The American stared, his mind as much at sea as his body.

"Think of that Phoenician sailing his galley for the Isles of Tin. The Romans follow him, day after day, week after week. But does he betray

the secret of Tyre's wealth?" Caradoc made a gesture. Madden was about to answer that he didn't know, when the orator went on.

"He does not. Rather than expose the rich mines of Cornwall, he dashes his galley upon a reef and risks his life among the early English barbarians."

"Was it here where that happened?" asked Madden interestedly, fishing some such tale from the bottom of his recollection.

Caradoc stood upright on the swinging platform, hands thrust in jacket pockets, thumbs out, Oxford fashion. His tall form swayed slowly with the steady rise and fall of the dock.

"Certainly, the Cassiterides is Cornwall, and that point of land just ahead is the spot where the Tyrian wrecked his ship, so the legend goes."

Madden's eyes followed Caradoc's gesture. "I've read that story, but I never thought of seeing the place."

"Cornwall is entrancing if you care for antiquities," went on Smith in the polished style of a collegiate. "Four or five miles up that cape are the Boskednan Circles and the Dawns-un, old Druidic stone temples. Just across the peninsula is St. Ives, where the virgin Hya appeared miraculously. It is really regrettable, Madden, that you are leaving England before you tour Cornwall. A wonderful little island, England. A land to live for--or to die for, God willing."

Caradoc stared toward the coast, frowning, with the old familiar look of pain coming into his eyes. His hearer and his extemporaneous lecture plainly slipped out of his mind.

"You've been along here before," suggested Madden with a hope of diverting Smith's mind.

"Oh, yes," replied the Englishman gloomily.

"Sailor, perhaps?"

"Yes."

"Not another dry dock, I trust," laughed Madden, turning to work.

"No."

"Windjammer?"

"Yes."

Leonard nodded at his painting. "Fishing smack, I'll bet."

The cross-questioning was interrupted by a raucous voice overhead, and

both boys looked up to see the mate's thick torso hanging over the rail. He was shaking his fist at the tall Englishman.

"W'ot you think we brought you along for?" he bawled savagely. "To give lectures? If you don't paint and quit blowin', you win' bag, I'll ship you at Penzance!"

Caradoc's face went white, leaving threadlike purple veins showing on nose and cheeks. "I'm willing to do my duty," he said with a quiver in his tone. He glanced at his empty paint bucket. "If I'm to work, bring me paint--I'm out!"

Caradoc seemed to be able to make the mate madder and do it quicker than anyone else.

"Paint! Bring you paint!" roared Malone, apoplectic. "Git out an' git your paint, or I'll put a longer, uglier head than that on your shoulders."

Caradoc gave a shrug, stooped for the bucket, then began composedly climbing the ladder straight at the sputtering officer.

"Be careful there, Smith," warned Madden in an undertone; "he'd as soon as not slug you without giving you a dog's chance."

Caradoc said nothing but continued his climbing. The men on the platform fore and aft ceased work, watching the mate and the climbing man intently. The silence following the usual drone of conversation was noticeable.

Caradoc was just reaching up to climb into Malone, when at that moment something happened that drew and held everybody's attention.

The whole face of the sea around the dock broke into a sort of sputtering. The ocean seemed to boil. To his astonishment, Madden saw the commotion was caused by millions of small fishes leaping and running along the surface.

Cries came from all over the dock at once: "Pilchards! Pilchards are shoaling! Pilchards are shoaling!"

The few gulls in the sky now seemed to multiply and settled in a fluttering cloud to strike such easily captured food. Among the press of little fish leaped cod, hake, dog fish, all feasting on the annual migration of the pilchards. The crew on the dock scrambled up and over the sides, flung down boxes, buckets, anything and scooped the fish from the sea.

The diversion saved the Englishman from any bellicose intention of the mate, who hurried off to take a hand in the sport. Madden sat on his platform watching the fun, for it was a remarkable sight. Caradoc swung around on the ladder facing Leonard.

"There, Madden," he cried, "is a sight characteristic of no other sea. Every season Cornish fisheries capture millions of these fish. They pickle 'em, can 'em. They even sell them to you Yankees for sardines. You are fortunate to have seen this phenomenon."

Leonard studied the novel sight. Hundreds of fishing smacks converged on the area where the pilchards were breaking, their red sails glowing warmly against the green of the land and the blue of the sea. Gulls whirled about the tall dock, filling the air with thin creakings. Madden admired the sudden picturesque activity. Some of the smacks were so close now that he could see their long trawls stringing out behind, and little figures running about their decks, winding in nets, bringing in a flood of silver fishes.

The metallic noise of the gulls grew so loud as to blanket all else. In the midst of this fluttering and shrieking, Leonard heard the shouting of human voices. He paid little attention. Then some of the men on top of the dock's side began yelling. At that moment, Caradoc shouted down Madden's name. Madden looked up. On the instant the swinging platform under him tipped violently.

Next moment, Madden saw right beneath him a smack. The vessel was floating by, and the peak of its boom scraped the high iron wall of the dock. This boom had struck his platform.

Madden clutched impotently at the blank iron wall, then flung an arm for one of the supporting ropes and missed.

"Jump to me!" yelled Smith. The Englishman was still on the rope ladder, but had climbed down rapidly when he saw his mate in distress. The boom was tilting the platform straight up and down. The deck of the smack below promised to mash the American into a pulp. The fishermen were shouting. Leonard made a falling leap toward Caradoc's extended hand. He caught it in both his own. The Englishman's other hand gripped the rope rung. Unfortunately Madden's body flung out with a twisting motion, and he could feel Smith's arm grow tense in an effort to keep from being wrenched.

Madden was scrambling with his legs for a foothold on the ladder when the boom dragged past the platform and the whole thing swung back on the distressed boys. A flying end caught Madden in the side. The blow sickened him. He clung desperately to Caradoc's hand, his grip weakening, his senses swimming with the feeling of an awful void beneath him. The strength in his fingers gave way, and he felt a chill sensation before the coming downward plunge. But even in his twisted, straining position, the Englishman's long fingers did not loose Madden's wrist. A moment later, Leonard had lost consciousness completely, swung in midair, limp as a bag.

The American had a dim impression of being drawn to the top of the side wall, and the crew clustering about him. Someone splashed water in his face and the world cleared up before his eyes. The young fellow called Greer was whisking on the water, but when Madden opened his eyes, he set

the bucket down and returned silently to his work.

"There, ye're bether now," grinned Hogan stooping over the wounded man. "That platform caught yez a little love lick in the slats--break any of 'em?"

Leonard reached across and felt his side. "How came the smack there?" he inquired weakly. "Why didn't I see it?"

"Ye was lookin' astern, an' th' vissil barely turned the bow of th' dock an' her boom kissed us all th' way down. I yilled at ye, so did Dashalong an' th' silent man. Thin I got so interested in l'arnin' he could say a worrd, I quit lookin' at you completely."

"I couldn't hear for the gulls--I'll be all right in a minute."

Leonard looked around and saw Caradoc massaging his twisted arm. He had an impulse to thank the Briton, but he changed it to, "I hope your arm isn't badly wrenched, Smith."

"Quite all right," assured the tall fellow cheerfully.

The men began to scatter to work again.

That day at lunch the ship's fare was garnished with an abundance of delicious pilchards. The whole crew wore a holiday air. During the afternoon the men sang at their work and labored so merrily and so well that a broad wash of paint was added to the outside wall.

Leonard, whose side was sore enough from the thump, did not work. Even the mate suggested that he take a leave of absence, and stay in his bunk if he would.

The boy went at once to his cabin and began hunting in his suit case for a little medicine chest which he always carried. He wanted arnica for his bruised side. To his surprise he could not find it. He gave his bag a thorough search, tumbling garments, trinkets, souvenirs, curiosities, helter skelter over his bunk, but failed to find his case.

The loss of the medical carry-all distressed Madden. It had proved useful in the past. However, he hunted up the mate and begged a liniment, which must have had a wonderful virtue if a powerful odor was any indication.

Leonard rubbed the stuff on his side and turned into his bunk. His side grew so sore he wondered whether or not his ribs really were broken after all. In his dark den he could still hear the gulls wailing, although the tug had passed the major portion of the shoaling pilchards. There also came to him the constant creaking of the dock, the slow dull recurrence of the ground swell against her bow. The boy's mind centered fretfully on his lost medicine chest. No doubt it was stolen, and he began wondering which of the crew had taken it. His suspicion played idly over the crew, and then settled on the youth called Greer. His

reason for this was that Greer said very little. Madden thought this must be the sign of a guilty conscience.

He did not brood long, however, as the monotonous sounds exerted a hypnotic effect on his senses. Once or twice as he was almost falling asleep, he felt himself clinging desperately to Caradoc's hand, his grip weakening, the fearsome void gaping under him, then he would awake with a start that sent a knife of pain through his bruised ribs. After that he would be forced to feel once more to test his costal region for broken bones. Finally the vision failed to paint itself, or did not rouse him, and he slept.

After an indeterminate interval, he was awakened by someone entering the room. It was fairly dark now and by lifting a head over the side of his berth, he saw the outline of the Frenchman standing by the door. Madden thought of the stolen medicine chest and remained silent.

The Gaul was about to withdraw when Madden called out.

"What is it, Deschaillon?"

"I just came by to say your frien' ees in trouble. Zay play cards in zee salon. Smeeth he win beaucoup. Zay quarrel, perhaps zay fight. He ees your frien', and--"

Leonard smiled when he heard the mess hall dignified into a salon; but at the latter end of the sentence he sat up suddenly in his bunk and began pulling on his jacket despite the twinges in his side.

"Eh, how's that--fight?"

At that instant Hogan lolled against the jamb and announced his entrance with a laugh.

"What's this Deschaillon's telling me, Mike--the men fighting over cards?"

"Sure now I heard him and told him not to be wakin' a sick man up for sich trifles. They was a few raymarks ixchanged, but nawthin' ser'us." He turned reproachfully on the Gaul. "Nixt time be advised by me and don't be wakin' a sick man for nawthin'."

The two walked away and Leonard leaned back in his bunk, quite sleepless now. He stared into the blackness, his mind a moving picture show of the last three days. The Englishman was chief actor on this stage, and his disagreeably mixed character puzzled and disturbed the American. Caradoc's language and manners showed him to be a man of breeding, but he was full of contradictory habits. His uncosmopolitan moodiness, his vulgar quarreling over cards, were typical instances.

Leonard almost regretted that he had formed an uncomfortable intimacy with the fellow, but he could not very well break it off now since Smith had saved him from a fall that might easily have proved fatal.

Just then the Englishman entered the cabin silently. He lighted the bracket lamp quietly and looked about to satisfy himself that his mate was asleep. Later Madden heard him open his big kit bag and take something out. A moment after, the odor of alcohol scented the little cabin.

Leonard lifted his head and saw the fellow under the lamp, just lifting the silver cap to his lips. A disagreeable smile moulded the long face, wrinkled the nostrils and slid away under the choppy blond mustache. The strong light from the overhead lamp brought out an almost sinister countenance.

The thought that such a man had probably saved his life filled Madden with a kind of repulsion. He turned in his bunk with a little disgusted grunt.

Caradoc dropped the little cap and came to the bunk.

"Side hurt, old man?" he asked anxiously.

"Yes--no--nothing the matter."

"Oh, maybe you don't like this odor--forgot you didn't drink." He stepped quickly to the kit bag, replaced the bottle and cap inside and closed it. Like many alcohol users he labored under the delusion that alcohol was not offensive on his breath.

"Nervous shock you received seemed to upset you more than the punch," he diagnosed in a concerned voice. "You Americans are a high-strung nation." He paused a moment philosophically. "I daresay you're right about not drinking spirits. With your nervous organism, it would set you on fire. But our foggy English climate and stodgy people call for it. Sets our pulses going. A thought just here--Climate and Alcoholism. Not a bad subject for a scientific investigation, is it?"

Madden grunted.

"I'll blow out the light unless you'll have me rub some more of that villainous stuff on your ribs?"

The patient declined this.

"Need water or medicine during the night throw your boots at me--I'm hard to wake,"

Then he puffed out the light.

[Illustration: Out There Lay Adventure, Mystery--More Than Either Dreamed.]

CHAPTER III

THE LAST OF THE _VULCAN_

A temporary rudder had been installed on the unwieldy dry dock, and each twenty-four hours Mate Malone detailed seven men to stand watch, which gave the regulation dog watch, although there was no need of it with a double complement of men. Thanks to his bruised ribs, the American had thus far escaped duty at the wheel. About a week after the pilchard incident, he reported ready for this service, when a twist of circumstance rendered it unnecessary.

A long stretch of fair weather had been enjoyed by the dock painters on a steadily dropping barometer. On this particular day a cold puffy wind developed out of the northeast, bringing with it a rack of clouds and spreading a choppy sea below.

From where Madden painted on the corner of the dock, he had a good view of these chasing waves that rose a moment in the gray seascape, nodded a white cap, then dropped back into the waste of water.

"Wonder if a storm would affect this old box much?" he queried of Caradoc.

"Probably have a chance to see," opined Smith, looking out with a speculative eye. "By the by, what's that?"

Caradoc pointed toward the _Vulcan_, which already exhibited the motion of the rollers.

Madden looked. A sailor stood on the tug's round stern waving two flags toward the dock.

The American arose from his work, funneled his hands before his lips and called to the man, but the spitting wind whisked away his words, and the sailor went on with his flag.

Madden regarded it attentively a few moments. "He's wig-wagging--wants to speak to the mate. I'll go for him." He trotted aft.

Leonard found the officer in his cabin and told his mission. The mate arose at once and came out with the lad. "Don't know w'ot 'e wants, do you?" he inquired.

"I only spelled his message till I found he wanted you."

"Huh--understand flag signals, do ye?" grunted Malone, shifting his inflamed eyes to Madden's face.

"Learned it in my engineering course," explained the lad.

The two passed on to the bow, when the sailor on the tug starting waving once more. Mate Malone watched the man until he had finished spelling out the message, then he turned to Leonard and asked:

"Know w'ot 'e said?"

"Parker's sick and they need you," translated the American.

"Good," grinned the mate with more fellowship than he had ever shown before. "Now, lookee here, young chap. They're going to send a cutter for me to come and take Parker's place. You strike me as a decent sort, so I'll leave you in my berth till I get back. You won't have nothin' to do hexcept tell off th' watches an' keep th' boys paintin'. Softer'n your fo'cs'l job, though you won't git no hextra pay--wot about it?"

"That goes with me," agreed Madden readily.

"All right, you signal me about anything you don't understand. Make the men step, lively, same as if you was me."

By this time the tug had slowed down a trifle and a boat put out from her. While it came bobbing over the water, Malone bawled his men together and briefly explained his transfer of authority.

"Be back jest as soon as Parker's all right," he said as he climbed from dock to dancing boat below. "And, by the way, Mr. Madden, you will bunk in my cabin."

That "Mister Madden" from the mate was the great seal of authority. The men looked at him with new eyes.

Somehow, Malone's confidence pleased Madden. That uncouth, bullet-headed officer had not spent his whole life on the high seas, belaboring all classes of men into serviceableness, without being able to judge the genus homo pretty shrewdly.

The navvies accepted the new officer in stolid submission, but Hogan clapped his hands. "Hey, a spache fr-rom th' new boss!" he grinned.

Leonard laughed. "My speech is to get back to work, and I'll do the same," said the boy, returning to his bucket.

This appealed to the cockneys, who gave a dull English cheer, and then everybody settled back to their tasks once more.

"What's the use in your painting, Madden?" asked Caradoc, "You don't have to."

Leonard was amused, "They tell me a chap whose work is no bigger than his contract, never gets a contract for bigger work."

"What's that?" frowned Smith. "That sounds like Yankee smartness to me--seems to make a great deal more sense than it really does."

"Anyway, I don't want to rat on you fellows, just because Malone left me in charge for a day or so."

Caradoc made no answer, but stared after the rowboat which was just rounding into the tug. "If I'd played up to that officer a bit," he smiled dourly, "I could have had the mate's berth, Madden."

The American glanced up. The Englishman's smile recalled the look Leonard had seen under the bracket lamp.

"Well, there's very little in it for anyone, I'm thinking."

"Certainly, certainly," Smith shrugged a broad shoulder and the subject was dismissed.

The blustery weather increased steadily, and by lunch time the wind was blowing half a gale. Regiments of waves marched against the dock and snapped spray high up the red sides. Their constant blows rang through the big iron structure. A feeling of security came to Madden as he saw the gray-green waves break white, and yet not shake the huge barge sufficiently to tip the paint from the men's buckets. Certainly the dock was monstrous.

The sea grew rougher as evening wore on and finally the boy went to the mate's cabin to pick out his men for the night's work. After his own cramped quarters, Malone's room proved delightful. Three glass ports admitted light. A table in the center of the room spread over with a Mercator's projection showed that Malone dutifully pricked the _Vulcan's_ course on the chart, although it was not required of him. A sextant and quadrant told the American that the stolid Briton worked out his own reckonings. The sight of these things filled the boy with a respect for the uncouth fellow. He understood how doggedly Malone must have labored to acquire mastery over the instruments of navigation. Beyond this there were a number of flaring chromos on the walls, a decanter of wine and glasses in a chest. He found what he was looking for in the desk drawer, a roll of men checked off for watches. The coming night was arranged for, but for morning, the names of Heck Mulcher, Ben Galton and Caradoc Smith stood in order. Madden was just marking these men when there was a tap at the door.

Upon call, Gaskin, the cook, entered, bearing a big tray of dishes, "Yer dinner, sir," he said, very respectfully.

Madden had not anticipated having the mate's meals served to him, and for a moment he came near asking the cook if he had not made a mistake; but the steaming tray and the pleasant odors kept the question unspoken. Only with this diet before him did he realize that he had been fairly starving on the poor ship's rations.

When Gaskin placed the soup on the table, Madden became aware that the dock was rolling rather heavily, for the liquid spilled over the side of the plate, while dishes and tureens went coasting up and down the

boards.

"Getting rough outside," remarked the lad to the servant, who was lighting a lamp.

"A bit 'eavier, sir," replied Gaskin self effacingly.

Madden held the soup plate in his hand for steadiness, and sipped the hot, satisfying liquid while the great dock rose and fell. The fact that he was really in command of the vast iron fabric put the American in a serious humor. He ate dinner slowly, listening to the heavy clang of the waves against the iron hull, and to the wind whining and sobbing over the great metal sides.

When he had finished his meal, the youth arose with the intention of going to the sailors' mess house to see about the watches. He had no sooner stuck his head out of the door, however, than a whisk of spray leaped at him out of the darkness and drove him inside. He was preparing to venture out again, when Gaskin opened a locker and brought out an oilskin.

"Hit'll 'elp you keep dry, sir," holding up the garment.

Swathed in its folds, Madden made a new start and walked out on the heaving, shifting pontoon.

Outside a renewed noise smote his ears. The air was full of flying spume that whipped in through the stern of the dock. Malone had planked up this open gateway to a height of thirty feet, which made it forty-two feet above the salt water line, but the spray already leaped this barrier and pelted throughout the dark heavy iron canyon.

The dock was made in three huge sections, in order that it might be self-docking when fouled. Now in the darkness, the groaning of these joints smote the blustering gale in a sort of vast distress. The many iron stanchions for the shoring of vessels began thrumming a devil's tattoo against the high iron walls, like a myriad giant fingers.

In the corners of the bow pontoon, Madden could see the signal lights heaving and dropping with the motion of the vast fabric. Now and then he caught a glimmer of the tug's light, and its erratic motions told how the staunch little vessel fared.

There was a faint radiance around the shut door of the mess hall, and Madden walked toward it rather unsteadily, with the spumy brine dashing into his face.

A signal lantern was attached to one of the shoring stanchions near the mess hall, and as Madden moved into its dull glow, another bundled form entered from the other side. The figure stopped and saluted.

"If you please, sor," he bawled in Madden's ear, "th' nixt watch is sick."

"Sick! The whole watch sick? What do you mean, Mike?"

The Irishman grinned in the dim light, "Yis, sor, they're in their bunks wishin' to die. They've niver been in a blow before. It's say-sick they ar-re."

Both men were holding to the stanchion.

"Seasick!" ejaculated Madden. "How about Heck Mulcher and Ben Galton?" he recalled the names on the list.

"The whole sit of navvies, sor, ar-re down on their backs, not carin' at all, at all, whether we float, sink, swim, or go to Davy Jones' locker."

"Well, Caradoc's next--come with me."

They took hold of each other and went sliding and slipping along the iron deck, now skating down hill, now climbing a sharp tilt, shoulders hunched against the gusty spume, until they reached Smith's little cabin past the mess hall. Here they paused and rapped on the door. As this could not have been heard inside for the wind and the waves and the groaning of the dock, they pushed open the shutter.

Madden no sooner entered than his nostrils caught a pervading odor of alcohol. The Englishman's long figure lounged fully dressed on a bunk; a demijohn was jammed behind his kit bag to keep it from rolling.

"Smith!" called Madden, "I'll have to ask you to stand watch to-night; nearly all the navvies are sick."

Caradoc lifted his head from the bunk and blinked at the two men in the door. "What?" he asked vacantly.

"You're to stand watch to-night," Madden raised his voice.

"Stand watch!" cried the Englishman, sitting up, his face flushing darkly under the bracket lamp. "You _have_ turned master, haven't you--bootlicker ordering me to stand watch!"

"It's your turn on the list!" commanded Madden brusquely, with ill-concealed disgust that Smith should be maudlin just when needed.

"My turn--Bah! I'd have been mate myself if I had toadied and flattered that upstart Malone as you did!" He laughed sarcastically. "Then I could have had decent dinners, been wearing the mate's sou'wester, been--"

"Cut it out!" snapped Madden. "Will you do your duty or not?"

The dock gave a great lurch that flattened both men against the door, juggled Caradoc in his berth and sent kit bag and demijohn sliding toward the visitors.

"Not!" bawled Smith. "I, Caradoc Smith-Wentworth, can't think of going to stand watch for a gang of siz-seasick navvies an' a t-toady American Yankee--Not!" he reiterated and laughed in tipsy irony.

A flush of anger went over Madden. He reached down suddenly and caught up the demijohn.

"You--you bet' not drink th-that, y-you little bossy Yankee; it-it'll m-make _you_ d-drunk."

"You sot!" trembled Madden. "Whiskey will not be your excuse next time!" He caught the Irishman's arm, "Come on!" And before Smith realized what had happened, the two men and his liquor were out of the door and gone.

Madden slammed the shutter viciously, and the tilt of a wave helped give it a loud bang. Then he gave the jug a wrathful swing and smashed it against the nearest stanchion.

"Smith'll have some sense when he can't get any more," he shouted in Hogan's ear. Then after a moment, "Is there nobody else to take the watch?"

"There's Dashalong, sir," bellowed Mike, "but he stood last night."

"How about you?" inquired Leonard.

"All roight." The Celt was about to turn for the high bridge at the stern, when Madden stopped him.

"When was your last watch, Mike?"

"This afternoon, sor."

"When did Greer stand watch?"

"He's niver told anywan, sor; I think it must be a saycret."

"Get to your cabin and turn in," directed Madden. "I'll take it myself till midnight, eight bells. Then send Greer."

Hogan saluted in the darkness and turned about for his cabin. Madden began a careful journey aft toward the wheel.

He fought his way to the ladder and climbed up into the night, sometimes clinging like a fly to the underside of the reeling wall, sometimes going up a steep slant. Gusts of spume and foam whipped him all the way up. Once on top of the wall, he clung to the inside rail and began pulling himself carefully around toward the rear bridge. At this height the full force of the wind almost tore him from his reeling anchorage. At last he turned onto the bridge and moved toward the binnacle light.

"You'll find 'er a little 'ard, sir," remarked the steersman as he turned over the wheel to Madden. "Good night, sir."

"Good night," returned the American, and he watched the fellow's form disappear in the darkness.

Madden gripped the spokes of the wheel and fell to watching the signal light in the center of the forward bridge and the stern lantern of the distant tug. These two plunging spots in the black void of night he must keep aligned.

The enormous dock leaped and shivered under his feet. Huge waves roared by, of such vastness that Madden could hear their crests crashing and thundering high above the level of the bridge. These moving mountains shook tons of black water into dim, ghostlike spray, and sent it hissing down into cavernous troughs. The weight of the wind-swept spume flashing out of darkness through the binnacle light almost took the boy off his feet. It pounded his oilskin, stung his face. The enormous iron dock groaned and clanged under the mad bastinado. The long arms of the shoring stanchions smote the walls in a kind of terrific anvil chorus to the blaring orchestra of the tempest. The joints of the three huge pontoons sounded as if they were being rent asunder every moment. One minute the great structure would rise dizzily, high into the black blast, a skyscraper flung up on a mountain Madden could look far below on the lights of the struggling *_Vulcan_*. Up there the storm yelled and screamed at every corner and brace of the weltering dock, and wrenched at the midget helmsman. Then came the sickening drop, down, down, down, into the profound, and the *_Vulcan_* would swing far above her towering consort. For the instant the storm would be blanketed by the prodigious waves. Wild, formless ghosts of foam would stretch wide arms about the falling dock as if they were clasping it into the lowest crypts of the dead, and the night would be filled with a vast and dreadful whispering.

For hours it seemed that every ascent, every descent, must mark the end. But the storm was so terrific, Madden's sense of personal fear was blotted out in the tremendous conflict about him. Indeed, there was something deeply moving, almost gratifying in this elemental rage. Then he discovered that he was taking a part in it. Mechanically he had been straining and pulling at the wheel to hold those signal lights in line. Now he realized that his tiny human force formed a third contender in this vast battle. As he eased the great dock down the rushing sheer of a wave so the shock would not break the straining cable, he had won a point over two violent antagonists. His puny arm, that could raise perhaps two hundred pounds, was lifted against enemies that could fling about billions of tons. Without his force, tug and dock would part company instantly. Each watery mountain that he climbed, each gulf that he fathomed, was a victory over infinite odds.

However, if the man worked with subtlety, the sea likewise worked with subtlety. As the long hours of Madden's watch roared by, one thing was borne in on the youth: the rudder gradually was becoming harder to manage. Madden thought this was caused by the rising storm and strained more rigidly against the wheel.

Then, in the latter part of his vigil, an odd thing happened. A blast of spray struck Madden with some slimy thing that whipped about his neck and chest and almost tore him from the wheel. With convulsive repugnance, he jerked it loose and held the clammy stuff toward the binnacle light. He saw it was seaweed. Presently more strands came beating down on the spume to sting him.

The youth was crouching in his oilskins for protection, when he was surprised by a hand laid on his arm. He looked around and saw it was Deschaillon and the silent Farnol Greer.

"Eet makes bad weather," remarked the Frenchman, peering at the dark rolling Alps about the dock.

"Good thing both of you came," shouted Madden, turning the tiller over to the men. "It's as stiff as cold molasses--how are the sick ones?"

The boy saw Deschaillon grin and twirl his pointed mustache in the faint illumination. "Zay are very numerous," he laughed. But the Gaul had no sooner swung his weight against the wheel than his grimace vanished.

"Parbleu! Here, Greer, pull zis wheel with me!"

The two men caught the spokes and set their weight to it. Greer remained silent.

"Zis ees bad!" exclaimed Deschaillon. "Zis wheel will not go around!"

"What's the matter, do you think?" cried Leonard.

"Zee gear ees clogged, I think me."

"Go get a lantern and some men, Hogan--anybody who isn't lifeless. We've got to do something!"

The Frenchman obeyed, hurrying off into the darkness. Leonard resumed his place at the wheel with Greer to aid him. But both men could not swing the big dock around. The tiller was growing utterly unmanageable. Nearly every dash of foam brought with it biting bits of seaweed now. The silent Greer endured the whipping without wincing or speaking. Even in the midst of their work, Leonard found time to wonder why this fellow had stolen his medicine chest.

Presently the two helmsmen could barely turn the wheel. Madden could feel the jerking of the cable even through the great mass of pitching iron. Then the wheel clamped viselike. The dock's headlight and the intermittent glow of the tug teetered, swung out of line, crossed each other, like dancing fires. In a sort of panic, the two strained at the solid wheel. A huger wave came roaring by, flung the enormous square prow high in air. As it fell off with a shock, Madden felt a little quiver pass over the lumbering pontoons. The dock ceased taking the upheaved water with her slow, constant, aggressive movement.

The cable had parted!

Madden wondered dully what sort of cataclysm had occurred on the little tug at that tremendous strain.

Both men still hung to the hand-grips on the useless wheel as the dock rose and dropped, thundered and groaned. Now and then from the storm-swept wave tops Madden could catch the glimmer of the _Vulcan's_ light. This slipped farther and farther into the void, heaving night, then he saw it no more.

A sense of vast desolation swept over the American, and he was still staring into the black pandemonium ahead when Deschaillon, Hogan and a third man came struggling toward him.

"You may go back!" he yelled wearily above the uproar. "Go back--there's nothing to do. The cable's broke--the _Vulcan_ is gone."

CHAPTER IV

AN INTERRUPTED MEETING

Convinced that there was nothing else to be done on the big dock, Madden went to his cabin, threw himself on the bunk, and there tumbled and tossed through the stormy night, sleeping brokenly and dreaming of the missing _Vulcan_.

Finally a bleary dawn whitened his cabin ports and the lad scrambled into damp clothes, picked up the mate's battered telescope and went on deck.

He fully expected to see the _Vulcan_ lying close by, but as he glanced around in the dull light, an extraordinary scene shunted all thoughts of the tug from his mind. The wind had lulled, but there still rolled high a most unusual ocean. As far as he could see moved a long solemn procession of hills covered with splotches and serpentine lines of grays, olives, yellows--an ocean in motley. The great waves wove these sinuous markings up and down, in and out, confusing the eye with changing mazes.

Madden went forward and studied the nearer formations under the dock's prow. This astonishing effect was caused by seaweed. It was the seaweed spray of this seaweed ocean that had whipped him during the night.

A glance toward the stern of the dock solved the mystery of the balky steering gear. The temporary sheathing was choked with the slimy stuff. Tons of it had beaten over into the dock so that there was a week's work of cleaning ahead. The whole interior of the pontoons looked gutted; empty kegs, barrels had gone overboard, boats had been washed away, the

big coal pile was scattered like pebbles and some half of it lost. And one odd trifle gripped Madden's heart--the fresh paint over which the crew had toiled so patiently looked old and dingy.

As he studied the scene, two seasick navvies tottered out on deck to sniff the clean air. They dismally surveyed the traces of the storm. Then they moved weakly toward the boy, who was now scrutinizing the horizon with his glass.

"See any sign of 'er, sir?" asked Galton saluting.

Madden took down the binoculars. "Not a trace--feel better?"

"Some better, sir, but my stomach is still like th' hocean, sir, a bit unsettled. May I arsk where we are, sir? I never saw such streaky water before."

"Sargasso Sea," replied Leonard.

Galton grunted and stared at the spangled waves. Under its load of seaweed, the sea was falling rapidly, and presently other seasick navvies came on deck. A dismal lot they made, pasty and sick and draggled.

"You fellows that are able," Madden addressed the group, "get buckets and shovels and pile up that scattered coal. The exercise will make you feel better. When the sea is smoother, we'll rig a jury mast on the forward bridge for a signal."

A few of the men were still too sick, but most of the crowd shuffled off to work. Some of the laborers drew off their pea jackets as they went, for the murky day was filled with a rising humid warmth.

Coal piling was just getting under way in the heaving dock, when the door to Caradoc's cabin swung open and the Englishman stepped out.

A glance at the tall fellow told Madden how he fared. The narrow-set eyes were inflamed, the long bronze face had lost firmness and seemed inclined to sag in lines.

"Smith," called Madden friendly, "you may help pile coal if you feel like it."

"I--that demijohn that you took last night," began the Briton nervously.

"Yes," Madden became serious.

"I want it, if you please."

Madden looked at the unstrung fellow. "Can't get it, Smith; you've had too much already."

"Can't get my own property?" demanded Caradoc, raising his voice so all

the men could hear.

"No," snapped Madden, "you know sailors are not allowed to keep liquor in their dunnage."

"That's my demijohn and I'll----"

"I smashed it, and the pieces washed overboard long ago."

"Overboard!" cried the big fellow. He turned hot eyes seaward as if searching the waters, then for the first time noticed the fantastic ocean around him. He stared at it with a strange expression.

"What--what is that--where are we, Madden?" he asked with a catch in his breath.

The fellow's tremulous condition touched the American. "Tug broke away last night--we're adrift in the Sargasso."

A look of relief came over the long face, but he still gazed at the serpentine patternings. "I--I thought I was seeing--ugh, isn't it horrible!"

"You're unstrung, Caradoc; better go lie down," suggested Madden in considerate tones.

The mood of the Briton underwent a characteristic quick shift. "Me lie down?" he rasped. "I'll have my property. You're grabbing authority fast enough, but you'll learn Englishmen don't submit to impositions. Threw it overboard!" he laughed with sour incredulity. "Bet you have it in your cabin."

The men stopped work, gaping at the insubordination. Madden flushed under the implication. He stepped forward to smash the long insolent face and white mustache, but it was plain the Englishman was on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

Madden caught himself, stood drawing short breaths through expanded nostrils. "Go to your bunk, Caradoc, and wait till you're sane," he ordered in fairly even tones, then turned abruptly, leaving the big fellow scowling and biting his choppy mustache.

The navvies turned back to their work, distinctly disappointed; they had expected a fight.

Within the next few days the crew dropped into the routine of derelict life. When the sky cleared and the sea flattened, it left the big dock amid breathless heat beneath a molten tropical sky.

As far as the eye could reach, the castaways saw no signs of life, not a sail, not a smoke, not a gull, not even the ripple of a wave; nothing but gaudy, motionless markings from one flat horizon to the other, dead trceries that swiftly became uninteresting, then monotonous, then

disagreeable, then maddening in the aching eyes of the crew.

As much for the mental health of the men as anything else, Leonard worked them steadily. The day's work was divided into morning and evening watches, because during the midday the iron barge reached a temperature where labor was impossible. During the cooler watches, the men painted desperately to cover the black expanse of the dock with red in order to reflect part of the palpitating heat rays.

Through the idle noon periods, the crew lay about on gunny sacks under improvised awnings, with a man posted on the forward bridge as lookout.

The colorful mazes of the Sargasso were as irritating as flowered wall paper in a sickroom. Even Hogan's and Deschaillon's spirits sagged under the brilliant sweltering sameness. The navvies moved about half naked, and burned brown as nuts. The men fought over trifles. Caradoc became a raw mass of nerves. Once or twice Madden attempted to make things pleasanter for his former friend, but was repulsed rabidly.

Near sunset one day, the American was in the mate's cabin trying to work out his daily reckoning. According to the lad's inexpert calculations, the dock was drifting southeast at the rate of some six or seven miles each day. The dock was a prisoner in that vast central swirl between the North and South Atlantic, that was swinging in stagnating circles when Columbus sailed for the new world; it lay exactly the same when the Norsemen beat down the coasts of Europe; it would continue as long as Africa, Europe, and the Americas deflected ocean currents to produce its motion. Its vast flaring dial was the clock of the world, marking the passing ages. In all that stretch of time the Sargasso must have received strange prey, triremes, caravels, galleons, schooners, men o' war, derelicts ancient and modern, but certainly never before had the art of man placed such a colossal and extraordinary fabric within its swing.

Some such thoughts as these passed through Madden's mind as he pursued his reckoning through trigonometric tables. The light fell redder and dimmer through the ports and he hurried to finish his work before darkness required a lamp in the steamy cabin. A furnace-like breath, laden with malodorous ship smells, drifted in upon him. Madden's thin undershirt clung sweatily to the muscular ridges down his back and moulded the graceful deltoid at the shoulder.

Madden pushed back his figures as Gaskin entered with a tray. The cook's face was scarlet and dripping.

"How much provisions have we on board, Gaskin?"

"Another month's supplies, sir--most of the stores was on the _Vulcan_, sir." Gaskin was dignified even in the heat.

Leonard turned to his map showing the drift of the dock; she was swinging farther and farther out of the trade routes every day. The probability of a rescue steadily decreased.

"In the future, Gaskin, cut rations one third."

The cook covertly swabbed his fat jowl. "Yes, sir--are we about to--" he checked his question. "Yes, sir," he agreed instead.

"Yes," said Leonard, answering the half question, "it's a very necessary precaution, and I hope this small reduction will be sufficient."

"Thankee very much, sir." Gaskin made a little bob and withdrew ceremoniously. Madden knew that Gaskin would continue to bob and thank as long as he had strength to do either.

Reducing the rations was not a sudden impulse with Madden. Ever since the first expectation of the *Vulcan's* return had lost its immediate edge, the American knew that the hope of final rescue depended upon conserving their food supply.

The Sargasso Sea is a great oblong whorl in the Atlantic some four hundred miles wide and fifteen hundred long. Trade routes cut along its northern boundaries, and skirt its southwestern boundary. The dock might very well traverse two thousand miles without seeing a sail. At a rate of six miles a day, it would take eleven months to reach waters in which a rescue might be hoped.

In the meantime, the men grew more and more intractable and insubordinate. That day, when Madden had ordered Heck Mulcher to paint in a certain place, the navy had grumbled out a "That's all very well for you, sir," and the rest was lost in a mutter.

The uncertain discipline of his men made Madden hesitate to cut the rations more decidedly. He felt that his command was questioned by the sailors.

As the boy gloomily dispatched his own supper, his ear caught a faint persistent tapping on the iron wall which faced the mate's cabin. At first he paid no attention to it, assuming it was the contraction of the iron in the cooling temperature of the oncoming night that made the popping. But as he ate it was at last borne in that these taps came in the irregular but orderly sequence of a telegraphic code.

With this thought in mind, he listened attentively. In his work as engineer he had had occasion to study up Morse in heliographing.

It proved one of the most senseless messages the boy had ever translated:

"Tiny arm, men plan mu." Then it was repeated, "Tiny arm, men plan mu." This odd sentence was retapped four or five times and at last ceased. It was perhaps some beginner learning the code, but who in that crew could be working out the telegraphic code? Leonard thought over the men, one by one, but struck nobody who appealed to him as an incipient telegrapher.

The American continued thinking over the incident idly, the odd time the telegrapher had chosen to practice his art, the queer message he had rapped out, when suddenly the message whirled around in his mind, and he perceived he had begun listening in the middle of a very alarming sentence, and had been reading from one middle to the next. The message was: "Men plan mutiny--Arm!" "Men plan mutiny--Arm!"

Madden got to his feet with nervous quickness, and stood listening intently. The question of who sent the message now became of sharp importance. If the men planned mutiny, he could rely upon the telegrapher--perhaps.

There was still enough light in the steamy cabin to discern objects. The American began rummaging through table drawers, lockers and racks for some effective weapon, preferably a revolver.

At that moment he heard footsteps approaching his cabin door. An instant later the shutter swung open without the formality of a knock and two dark figures entered.

"Well?" inquired the American sharply.

"It's us!" put in two voices at once.

"What do you want?"

"It's a bit of a disturbance, Mister Madden, that's----"

"Zat Smeeth," put in a pinched French accent excitedly, "he says zare ees no mate, zat you----"

"Be quiet, Dashalong; th' gintilman can't understhand yer brogue. Smith siz ye have no authority by rights; that we should run things as we plaze; that th' bhoys should have all they want to ate; that we should have rum with aitch male, sor."

"And have you two fellows come to get these things?" inquired Leonard in a hard voice.

"No, no, no," trilled out Deschaillon. "Eem-possible!"

"We sthrolled around to till ye, and bide wid ye a bit, and whiniver th' romp starts, me and Dash here ar-re going to swing partners, eh, Dash?"

"Oh, beg pardon," apologized Leonard frankly, "but I had just been warned and I was looking for trouble--"

"Thot's all r-right, Misther Madden. We ar-re wid ye. I am always for law and ordher, Misther Madden, aven whin I am most disorderly,"

"That ees true, he ees," nodded Deschaillon.

"And I always fight on th' wakest side no matther whether it's roight or wrong."

"Hogan ees a chevalier, no matter eef he does have to paint," corroborated the Frenchman.

"Are all the other boys in with Smith?"

"In with him, sor? Fr-rum th' way they stick around him ye'd think he was a long-lost rilitive come back wid a million pounds."

"I'm glad you fellows are with me, Mike. I was just looking for a gun, but if you'll stand by me--"

"Oh, don't pull a pistol, Mither Madden. A man who would pull a gun in a free-for-all--why he would smash th' fiddles at a dance."

"As you deed not fight zee day Smeeth said you stole zee whiskey, zee men--"

"Think ye'll be aisy," finished Hogan.

"I've just ordered a change in diet," observed Madden dryly.

"Oh, thin ye're goin' to give in to th' spalpeens?"

"No, I've cut rations one-third--and that goes!" There was a finality about the dictum that reassured his allies.

"Uh-huh, Dashalong, I towld ye Mither Madden wasn't no----"

The sentence was interrupted by more feet approaching outside, then a heavy knocking at the door. The two men automatically moved over to Madden's side and faced the entrance.

"Light a lamp, Deschaillon," directed Madden crisply,

"Yis, two of 'em--I want to watch 'em fall out o' th' tail o' me eye."

The Frenchman struck a match for his task. Madden invited the men to enter.

The whole crew came through the door in an orderly but somewhat embarrassed manner. A few of the men had on shirts, some undershirts, others were stripped to the waist, their torsos shining with moisture, Deschaillon's hand trembled slightly as he lighted two bracket lamps, Hogan's little eyes sparkled in anticipation.

"What is it, Galton?" Madden picked out the nearest man brusly.

Gallon shuffled his bare feet on the hot boards. "We hev been thinkin'," he began in a throaty cockney voice, "that since ye was not mate to begin with----" he looked back over the crowd toward the real leader,

Caradoc, for moral support.

The men gave Smith an opening toward the American. In the oppressive heat of the crowded, lamp-lit room everyone was crimson and dripping except Caradoc, whose face was curiously bloodless beneath its sunburn.

"If you are spokesman, Smith, what do you want?" demanded Leonard with rising inflection.

"We are all workmen together," began Caradoc with an obvious effort, panting in the heat. "We're working together, living together, roasting together in this awful furnace. Your authority was only meant for a few days. Now the _Vulcan_ is gone. Nobody knows for how long. We think all men should share and share alike."

"All this demonstration to tell me you want me to eat at the regular mess?"

"No," quivered Caradoc, "it's not just eating. We are not pigs. We want a hand in running things, and we want a portion of rum served at meals, as every decent ship allows. We want--"

"Oh, so it's drink, not eating," satirized Madden.

"Rum's our right as sailormen," mumbled Galton.

"Rum in this climate?" Ridicule tintured the American's tone. "Smith, I believe you once proposed to write an article on Climate and Alcoholism." He turned to the men. "Do you fellows want to build a fire inside yourselves when your lungs and hearts are strained to breaking already?"

"It cools you off in hot weather," answered a voice in the crowd.

"Cools nothing! It heats you up." He leaned forward and tapped the table decisively at each word, "It won't be served, y'understand!" His last tap was a thump. "I'm boss here--no rum! And I'll tell you right now, I'm going to cut your rations one-third, too--hear? Now, get out, all of you--move out o' my cabin!"

There was a shuffling among the navvies toward the arrowy lad who confronted them. Deschaillon balanced himself on one leg, French boxing fashion, ready to kick out with the deadly accuracy of an ostrich. Hogan gave a brief happy laugh, broken by his jump, the crack of his fist against some jaw and the stumbling of a man.

As the fight flamed down the sweating line, Farnol Greer suddenly rushed through the door. "This is mutiny!" he shouted aloud. "Every man-jack will hang for it by the ship's articles! I'm for you, Mr. Madden!" and he made a surprising assault from the rear.

Madden and Caradoc squared away at each other. The Englishman headed his men, his long face sinister in the lamplight. But he had hardly taken a

step when an absolute pallor whitened his countenance, he halted, shaking, gasping, then flung back an arm to Galton.

"I--I'm fizzled out!" he stammered with twitching lips. "Go ahead--fight!"

"You'll hang--you'll hang for it!" bawled Greer, mauling at the men behind.

Caradoc crumpled down on the floor. The navvies, with an English dread of legal authority, hesitated, thinking perhaps Caradoc had deserted them purposely to clear his own skirts in the mutiny.

Madden instantly caught up the loose ends of his raveling authority.

"Lay him on the bunk, Galton!" he commanded.

Galton obeyed instinctively, half carrying the long sagging form to the bunk.

"Hogan!" he thundered at the cyclone on his right, "you and Mulcher stop that! Stop it, Mulcher!" he turned to some of the men. "Part 'em there! Stop 'em!"

Six navvies, three to the man, jumped and grabbed the combatants.

"Just look, will you?" Madden pointed to Caradoc on the bunk. "You fools have followed a man half mad with a sunstroke! He has blown his nerves all to pieces with a rum bottle, and you bunch of mush-heads have mutinied to give him more rum so he could finish the job!"

The leaderless insurgents stared at Caradoc's still form, then began filing out of the cabin.

"Deschaillon, get that medicine chest out of my bag!"

The Frenchman moved toward the bag indicated, when Madden remembered.

"Here, come back, every one of you!" he cried.

The mutineers flowed in again, entirely subdued now.

Madden was loosening what few clothes Smith wore. He twisted about, facing the crew.

"Some of you fellows stole my medicine chest," he accused boldly. "I want it! The man who has it bring it here!"

The men stood very still, looking from one to the other uneasily.

"Listen, men," repeated Leonard intensely, "I've got to have it--understand? I don't mind your stealing it. I won't say a word to you about that, but I'll manhandle the scoundrel that's keeping it now!"

There was a growled chorus of protests. Madden quivered at his impotence to put his hand on the thief in the crowd.

One of the navvies caught the expression on Madden's face, and blurted, "If I 'ad it, I'd bring it back--'onest!"

Leonard suddenly recalled his suspicions. He looked at Farnol Greer, whose timely shouting and attack had practically quelled the rising. For a moment Madden's old friendship for Smith and his new gratitude for this silent unknown youth struggled, then he said:

"Greer, do you know anything about that chest?"

A look of blank surprise, then indignation went over Greer's heavy serious face, then he said bitinglly:

"You sure stand by your pal, all right," and moved out of the cabin without another word.

Caradoc lay dry and burning on the hot bunk, his big hands pressed to his forehead, eyes clenched shut.

"I don't know what to do!" cried Madden miserably. "Hogan, Deschaillon, for God's sake, if you know anything about that medicine chest, tell me--I'm not accusing anybody!"

"Sure, sure," cried Hogan sympathetically, "Oi'm sorry Oi ain't got it. If Oi only had me chance again I'd stole it long ago!"

"I'm sorree, but I never stole eet either, Meester Madden."

"If I only had bromide!" growled the American, watching Smith's broad hairy chest lift and drop in short breaths.

The Englishman opened his hot red eyes. "What's that to you, Madden?" he asked thickly. The choppy white mustache pulled down in a sneer. "I might as well die now--I'm nothing but a remittance man. A remittance man," he repeated the term with mingled self contempt and bravado. "My people have shipped me--flung me away, broken, no use," he flung out a long hot hand at Madden. "Why do you try to pick up the pieces?" He laughed thickly, which sent wild pains through his head and stopped him suddenly.

Madden stared penetratingly at this outbreak.

"Pour water over him, Deschaillon, Hogan," commanded the American briefly.

As his two helpers hurried out after buckets, Leonard came close to the sufferer.

"Where is it?" he asked shortly.

"Where--what?"

Madden stooped over him. "Where's that medicine chest? What did you do with it? You wouldn't have started that tirade unless you had it."

"You Americans--very keen," panted Caradoc in the midst of his rackings.

"Think you're d-deuced smart--it's in my bag's lining--there was some alcohol in it, so I took it--let it go--don't do anything--for--me."

Deschaillon entered with a bucket of seawater. They stretched the sick man on the floor, and a moment later, the Englishman shuddered under the deluge.

"This ought to be an ice pack," observed Madden, then: "I believe I remember laying that medicine case in my old cabin; I'll see," and he walked out of the mate's room into the darkness.

CHAPTER V

SAIL HO!

Caradoc lay stretched out in a deck chair, on top of the broad wall of the dock, a cool dawn breeze playing over him. He looked across the motley sea toward an opalescent sky reddening in the east.

"No," replied Madden without great interest, from his seat on the rail, "I've no idea what you mean by a 'remittance man.'"

The Englishman's eyes strayed wearily from the limpid dawn to the tiny image of a lion couchant on a small blue enameled shield which he used as a watch fob.

"Among the English--" He paused and began again: "Among a certain class of English families," he proceeded in an impersonal tone, "when a member goes hopelessly astray, that member is sent abroad to travel indefinitely. Remittances are forwarded to him from place to place, wherever he wishes to go, but--" there was a scarcely noticeable pause--"he can't come back to England any more."

"O-o-h!" dragged out Madden in a low voice, comprehending the man before him for the first time.

"So they are called remittance men--always remitted to." Caradoc's long fever-worn face, that was filling out in convalescence, colored momentarily.

"So that's what you were," said the American after a pause; "a remittance man, simply drifting over the face of the earth, supported by

your family, boozing your life away, and always longing to see England again?"

"You can put things so raw, Madden," responded Caradoc with a ghost of a smile. "I _am_, not _were_."

"_Were_," insisted the American quickly. "Before your collapse you were a confirmed alcoholic, but you are slightly different now. Your eight days of fever, when Hogan and I had to hold you in bed, must have burned you out, cleaned up your whole system. You are nearer normal now than you were. You have a fresh start. It's up to you what you do with it."

The Englishman looked at his friend with a sort of slow surprise on his face. "I hadn't noticed it, but I don't believe I do crave drink as keenly."

"No, sickness is often not so bad a thing as folks think. It is nature's way of putting us right. Sometimes," he added thoughtfully, "we crumple up in the process, but we can hardly blame the old lady for that."

"You're an odd fellow, Madden," laughed Caradoc, getting slowly out of his chair and stretching his arms. "Well, for some reason or other, I feel fine this morning--let's take a constitutional around the dock."

The young men walked off, side by side, and began the circuit of the dock's quarter-mile outline. The breeze was such a rarity in the becalmed region that the two paused now and then to take long grateful breaths, and to watch the little wind waves ripple the glassy Sargasso lanes.

As they walked, navvies came out with buckets brushes and set to work painting the maze of iron stanchions that lined the long interior of the dock.

"I'm afraid I'll have to stop that painting," remarked Leonard after watching them a moment.

"They'll be very glad of it--but why?"

"It consumes too much energy. The men can live on less if they quit work."

"Oh, I see."

"I think I shall have to cut their food down to half rations. We've been adrift nearly sixteen days now and not a smoke plume from the _Vulcan_. She has lost us--if she didn't founder."

"Any chance of meeting some other vessel?"

"Here in the ocean's graveyard?"

"Are we far in?" inquired Smith with rising concern.

"Close to three hundred miles, and getting deeper every day."

The two walked on mechanically, with the precise step of those who seek exercise. The rim of the sun cut the edge of the ocean and a long trail of light made the east difficult for their eyes.

"Any danger of starving?" questioned Caradoc, staring moth-like at the blinding disc of flame.

"Perhaps not," meditated Madden. "I've been thinking about it. As a last resort this seaweed is edible, at any rate certain species of it. The Chinese and Japanese eat it, but that isn't much of a recommendation to a European. Then the water is full of fish that come to nibble at the stuff."

Caradoc was obviously inattentive to this consoling information. "Yes," he murmured politely, "Japanese do nibble at the fish."

Madden looked around at his abstracted friend, who was still staring into the molten sunrise.

"When the Japanese come to nibble at the fish, we might get some food from them," suggested Madden with American delight in the ridiculous.

"Perhaps so."

"And fans, parasols, and little ivory curios--souvenirs of the Sargasso, when we roll up the dock and take it home."

Smith nodded soberly, still gazing.

"What are you looking at, Caradoc?" laughed the American.

"I say, Madden, just look at that sun, will you? I thought I saw a little black fleck against it straightaway to the east right down on the horizon."

"You're injuring your sight, that's all," the American was still smiling. "You know black specks will dance before your eyes if you stare at the sun too long."

"But this was shaped like a sail," persisted Smith, staring again.

"Illusion," diagnosed Madden promptly, but his eyes followed Caradoc's eastward nevertheless.

As far as his sight could reach up the golden path, he saw the black markings of seaweed; then his vision became lost in a mist of illumination. However, in this region, he could distinguish things dimly and in flashes.

Presently, in one of these clear instants, he saw flashed, like the single film of a moving picture, the tiny black silhouette of a ship's sail against the dazzling east. Next moment it was lost in light.

"I told you!" cried Caradoc, getting his friend's expression. "It's there! We've both seen it! A ship, Madden!"

Then he turned with more strength than Madden thought was in him. "Sail ho, men!" he sang out. "A sail!"

"Come up, fellows, and take a look!" chimed in Madden just as eagerly. "We believe we see a sail!"

The crew dropped work at once, and came climbing the ladder up the deep side of the canyon like a string of monkeys; then they came running across the red decking.

"Where?" "Wot direction?" "Where ees eet?" came a chorus of inquiries.

The two were pointing and soon the whole crew was lined up staring into the brilliance. Their fresh eyes caught the glimpse immediately and held it long enough to make sure.

"A sail!" "There she is!" "Oi see her!" bellowed half a dozen voices.

The whole crew fell into tense, happy confusion, laughing, staring, yelling, speculating, slapping backs.

"Will she see us?" cried someone.

"Do ye think she'd overlook the whole west half o' th' sea, Galton?"

"She weel run against us eef she cooms thees way."

"But she might not know we are in distress?"

"Disthress, is it ye're sayin'? We're not in disthress, ye loon. This is th' happiest day o' me loife."

Leonard turned to the Irishman. "Hogan, go dip that flag on the jury mast--wigggle it up and down--let 'em know something is wrong--make 'em think we have the rickets if nothing else."

Two men ran off with Hogan to the forward bridge; the others stared, waved, shouted and let their excitement bubble down.

"But I don't understand a sailing vessel in these waters," speculated Leonard.

"Maybe it's a derelick?" surmised Galton. "I've 'card as 'ow this was a great place for derelicks."

"Ow could she be a derelick," argued Mulcher, "w'en she 'as so much

canvas aloft? You run up on derelicks an' git sunk, ever' cove knows that."

"I can't think of hall these things at once!" retorted Galton.

"Perhaps she ees the _Vulcan_ under sail with deesabled engines?" suggested Deschaillon.

This explanation was accepted unanimously and joy broke out afresh.

"Why sure, th' _Vulcan_, th' good old _Vulcan_! Now, lads, let's give three cheers and maybe it'll reach 'er!"

Madden left the men trying to reach her with their bellows and went below after the mate's binoculars. When he returned the sun had swung up above the rim of the ocean and the sail was plainly discernible. He leveled his glasses and his eyes went searching among the distant markings of seaweed, until it finally rested on the sail. The vessel was hull down. There was nothing to see except a little canvas stretched neatly aloft and ship-shape masts and spars. He observed her attentively for some time. She seemed to be making very little headway. All in all, Madden made little of the craft, so he handed the glass to Smith. The Englishman was likewise puzzled, and the binoculars went down the line of curious men.

There was something in the way the youth named Farnol Greer handled the instrument that caused Madden to ask:

"What do you make out, Greer?"

"She is lying to, sir. She's backing her tops'ls flat against the breeze, and her mains'l's reefed and drawing with it."

"Lying to!" cried three or four voices. "W'ot does she mean by that? Looks as if she'd be bloomin' glad to get out o' such a bally place as this!"

"Let me have another look." Madden resumed the binoculars.

Now that Madden's attention was called to this unusual disposition of the sails, he could make out their position for himself.

This started another tide of speculation buzzing among the castaways. Was the _Vulcan_ crippled? Had she run short of coal? But why should she voluntarily lay-to in the very sight of her quarry?

"They're fishin'," surmised Deschaillon, "off in th' boats fishin'; they're weethout food also."

This wild surmise was the only reasonable hypothesis that had been struck on. Another group of men rushed for the jury mast to show the fishermen that their presence was desired. At any rate the faint breeze was very slowly bringing the two vessels together.

If the men had been heretofore anxious that the cool breeze continue, now their anxiety was redoubled. At any moment it might die away and leave the _Vulcan_ stranded beyond communication. In painful uncertainty, they watched the tug drag her hull slowly into sight, then slowly eat her way down the long mazy lanes of the Sargasso.

Then, when she was well in view, Farnol Greer said:

"She is not the _Vulcan_, sir."

By this time all the men had their brown faces wrinkled up against the glare of the sunshine. Now they redoubled their gaze on the distant vessel.

"Faith, and sure enough she isn't!" cried Hogan.

Greer was right; the strange vessel was not the tug. She had a funnel amidship and two masts, but there her resemblance to the _Vulcan_ ceased.

The crew stared, talked, speculated, until the sun swung up like a white-hot metal ball in the sky, and the quivering heat drove them below under the awnings. From here they could still view the stranger, but not to so good advantage. The breeze, by good fortune lasted till deep in the morning, but finally dropped down in the blanketing heat, with the unknown craft a good three miles distant.

The dock's crew could make out no sign of life as they strained their eyes through the glare of tropical brilliance. The high-lights of the schooner's reversed topsails and the luminous shadows of her mainsail stood out vividly against the hot copper sky. The multi-colored markings of the ocean and the sharp line of the horizon finished a very picture of pitiless heat.

The men stood beneath the awning, legs apart, arms held away from bodies, and stared from under dripping brows for some signs of recognition from the stranger.

"'Asn't she got up a single rag to show us she sees us?" puffed Galton, swiping his hand across his forehead and flinging drops on the iron deck, where they evaporated the moment they hit.

"Don't see none," replied the navy who possessed the binoculars at that moment.

"'Ave they any boats?"

"One cleated down for'ard, one slung on the midship davits, and I think I make hout one on t'other side past the booby hatch."

"And not a soul on deck?"

"Not unless they're settin' on th' fur side o' th' superstructure."

"Wot would they want to be settin' in th' sun for?" demanded Galton brusquely.

"Ow do I know? If they was Eth'opians, wouldn't they set in th' sun?"

"This is as clost as we'll ever git," surmised another voice. "The night breeze'll blow 'er back where she come from."

"Well, w'ere's that?" demanded Mulcher savagely.

"Why, Eth'opia, I reckon, if she's got a crew of Eth'opians settin' on t'other side of 'er superstructure."

"They ain't a man-jack aboard; and you know it," snarled Galton, "or 'e'd be poppin' 'is eyes hout at such a 'orrible big sight as we must be."

"Anyway, I'll bet she blows back w'ere she come from, to-night," persisted the advocate of this theory.

The men caviled on at each other endlessly, disputing, denying, upbraiding, and once in a while coming to blows.

In order to keep any sort of discipline, Leonard and Caradoc kept to themselves under a separate awning, for all sea-faring experience has shown that a separation of officers and men is necessary for the management of sailors.

However, Madden heard most of the arguments that went on under the men's canvas, and he became convinced that the sailor was right; the evening breeze would carry the schooner away from the dock. He measured the long distance through the sea lanes from dock to schooner with his eyes.

"Caradoc," he said to his friend, "if we ever reach that vessel now's our time."

"How do you hope to do it?"

For answer Madden turned to the men. "Mulcher, bring me a life buoy, will you?"

Mulcher arose and started on his errand.

Caradoc stared. "You don't intend to swim that distance--through this heat?"

"There's a boat over there, and provisions, perhaps."

"And the crew?"

"It is quite possible that they sleep through the day which is utterly

becalmed and make some little headway at night with the slight evening and morning breezes--it would be a task for a sailing vessel to work herself out of the Sargasso."

"Why I never thought of that. I suppose it is possible."

Mulcher was returning with a buoy. The crew came forward behind the navy, on the *_qui vive_* over this new undertaking.

"Faith, and hadn't ye betther sind one o' th' min, sir," suggested Hogan, "an if he drowns, sir, Oi would take it to be a sign that it's a dangerous swim."

"An' the sharks, Meester Madden," warned Deschaillon.

As Madden kicked off his clothes, he observed Caradoc stripping likewise. Then Farnol Greer came running down the deck with another buoy and a big clasp knife.

The American looked at these fellows. "Caradoc, you can't possibly hold out that distance; you're weak."

"I've done ten miles in--at home."

Greer said nothing, but rapidly undressed.

All three kept on their hats and undershirts as protection against sunburn. As Madden walked from the awning through the stinging sun rays, crimping up his naked feet from the blistering deck, Galton called to him.

"If we git a lot of grub, sir, couldn't it be hextra, and carn't we 'ave a spread to-night, sir?"

"Something like that," agreed Madden, tossing his buoy into the water. The two other swimmers followed example, then all three dived off the twelve foot pontoon toward their floats. They came up shaking the water from ears and eyes. Madden was immersed in tepid water. His men were cheering stolidly. The schooner looked very, very far away now that he was at the surface of the water. Between him and his goal streaked mazes of sargassum. It suddenly struck the American that he might have trouble getting through those barriers.

However, the three swimmers were progressing boldly.

CHAPTER VI

THE CUL DE SAC

Madden thrust head and shoulders into his float, a round canvas-covered hoop of cork, and set off at an easy stroke. Now that he was flat on the water, he could no longer see the lanes of seaweed, and he would be forced to depend entirely upon signals from the dock.

Alongside Madden came Greer, and after them Caradoc. Like all Americans, Leonard gradually increased his energy, and forged ahead at a rate considerably faster than that required for long distance swimming. Once or twice Caradoc warned the swimmers to go more slowly, and at each monition Madden slowed up a trifle, but within a few minutes he would again speed up unconsciously.

The three swimmers could form little idea of the rate they were making in the lifeless sea. At the end of half an hour, when Leonard looked back at Hogan on the wall for signals, the dock still loomed above him, a vast glare of red in the dazzling sunshine. It seemed impossible to get away from it; the featureless red flare followed him as a mountain peak seems to follow a traveler.

The sun beat oppressively on his head and blistered his shoulders through his net undershirt. The warm water soaked the energy out of limbs and arms. He changed from breast to over-arm stroke, then he shifted to the crawl and trudgen stroke.

"Perhaps we'd better rest awhile, sir," suggested Greer, who came puffing close behind.

"Beastly hot, this sun," Leonard ducked head and shoulders under water for relief. His hat floated off and he grudged the slight effort to retrieve it.

"How far are we?"

"Dock looks as close as ever--where's Smith?"

Greer nodded toward a small head and shoulders bobbing behind a little white buoy.

At that moment, they heard the Englishman's voice calling, "To the right!"

The boys turned and struck out ahead once more. They regretted having to leave the straight line. As far as they could see there was no algae in sight, the water was one glassy blue. And the mysterious schooner, with its lights and shadows exaggerated in the tropical glare, seemed to the tired swimmers to be as remote as ever.

As Madden pressed on and on, changing strokes after the fashion of tiring swimmers, the constant beat of the sun made his eyeballs ache; the ocean felt like a Turkish bath; the muscles in his shoulders, back and legs grew numb, with an occasional cramping twinge. And what irritated him as much as anything else was the fact that he was swimming toward the right quarter of the schooner, throwing away his energy.

Just then Caradoc gave a distant call, "To the left."

With deep relief, Madden rounded back toward his goal. He had swung about some unseen cape of algae. He looked back toward the dock. Hogan, a very tiny figure, held his flag straight up; that meant "dead ahead."

In relief Madden turned over on his back, laid his hat across his face, then with hands resting on chest, he began sculling along with knees and feet.

He did not know how long he swam in this fashion. Queer ideas drifted through the lad's mind. He recalled standing on the bridge of the dock as it went out of the Thames and wondering what would happen. He had never anticipated anything like this. It seemed that he had been swimming for days and weeks. He reminded himself of those little kicking toys that never get anywhere. He felt as if he were a June bug buzzing helplessly at the end of a string. He kicked, kicked, kicked under the broiling sun, in the hot water. The sweaty smell of his hat band disgusted his nostrils. The crown of his hat seemed to coop the heat over his face, sweat seeped into his closed eyelids and stung his eyes. He gave his head a little shake. The buoy slipped out and he bobbed under the tepid water head and ears.

This jerked him out of his dreamy state. He whirled over, struck to the surface, spat out brine, blinked his eyes. Somebody was shouting something in an urgent voice. The noise buzzed in his waterlogged ears.

"Hey, hello! What is it?" he cried, giving his head a shake and putting on his hat.

"School of sharks!" shouted Greer, coming toward his leader at a foamy speed.

"School of sharks!" echoed Madden with a sharp thrill. "Where? Which way?"

"Must be toward the dock, sir!" panted Greer driving up.

"Where's Caradoc?"

"Yonder." He pointed toward a distant twinkle in the water.

"We must get together--yell to him, warn him!"

The two lads began a strenuous chorus that further used up their exhausted strength. Caradoc responded by a wave of his hand. Then when he understood "sharks" he gathered speed in their direction.

By this time the dock seemed as far away as the schooner, and was in reality probably farther. On the wall of the dock, they could see Hogan's microscopic figure apparently having a fit, against the coppery sky. No doubt from his height he could make out the monsters. Perhaps

Hogan could see the great fish shooting along with sinister, exertionless ease toward these clumsy adventurers--a school of trout striking at three awkward beetles.

"Hey, Caradoc! Caradoc!" screamed Madden. "Straight for the schooner!" The American stared around with tense nerves for the little swishes on the surface that betray the attack of a shark.

From something near middle distance, the Englishman raised a hand toward his comrades and motioned them forward.

"Go on! Go on!" he gasped in a tired voice. "I'll catch you!"

Indeed, there was little to be gained from waiting. Caradoc moved toward his friends with a long overhand stroke that gave him the queer appearance of some huge water bug striding along. Madden and Greer propelled themselves slowly toward the schooner, waiting for their friend to close up. They could not keep their eyes off the Englishman. Every moment they expected to see him jerked under, or they expected to see a huge shadowy form strike at themselves through the clear green water.

Once Madden looked at the dock. Hogan on the rim of the red flaring wall was flinging out all kinds of despairing gestures.

By this time Caradoc was in hailing distance.

"Did you say sharks?" he called out in a dull voice.

"Yes, sharks!"

"Where a way?"

"Don't know!"

At that moment a trickling thrill went through the American. A long dark motionless shadow lay in the water straight in front of him. He stopped swimming suddenly.

"Stop, Greer! Straight ahead!" he warned in a low tone, easing himself carefully up on his buoy for a better look.

By this time the swimmers were nearly together and all three stared ahead with painful intentness.

"That dark thing?" inquired Greer in an undertone,

"Yes, we ought to have a knife apiece."

"I never saw a shark lying still," panted Caradoc straining his eyes.

"Say, that's a little streak of seaweed," decided Farnol, beginning to move toward it.

Then all three perceived it was merely seaweed. The shark-like illusion disappeared completely the moment someone doubted it.

"Who cried out sharks anyway?" demanded Smith of Madden.

"Greer there warned me--he yelled 'school of sharks.'"

"Where did you see them?" inquired Caradoc of Farnol.

"You shouted school of sharks to me yourself," defended Greer.

"!! !!" puffed Caradoc, whose spurt had blown him badly. "I said nothing about sharks!"

"Well, what did you say?" demanded Greer.

Caradoc thought back fretfully. "I said we were running into a _cul de sac_."

"A cool de sock!" repeated Greer with irritation. "What did you want to say 'cool de sock' for?"

"I was calling to a gentleman," panted Smith with an edge of temper in his tone, "and here you've swung us clear off our bearings because you didn't know a common French phrase----"

"French! I'm no Frenchman! Why don't you talk English!"

The two tired, worried, overheated men were rapidly brewing a quarrel, when Madden interrupted.

"Look how close we are to that schooner! If somebody would raise another shark alarm, we'd land plump on her decks."

"Yes, but this Zulu here has run us straight into a loop of seaweed it'll take two hours' swimming to get out of--_cul de sac_, school of sharks! Why the two phrases scarcely resemble each other!"

Madden turned longing eyes toward the motionless schooner that was not more than three-quarters of a mile distant. "Say, it's too bad to turn around and swim away from that vessel!" he lamented wearily, "and this sun is fierce!"

"I say let's try going through!" encouraged Greer.

"It'll be--difficult," warned Caradoc.

"Won't swimming clear around the earth be difficult?" demanded Greer hotly.

"Proceed," agreed Caradoc tersely. "It's all one to me."

The boys adjusted their floats and once more began their weary labor, all three disgruntled at the false alarm. As they worked their way forward, clumps of seaweed, similar to the first they had seen, thickened in their path. After a long swim in and out, they reached a point where these floating masses coalesced into an island, or a continent, that swung far back toward the barge in the segment of a great semicircle. Fortunately there were still open channels in this main field, and one of them led toward the schooner. They struck out up this estuary, which presently became so narrow that they were forced to travel single file. Occasionally their kicking feet would strike slimy filaments in the water, but for a while the channel cheered the swimmers, for they could now see they were making progress toward the ship.

Ten minutes later, however, they reached the end, and an inexorable continent of slime lay between them and their goal. Madden paused in the last yard of clear water, hung to his buoy, his big biceps flattened on the canvas cover and slowly blistering in the sun.

"All right, boys, close up," he panted; "let's stay in helping distance of each other."

"Shall we try to take our buoys through, sir?" inquired Greer.

"We'll start with them."

"Don't try to use your legs in the weed," warned Caradoc. "Don't kick; you'll get tangled."

"We'll experiment and work through the best way we can. If it turns out too bad, we can turn back, that's one consolation."

Just then, under Madden's astonished eyes, a queer thing happened. The long open tongue of the sea which they had just entered, silently closed up. It seemed to close very slowly, and yet it was accomplished in an amazingly brief time. Some dull movement in the Sargasso current had blocked the adventurers with sinister precision. Madden felt the hot slimy mass close softly around him.

It was now as easy to go forward as to return.

CHAPTER VII

TRAPPED

There was something so sinister in this silent closing of all avenue of retreat that for a moment Madden was dismayed, then he struck out toward the schooner with a certain bold weariness.

As an experiment he threw his buoy ahead of him by a snap of wrist and forearm, then tried to swim to it. The long yielding growth slid under and around him, but it took all the dash out of his stroke. He pawed his way forward with his arms, legs stretched out idle. A thousand wet sticky fingers dragged their length over his body, retarding, clogging, holding him. It left him stranded like a bug in gelatine. His flesh crawled at this slimy swimming, he shrank from it, and it sapped his heart and strength.

The only stroke possible was the overarm, and his hands fell with a gummy plop instead of the heartsome splash of open water. By the time he reached his buoy and threw it again, he regretted miserably that he had not swum the clean water route if it were five miles farther.

By the time he had thrown his buoy twice, he could hardly advance it a yard beyond his reach; finally it simply slushed along the surface. The sun seemed much hotter in this congestion than in the open sea.

Behind him came his two men in a queer snakelike procession of plopping buoys and wriggling bodies. Ahead of them the seaweed stretched, apparently all the way to the schooner. As they worked their way through the scum of many seas, the noon sun broiled their backs into thin water blisters, and stewed saline odors out of the clammy life about them.

Once Madden's hand struck a yellowish line of algae and a score or two of little jelly-like insects writhed into the grass below. One of these things touched the swimmer's arm and gave the boy a stinging sensation. He knocked it off desperately and pushed on.

Presently his shoulder muscles ached and burned so keenly, he could no longer continue the overarm. Then he took the buoy in both hands, held it straight out, thrust it edge down into the oozy substance, used it as a kind of anchor and drew it to him. At first this technique seemed to advance him somewhat, but presently he appeared merely to disturb the viscous mass without going forward. He grew acutely discouraged; his back, shoulders, cramped, ached and burned. The brilliantly lighted schooner seemed to regress as he progressed. The sun was like an auger boring into the back of his head. His mind began to wander again, and a sudden fear came on him lest he should go insane out in this horrible slime.

A fiery burning on his right foot jerked him back out of his half delirium, and he knew that an insect of the same kind he had seen a few minutes before had stung him. He kicked it off convulsively, but the thrust of his foot brought a wash of new stings.

All of a sudden, his patience, endurance, pluck seemed to give out. This new torture made him as unreasonably frantic as a baby. He kicked furiously. He scraped the toe nails of one foot against the flesh of the other leg. As he did so the animalculae settled on the abraded skin, like streaks of melted steel. The boy doubled up, like a grub worm covered with ants, fighting, scraping, twisting, squirming. He writhed, beat, scratched, this great hundred and sixty pound animal fighting an

enemy that would weigh about twenty to the gram.

He heard a shout from Caradoc, a question from Greer, then his insane struggles carried him under the surface of the clammy seaweed. The seaweed, infested with stinging insects, closed over his form like a wave of fire.

Only lack of breath stopped Leonard's mad struggles. Bursting lungs and the mere necessity to live at last made him disregard the attacks of these wasps of the Sargasso. He struck out for the surface again like a diver, reaching up arms, spreading legs with a stroke and a kick. But the gelatinous stuff simply quivered with his struggles and held him firm. He stuck like a fly in mucilage.

The sliminess of the element utterly destroyed the mechanics of swimming. A forward stroke in pure water displaces portions of the water and the return stroke sends the body forward. In this mass the forward stroke merely compressed the weed in front of the arm, and left a cavity through which the return stroke received no power.

Madden dared not open his eyes. In fiery blackness he kicked and struck in useless froglike movements. His heart was beating like a trip-hammer in his ears. Streaks of red fire played against the blackness of his eyelids. He knew that in a few more seconds his straining lungs would gulp in the stinging ooze, he knew his will could not prevent his drawing in some sort of breath.

He clung desperately to the control of his diaphragm, as a falling man clings to a ledge of rock. His great chest muscles gave convulsive jerks. His control was going, going.

Suddenly a human hand gripped his wrist. He was jerked upwards, perhaps a foot. A moment later he was gulping in great lungfuls of air.

He had been suffocating ten or twelve inches beneath that repulsive slime, as securely captured as if he had been a thousand feet deep.

It had taken Greer and Smith that length of time to wriggle a yard or two and fish him out.

"Steady! Steady!" said Caradoc in a lifeless voice. "Steady there, Madden! Hold him tightly, Greer!"

Greer made some sort of groaning reply, when Caradoc snarled, "Let 'em sting, you scullion! What if they do kill you! Is there any better way to die?"

Madden felt a great pushing and jostling at his body. He raked the seaweed from his face and opened his eyes. The Englishman was shoving fiercely at the American's shoulder, Greer, ahead, pulling at an elbow. The burning insects had swarmed on both his rescuers. Caradoc's sun-baked face had a yellowish, bloodless hue, his lean jaws clenched under his choppy white mustache. In the midst of his burning pain he

held his legs rigid, pushed Leonard with one hand and pawed furiously through the viscid tangle with the other.

The constancy of his companions braced Madden like a dash of ice water. His own weakness had brought about this dangerous plight. The American caught up his buoy, and between great gasps of the blessed air, rapped out that he could go by himself, and began making his own way forward.

So the three worked themselves over the oozy bed of fire. The Englishman's arms shot into the slime with the regularity of pistons. He appeared to make no haste, yet he made remarkable speed. Only his distended nostrils, pain-tightened mouth, grim eyes, showed that he was in torture.

Even amid his own suffering Leonard felt a thrill of admiration for Smith's endurance and working power. He even found time to wonder dimly if Smith's people, that rich, cold, proud family, if they could see their remittance man now, would not stoop to claim him as a kinsman.

All at once the poignant and disgusting attack of the insects ceased. A flood of ecstatic relief swept over the adventurers. Without a word, all three quit squirming, caught their floats under their armpits and swung down in a limp luxurious rest.

Then they saw a marvelous thing had happened. The same slow swirl of the Sargasso current that had closed up their avenue on the west side, had opened another on the east. Their way toward the schooner lay unobstructed.

The clean delightful seawater soothed the pain of their stinging flesh.

"We'll be there in fifteen minutes," murmured Leonard weakly.

"When you're ready, say so," said Greer with a frown still lingering on his heavy face.

At that moment Madden heard a groan from Caradoc.

"What's the matter?" aspirated the American.

"Nothing--weak--don't bother." He closed his eyes, blew out his breath like a sick man. His face was bloodlessly sallow, and Madden could see his grip slipping on the canvas buoy.

"You're all in!" gasped Madden in exhausted staccato, "I knew you oughtn't to--aren't you about to faint again?"

The Englishman shook his head slightly. "Don't worry," he murmured, then his eyes closed, his hands slipped loose.

With brusque directness, Madden caught the shock of tawny hair, jammed Caradoc's chin against the buoy and held him tight with little exertion for himself. Smith swung out as awkwardly as a turkey on a chopping

block. The water was level with his lips, but his nose did not go under.

"Petered at last," grunted Madden, staring at the corpselike face in dull speculation. "How in the world are we going to get him out of here?"

"I guess we can tow him out, sir," growled Greer with dull indifference. "Mighty puny chap--always flopping over when he's in a tight place."

"Come here, stick his arms through our buoys, put his own under his head!"

The plan was quickly carried out and Smith's unconscious form was placed beyond immediate danger.

The two youths took up their long swim once more. As they moved down the opening, they could see what slow progress they were making. Presently Madden explained in a low whispering tone:

"His heart's bad... can't stand much... poisoned with alcohol."

Another pause filled with slow weary swimming, then Greer said:

"Said I was no gentleman... didn't know a French word... I keep sober."

Madden made no defense to this reflection on the unconscious Englishman, but after a while he said:

"We ought to overlook lots in him, Greer--unfortunate fellow... there's good in him, Greer... bad too."

"I've got no call to please you," growled the sailor with astonishing frankness.

"Then why did you come with us?" inquired Madden amazed.

"Wanted to see the schooner."

"And what have I done to you?"

"Called me a thief!" the sailor elevated his dull tone. "After I telegraphed ye about th' men... fought for ye... called me a thief!"

"Was that you tapping on the dock?"

Greer nodded resentfully. "And ye insulted me for it."

"I'm sorry... I was almost wild that night. I'll apologize... before the crew."

"I don't care nothing about that dull English crew." This strange fellow's tone carried in it an illiterate man's undying resentment.

"Since you feel that way," panted Madden at last, "I think I ought to tell you--he took the medicine chest," Leonard nodded at the finely carved motionless face that lay on the float before them.

"Him!" gasped Greer.

Leonard nodded. "He wanted the alcohol in it."

"And you call him a _gentleman_?"

Leonard nodded again. "Somehow I still call him a gentleman. He's hurt, sick, bruised, but he's a gentleman."

"Well I don't!"

At that moment, the buoy under Caradoc's head bumped into a wooden wall and upset their swimming arrangements.

They were under the overhang of the mysterious schooner.

CHAPTER VIII

THE MYSTERY SHIP

Waves from the exhausted swimmers sent bright streaks of watershine wavering up the green hull over Madden's head. Utter silence pervaded the vessel. There was no creaking of spar or block. Hot tar stood in her seams in the beating sunshine.

The boys kicked wearily through the tepid water to the schooner's prow, where Greer succeeded in catching the bobstays and climbing aboard. A little later he lowered a rope to Madden with a double bight in it. The Yankee made the Englishman fast in the loops, climbed on deck himself and helped haul the unconscious fellow aboard.

The two boys lugged the senseless man wearily across deck into the shade of the superstructure, then in default of any better restorative, Leonard began slapping the bottom of the Englishman's feet to revive him. Presently Caradoc groaned, drew up his legs.

"He's coming around all right," said Greer, then he looked about him.

"What do you make out of this anyway, Mr. Madden?"

Leonard glanced around and did see a remarkable derelict. The schooner was as newly painted and trig as if fresh from the ways. Her deck was holystoned to man-o'-war cleanliness; every sheet, hawser, stay, tackle, pin, spike, was in place. Three small boats, her full complement, hung in davits. On the bow of these boats, on their oars and buoys, was painted the name of the schooner, "Minnie B."

From the port side of the vessel there stretched a long cable patently leading to a sea anchor. All sails were brailed except mains'l and tops'l, which were reefed and set against each other to hold her steady in case of a blow. The funnel was freshly painted black with a red band at the top. Judging from her appearance, the desertion of the _Minnie B_ had been carefully planned. Yet why desert a new vessel? By what means did the crew leave the schooner, since all her small boats remained?

What was their motive in anchoring the _Minnie B_ in the middle of the Sargasso?

There appeared to be no easy answer to these questions.

"I don't understand this," said Greer, in answer to Madden's unspoken perplexity. "Where did the crew go, sir, and how did they go?"

"They might have deserted her for her insurance," suggested Madden tentatively.

"Then why didn't they scuttle her--besides, a new vessel like this is worth more than her insurance."

"Maybe it was her cargo. Perhaps they faked it, rated it away above its value."

"Why she has no cargo, sir. She's riding light as a skiff; I noticed that as I climbed up."

"Then what is your idea?" inquired the American.

Greer glanced around with a trace of uneasiness. "The crew went by the board, sir, I'm thinking."

"Overboard--all washed overboard! Why there isn't one chance in a million of such a thing hap--"

"I didn't say 'washed overboard,' sir," corrected Greer heavily. "I think they got throwed overboard, one by one, sir."

"One by one!" Madden stared at the solemn faced fellow.

Farnol nodded stolidly. "Just so, sir."

"You mean--?"

"The plague, sir."

"O-oh!" The American stared around the deck with new eyes. Greer's explanation struck home with a certain convincingness. The mere thought of disease-laden surroundings filled him with alarm. Could they have unwittingly wandered into a deserted pest-ship? A focus of death in

these rotting seas? The very air he breathed, the wood he touched, might inoculate him with malignant germs. Then he began reasoning on it.

"Even if it were the plague, there ought to be someone left aboard, Greer, a last corpse." The American sniffed the hot, breathless, tar-scented air.

"He could well have gone crazy, sir, in this heat and followed his mates overboard--but we can look and see."

At this moment, Caradoc stirred and pulled himself to a sitting posture on the burning deck.

"You--you pulled me aboard?" he murmured weakly, looking about with the face of a corpse.

"How do you feel--anything I can do?"

"If I had a dr--" he broke off, drew a long breath. "Nobody aboard?"

"If you're all right, Greer and I will take a turn below and see what we can find," suggested Madden.

Caradoc nodded apathetically and stared seaward toward the cable sagging into the dead ocean.

The two boys moved gingerly up to the hatchway that led down to the forecabin. If disease had smitten the *Minnie B.* they hoped to get some clue from the taint of the sailors' quarters. Greer stuck a nose down the ladder first. Beyond the usual close ship smells there seemed to be nothing wrong. Then they climbed down.

Here again they found order. The bunks against the bulkheads and the curve of the prow were clean with neatly rolled blankets. The lockers were open and empty. The two searchers climbed out and walked aft to the lazaret. They were rapidly getting over their fright of the plague. Again Greer entered first, and this time Madden heard a loud snort of disgust.

Half expecting some sinister sight, Madden ran down the three steps and entered the storeroom. But what had roused the sailor's dislike was that the lazaret contained no provisions. It was as empty as the forecabin; not a chest, not a canister, not even a spice box remained. Here again the lockers were open and empty. From one of the keyholes hung a bunch of keys. The steward had deserted his ring, knowing it could never be of service to him again.

The little metal bunch hung straight down without the slightest oscillation. Such lack of motion and life amid the close stewing heat of the lazaret threw a glamor of unreality over the whole affair. The schooner might well have been warped to a dock in some port of the dead. The very newness of everything accentuated its amazing loneliness.

"Doesn't seem real, does it?" said Greer in a low tone, drawing a long breath in the heat. "I keep listening."

Madden shook himself. "It seems as if someone ought to be aboard." He broke away from the spell: "I wish they had left us some provisions--we need 'em."

The hot heavy silence fell immediately after the remark, like a curtain that was heavy to lift.

"Let's look through the hold and see if there _isn't_ someone here!" suggested Greer uneasily.

With a feeling that they were likely to encounter some being, human or spectral, at every turn, they went below. The farther they went the more inexplicable became the _Minnie B's_ desertion. Her engines were in perfect order, her furnace so new that the grate bars were still unsealed from heat; the maker's name-plate was still bright on the boilers; her hull was quite dry, with less than six inches of water in her bilge. She had no cargo, except four or five tons of raw metal ingots used as ballast. The coal in her bunkers was nearly exhausted. Indeed she was riding so light that heavy weather would upset her like a chip. It seemed as if the crew had looted the _Minnie B_ in a thorough and extraordinary manner, and then had simply vanished. Every now and then in their search the two would find themselves standing motionless, open-mouthed, listening intently to the brooding silence.

More puzzled than ever by these explorations, the two adventurers climbed into the chart room. Here, also, everything was intact, and in order. In a desk they found the ship's log and clearance papers. The captain's and the mate's licenses hung in frames against the wall. Near these was tacked the picture of a sunny-haired little girl and underneath it was written the name "Minnie." So the schooner was the little smiling-faced girl's namesake, this tragedy-haunted abandoned vessel. A Mercator's projection lay thumb-tacked on a table, and the last position of the schooner was indicated by a pin sticking in the map.

Madden moved over to it eagerly, hoping this pin would give him some inkling as to where the disaster, if there had been one, occurred. He noted the latitude and longitude indicated by the marker, then turned excitedly to Greer.

"Look here!" he cried, "this pin marks our position at this moment. We are right here!" he touched the point on the map.

"How do you know it does?"

"I calculated the dock's position this morning."

"Well, what of that? She will probably lie here till she rots in this stagnant sea."

"That's the point: This is not a stagnant sea. There is a current of about six miles a day in the Sargasso, very slow, but it will change a ship's reckoning."

Greer remained unimpressed. "What do you make of that?"

"Make of that! Why, man, the person who took this reckoning, took it this morning! That's the only way he could have got it. There was somebody on this schooner this morning when we sighted her."

"This morning! This morning! Where in Davy Jones' locker----"

Madden was leaning over the chart scrutinizing it with careful eyes. At last he raised up in complete bewilderment.

"Farnol," he said in a queer tone, "the crew meant to come here! Meant to sail through the Sargasso--clear away from all trade routes--incomprehensible but--just look!"

Both boys bent above the chart, and Madden silently pointed out a row of pin holes that marked the daily reckonings of the Minnie B. She had sailed from Portland, Maine, had swung up the northern route past Newfoundland Banks as if going to England. On this portion of her voyage her average run was a little less than two hundred knots a day. On the fifth day out, the Minnie B. inexplicably deserted the normal trade course, turned from "E. NE." and sailed directly "S. SW." At the same time her speed was accelerated to a trifle over three hundred knots a day. Her last reckoning left the pin sticking in the exact longitude and latitude which Leonard had worked out for the dock that morning.

"They got in a hurry when they did turn south," said Greer vacuously.

"They certainly burned coal from there to here."

"But what could have put her in such a rush, sir?"

"She must have sailed somewhere after a cargo, and later received a cancellation of the order. With that cancellation there must have come a new commission with a time limit, from some of the South American ports, I should judge by her course, say Caracas, or Paramaribo."

"But she has no wireless, sir. She couldn't have changed her destination."

"That would be fairly easy to explain. There are so many fast liners with wireless between New York and Liverpool, it would be a simple matter to get a message signaled to a sailing vessel in the trade route."

"But I can't see why she sailed through the Sargasso?"

"If the time factor had been urgent enough, she might have tried to shorten her journey by coming this way instead of following the usual

course by Cuba and through the Caribbean."

"That doesn't tell what happened to the men."

Madden shook his head and wiped the sweat from his face on his undershirt sleeve. "Let's read the log. That ought to clear up things a bit."

Both lads hurried over to the desk, drew out the greasy, well-thumbed book. In their excitement, they forgot rank and tried to read together.

"Let me read it aloud," compromised Madden.

Dripping with sweat, they leaned on the hot desk and went carefully over the log of the Minnie B.

The record was simple. The Minnie B, of Leeds, England, sailed from Portland, Maine, for Liverpool on July thirtieth with a cargo of lake copper in bulk bound for Liverpool. For the first five days, her log was written in two heavy unscholarly hands, which alternated with each other, and were evidently those of the mate and the captain. These two handwritings were quite distinct from each other and contained the usual notes of prevailing winds, state of weather, speed, distance indicated by patent log, dead reckonings, vessels sighted and such like.

From the sixth to the twentieth day, the log of the Minnie B was written in a sharp, pointed, scholarly hand, and this record was confined to the mere relation of distances and reckonings. Then on the twenty-first day of August there appeared the following entry:

"46 degrees 57' W. Long. 27 degrees 24' 11" N. Lat. No wind. Sargasso Sea. Current 9.463 kilometers per 24 hrs. W. SW. Cast sea anchor. Five hundred tons ingots reshipped."

At this statement, Leonard turned and stared at Greer.

"Reshipped! Reshipped! Holy cats, Farnol! Reshipped from here--right here!" He jabbed a finger downward to indicate the spot in the dead Sargasso Sea occupied by the Minnie B.

Greer shook his head dully. "But this is all the wildest--" he made a helpless motion. "You oughtn't to think about it, sir, or you'll be going overboard, too. Reshipped!... This heat will get anybody in time.... The man who wrote that went and jumped overboard the next minute no doubt. Reshipped..... It ain't good for us to read it, sir."

"But something's gone with her cargo, Greer!" declared Madden vehemently. "Something's gone with it. I don't care how crazy the crew became they surely wouldn't have dumped a hold full of copper into the sea. This log says 'reshipped' and blessed if I don't believe--"

At this moment the boys seemed to hear the sound in the deathly silent vessel for which their ears had been all the time straining. Madden

broke off abruptly and both stood listening with palpitating hearts. It was repeated. A repressed half groan, inarticulate, as if some human being were in distress. It was in the main cabin below them.

Hardly daring to guess at what they would see, the adventurers crept silently out of the chart room, down a short hot passageway to a door. Leonard caught a breath, then opened it without noise.

In the brilliant westering light that flooded the main cabin through the port holes, Madden saw a dining table, disordered as from a recent feast. On the floor around it were fragments of smashed glasses and bloody stains. A cut glass decanter, half full of wine, sat on the table, and in a corner of the cabin shrank the figure of a man.

CHAPTER IX

A MODERN COLUMBUS

Hardly knowing what to expect the two advanced into the cabin, when the figure turned and looked at them with pallid countenance.

"It's Caradoc!" cried Madden in great astonishment and relief. "Scots, Smith, you gave us a jolt! We thought--what's the matter, old chap? Heat again?"

The Englishman's long face was strained. "Would you--take that decanter away, please!" he begged unsteadily.

Instantly Leonard understood the temptation into which Caradoc had unwittingly wandered. A strong odor of wine pervaded the cabin, and Smith's knock-out had given his nerves a great craving for a stimulant.

Without a word, Leonard walked to the table, took the wine bottle by its neck and heaved it through the open port. The three men in their half costumes stood listening intently until it chucked into the sea below. All three seemed to feel relief at the sound.

"That's all right, Caradoc," said Madden with a note of comfort in his voice, "all right, old chap. It won't be like this always."

"I was unstrung--rotten heat," grumbled the Englishman in acute self-disgust. "I thought I was getting over all--" he shifted the topic suddenly: "What do you make out of all this?"

"Completest mystery I ever ran into--the crew deserted for some reason----"

"And they had a feast and a celebration before they went. What cause of rejoicing they discovered in this place is more than I can fancy."

An inspection showed Smith was correct. What the boys had taken for bloodstains in their first excitement were splashes of wine. The table was still laden with dishes and eatables. Broken glass around the table showed that the diners had followed the old custom of breaking their goblets after toasts.

"They were having a last square meal before taking to their boats," speculated Leonard.

"But the boats are still here, sir," objected Greer.

"There seems to be no explanation," gloomed Caradoc.

"If we gathered this up and took it to the men, they would thank us heartily," suggested Greer.

"That's a fact," agreed Madden, setting to work at once. "Here, pile these plates on trays and we'll load 'em in the small boat."

The three adventurers set to work busily, carrying the provisions, which were still fresh and wholesome, to the port dinghy which lay toward the dock.

As they worked they speculated further on what could have brought about such an extraordinary situation. Their guesses ranged from water spouts to savages. Presently Caradoc cut in with:

"It's not so much how the _Minnie B_ got here, as it is how we are going to handle her."

"We'll man her and sail home," said Greer.

"We'll have to ballast her first," declared Leonard. "She won't run this way."

"We have enough coal on the dock for that, sir."

"In a flat sea like this," suggested Caradoc, "we can warp the schooner to the front of the barge and load the coal directly in her hold."

By this time the dinghy was loaded and the three swung her out of the davits into the sea below. Then they threw down a rope ladder and climbed below. Greer went back to the stern, picked up an oar and began to scull.

The sun sank as the little boat worked her way through the lanes of seaweed, and the great dock threw long purple shadows across the highly colored ocean. Caradoc looked at the great structure intently. The setting sun rimmed its great shape in brilliant red, but the bulk of it lay in deep wine-like shadow. The boys gazed at it musingly.

"A fine structure to desert, isn't it?" said Caradoc in a low tone.

"Just what I was thinking," sympathized Madden. "I suppose we could send a tug back and find her?"

"Doubtful, in this fantastic place."

"The current is fairly well charted; still, it may take us some time to reach port----" Both men fell into a musing silence as Greer nibbled the boat forward with the single oar.

"The thing's worth over a million pounds," appraised Caradoc.

Suddenly Madden straightened with an idea. "How about hitching that schooner to the dock and towing her?"

"What an American idea!" Caradoc lifted his voice slightly.

"Would we--make any--headway, sir, with the schooner's--light machinery?" asked Greer, his sentence punctuated by shoves at his oar.

"We would have to try and see. Besides, we would have to do little else than help the current we are in. The Atlantic eddy sweeps through the Caribbean close to the South American coast. If we could control our direction slightly, we would perhaps make La Guayra or the Port of Spain."

"With a seven or eight mile current that would take us months--years.... What is the distance to La Guayra?" this from Smith.

"Something around fifteen hundred miles. But that isn't the point. It isn't how long it takes us, it's can we _do_ it. Had you thought of the salvage end of this thing?"

"Salvage, no. We'll get salvage on the schooner--a bagatelle."

Madden shook his head, "No, I believe we ought to get salvage on the whole dock."

"Salvage on the dock!" Caradoc opened his eyes. "We'd be jolly well near millionaires. No, that's impossible. A crew can't salve their own vessel."

"Yes, but we are not the crew of the dock," insisted Madden, "at least not the navigating crew. The men of the _Vulcan_ were that. We are nothing but painters----"

"Oh, that's a quibble--nothing but a quibble!" objected Caradoc.

"Well, anyway, I think there is a rule that if a crew rescue their own craft under circumstances of extreme peril, they come in as salvors. I'll look it up in Malone's books when we get back."

At that moment their ears caught a cheering from the dock, which came to

them as a small sound almost lost over the immense flat sea. Greer paused in his work to wave a hand, which was extremely sociable for him. The men bunched on the forward pontoon, waved and shouted at the little boat. As the noise grew louder, questions shaped themselves in the uproar.

"W'ot did ye make of 'er?" "Was there anywan aboard?" "W'ot ship is she?" "Can we git a berth hoff this bloomin' dock?"

Madden held up his hands for silence and shouted a reply.

"We have a meal for you--a dinner!"

A great shouting and cheering broke out at this. It is strange how much more pressing is the small need of a dinner than the large need of a rescue. The mystery of the schooner was overlooked in a sight of the plates and victuals.

"Oh, look, there it is--bread and meat!" "And, say, ain't that fish?" "And that goose or something!"

Eager hands reached down as Madden and Caradoc handed up the platters. "To the mess room, to the mess room!" directed Leonard.

"Sure, sure, we wouldn't touch a mouthful for hanything!" cried Mulcher earnestly.

"Misther Madden, you're a wonder!" extolled Hogan.

Then the three men climbed up and were received clamorously. Even the silent Greer found himself beset with a temporary bunch of admirers. All began talking of the _Minnie B_, asking questions. Caradoc unbent his dignity and explained what he had observed.

Leonard went straight to the officer's cabin, eager to satisfy his curiosity about salvage. A whole fortune shimmered before his vision if law allowed the crew to salve the dock. He turned into the hot cabin, struck a light and ran his eyes over the mate's shelf of books. He soon found what he was hunting, "Abbot's Law of Merchant's Ships and Seamen."

Leonard sat down at his desk, placed the light close by and began a sweating search for the legal rule applicable to salvage. It was Madden's intention to attempt to get the dock to port no matter what the law said, but he knew his best chance of getting the crew to cooperate was through possible prize money.

Like all legal works, Abbott gave shading decisions on both sides of the topic. As the lad read on he discovered many questions were involved.

What constitutes the crew of a vessel? Can a towed vessel have a navigating crew? Could a lawful crew be composed of ordinary laborers, or would it be necessary for them to be able seamen?

All these points and many others were involved, but Leonard plodded patiently through the legal labyrinth, and finally decided that he and his crew were eligible for prize money. He then fell to estimating the probable amount the crew would receive. The dock was easily worth a million pounds, or say five million dollars. It would lack one or two hundred thousand totting up a full five million, but Leonard's imagination was in no mood to balk at a paltry two hundred thousand more or less. Say five million! The share of the salvors would amount to--say fifty per cent, two and a half million. Distribute this among twelve men. There he was, two hundred and eight thousand, three hundred and thirty-three dollars and thirty-three cents. Or say two hundred thousand dollars.

Madden drew a long breath and opened his eyes at his own figures. Was it possible? He doubted it! He believed it!

He stared out of his open port onto the fantastic sea, amazed that a great fortune should drift in to him from such a place. What would he do? How should he live? He could go anywhere, do anything. There came to him suddenly the precepts of his old teacher in economics at college: "A fortune is a great moral responsibility. A rich man is a trustee of society." Did he have the brains to wield this money and make it mean something to the world? The thought of wealth always comes with a question. A man's answer to that question determines whether he is a man or a thing.

Before Leonard could reach any sort of decision, Gaskin rang his gong for dinner. The boy arose and walked buoyantly towards the mess hall. He was hungry, too. Ever since he had cut rations, he had been eating the same fare as the men.

The tropical night was falling as the men joyously entered to a full-fledged, satisfying, if secondhand, meal. They came in laughing, joking boisterously, wondering about the schooner.

When the men had strung around the long table, Mike Hogan arose and the men became quiet as if at some preconcerted signal. The Irishman gave a slightly embarrassed bob toward Leonard and began in an extra rich brogue:

"Misther Madden, sir----"

Leonard glanced up in surprise. "What's worrying you, Mike?"

"Th' bhoys, sir, have been thinkin' as how we would loike to iexpress our appreciation av what ye've done for us, sir, in a little spache, something loike a little spache av wilcome, sir, an' asked me to do it, if ye don't moind."

"Go ahead," nodded Madden, "but don't expect much of a response from me. I'm no speaker and----"

"Go on, Mike!" "Go to it, Mike!" "Take a sip of water, Mike, like a

reg'lar one, and cut loose."

With this encouragement, the Celt moistened his dry lips, thrust out his chest, and after a momentary fumble, stuck three fingers in his shirt front.

"It's me pr-roud privilege, ladies and gintilmin, to wilcome to our midst, a gintilmin bearin' in wan hand a distinguished ancistry, a spirit av enterprise and a hear-rt av courage, while wid his other, he snatches a dinner for his starvin' min out o' th' middle av th' Sargasso Sea. Oi rayfer to our distinguished commander, Captain Leonard Madden of America."

A burst of applause followed this period. Hogan beamed, bowed deeply to left and right; his voice went up an octave and he proceeded:

"Ladies an' gintilmin, me mind runs back through th' pages av histh'ry, lookin' for a name fit to be compared with him but I don't find none. There is Columbus and Peary and Stanley and Amundsen, all av thim gr-reat min, but whin you come to compare thim with our hero, phwat have they done?"

"Look at Columbus. What is his claim to glory? Did Columbus iver swim out into th' stinkin' Sargasso and come back with a good dinner for his star-r-vin' min? Histh'ry does not say so. He discovered America, Columbus did. What is America? A whole continint. Anybody that was sailin' by would have noticed it. But, gintilmin, a dinner is a very small thing and they are har-rd to discover, as ivry wan of you lads very will know. Columbus wint out in thray ships, our gallant captain wint out in his undhershirt and a straw hat. I say thray cheers for our gallant captain!"

The cheers were given with a hearty good will and the orator sat down smiling broadly and moistening his dry lips with his tongue. Then the diners desired a response.

It struck Madden to propose salving the dock while the crowd was mellow. He arose when the noise subsided somewhat.

"I thank you fellows very much for the kind opinion you entertain of me, and now I want to lay a proposition before you."

"Hear! Hear the captain!" called two or three cockneys in hoarse good humor.

"I want to say that to-morrow we are going to man the schooner and sail for home."

The men were in a bubbling mood, and cheered this with cries of "Good! Good!"

"What I wish you to decide is, whether we shall tow the dock, or sail with the schooner alone?"

"With the schooner alone, sor!" "Schooner alone!" "We 'ave enough of th' dock!" came an instant chorus.

Leonard held up a hand, "One moment. I want you to have a voice in this decision. An attempt to tow the dock will be highly adventurous, no doubt dangerous. You were not hired for any such service, and I wish to leave it to a vote."

"Good, very good, sor! Let's 'ave th' question!"

"Just one moment. You must consider the salvage involved in this matter. If we save the schooner, we will receive as prize money about one-half her value. If we save the dock, we will receive about half _her_ value. The dock is worth a million pounds, about five million dollars. So each man would receive for his portion, in event we salvaged the dock about... two hundred thousand dollars... a fortune."

A profound silence fell over the diners. They hunched forward, staring fixedly out of sunburned, gross, dissipated faces. Longshores-men, the scum of London, who had worked all their lives for half a pound a week, gaped at the idea of two hundred thousand dollars.

Somebody repeated the sum hoarsely. Suddenly they raised an uproar.

"We'll take 'er, sir!" "We'll tow th' dock, sor!" "We weel tow zee dock to zee moon for zat!" "Spend our loives and die rich min!"

The strong imagination of wealth ran around the table like wine. Deschaillon responded first.

"Voila! One meellion francs! I weel buy a pond near Paris and raise bull frogs. I weel buy a decoration and be a knight. I weel----"

"I'll start an undertaker shop!" glowed Galton, "and my old mother shall have a bit of ground to raise flowers."

"Glory be!" chanted Hogan, "Oi'll wear a tall hat, a long-tailed coat and carry a silver-headed cane, and thin Susie Maloney and Bridget O'Malley and Peggy O'Brien will be sorry they iver tossed up their saucy noses at th' love o' an honest lad!"

"I'll own a kennel of bulldogs," growled Mulcher, "and 'ave a fight hev'ry day."

All this was given in chorus and much of it lost. Those who didn't speak aloud their heart's desires thought them. Fortune had shown her golden form to these crude men for a fleeting instant, and dreams, long hidden in their hearts, suddenly leaped to life. They were poor dreams, selfish dreams, foolish dreams, but for the moment they poised, like liberated fairies, for a flight to the land where dreams come true.

"We sail in the morning," explained Madden, "for a South American port.

Is there anyone in this crew who knows anything about running a marine engine?"

The men fell silent and looked inquiringly at each other. Fortune was beginning to show herself elusive, even in the Sargasso, save to those who _know_.

"I b'lieve not," said Mulcher.

"We could raise steam, sir," suggested Galton, "and then pull all the levers and twist th' w'eels, sir and see w'ot'd 'appen."

"W'ot 'ud 'appen!" cried two or three voices. "W'y, we'd hall be blowed galley west, 'at's w'ot'd 'appen!"

"Sure Mither Madden can figger it out!" suggested Hogan cheerfully.

"We might leave th' dock and run 'er 'ome by sail," suggested Galton.

"No! No! Take th' dock!" "We'll run'er by steam!" "Steam's th' word!" A storm of determination cried down any such suggestion.

"D'ye mean a dozin str-rong min can't run one little engine!" shouted Hogan; "r-rich min, too! It's a shame, lads, we haven't a dhrop o' something to dhrink the health av th' ixpedition."

"Yes, Mister Madden, a drop o' something!" urged another voice.

At that moment, Gaskin entered the door with suppressed excitement showing through his usually imperturbable manner.

"Hi--Hi beg pardon, Mister Madden. Hi, don't want to interrupt, but--" he rubbed his hands with a little bob--"but would you 'ave th' goodness to step outside for a look, sir. Hi think th' _Minnie B_ is on fire."

And the fairy dreams, evoked by a wave of Fortune's wand, crept silently back into the hearts of their owners.

CHAPTER X

THE STRANGE END OF THE _MINNIE B_

At Gaskin's announcement, bedlam broke loose among the diners. They leaped to their feet and rushed headlong from the messroom.

"Get th' buckets!" "Man th' boat!" "We'll niver get there in toime!" "_Allons! Allons_!" "W'y didn't we put a guard on 'er!" "Hurry! Hurry! Hurry!" "Yes, 'urry! 'urry!"

Out into the darkness to the forward pontoon rushed the howling mob. Some gave inarticulate cries, others bewailed their lost riches to the vast empty night.

A strange sight met their eyes. The spars and sails of the _Minnie B_ stood out against the black heavens in a flickering brilliance that danced up through the rigging, but presently all saw it was a mere light shining from beneath.

"Th' fire's in th' hold!" cried Galton hoarsely. "Did you men drop a match?"

"Ow could they drop a match, wearin' nothin' but undershirts?" flared back another navy.

"We could do no good in a small boat!" cried Galton.

'She's afire from stem to stern!"

"But smoke--w'ere's th' smoke?"

Then, quite surprisingly, the light wavered out, leaving the schooner in stony blackness. A vague blur of complementary color swam in Madden's eyes. A gasp went up from the watchers.

"Bhoys," faltered Hogan in an awed tone, "th' banshees ar-re dancin' to-night!"

"Banshees!" sneered Mulcher. "Th' deck's caved in--it'll break out again!"

"Th' engines must be ruint completely."

"Wot do ye make of it, Mister Madden?" asked Galton, bewildered.

"Look--there it is again!"

Sure enough the mysterious light flamed up once more as suddenly as it disappeared. It flickered and wavered over hull and spars.

"It might possibly be a phosphorescent display," hazarded Leonard, completely mystified.

"Tropical seas grow very luminous when disturbed... a school of dolphins or sharks on the other side the schooner might----"

"This must be a reg'lar fire!" cried Mulcher. "Nothin' but a furnace in th' hold----"

"W'y don't hit smoke?"

"Ow do I know?"

"Hit ain't a fire!"

"W'ot is hit?"

"Phosphescence, didn't you 'ear Mister Madden say!"

"Will hit sink 'er?"

Deschaillon gave a sharp laugh. "What _sauvages_!"

By this time it became clear to everyone that it was not a fire. As the weird illumination continued its fantastic gambols, little points of light began moving about the deck.

Just then Caradoc's grave voice hazarded: "That must be an extraordinary display of St. Elmo's fire. I should say a storm was brewing."

"Would St. Elmo's fire 'urt th' vessel, sir?" asked a cockney.

"Not at all," replied the Englishman.

As Leonard stared a queer thought came into his head. He looked around at his companions. In the faint radiance from the mysterious schooner, he could make out their faces, pale blurs all fixed on the strange spectacle. He picked out the heavy form of Farnol Greer and moved over to his friend. Under the cover of excited talking and exclamations, he asked in a low tone.

"There was somebody on that schooner this morning, Farnol?"

"Just what I was thinking, sir."

"He could have hidden from us. You thought he must be crazy--a crazy man would probably have secreted himself."

"I had it in mind, sir, the very thing."

"Now could he possibly make a light like this?"

Greer remained silent. The queer fellow never said anything when he had nothing to say.

"I'd like to go over and see," went on Leonard. "I want one man to row with me. We want to go light and fast."

"That's me, sir."

Greer moved instantly to the rope ladder where the dinghy was tied. Madden followed him. Caradoc was still explaining the theory of St. Elmo's fire to the listening men. Madden broke in on it.

"Fellows," he called, "Greer and I are going to row over there. We'll let you know what we find."

Amid warning protests the two climbed down the ladder for the small boat.

"I wouldn't do it, sir." "Leckricity's liable to strike you, sir."

"There's a storm comin', sir, and you won't get back, like th' mate did." "You can see just as well from 'ere."

But the two clambered into the half-seen dinghy and pushed off. The moment they dipped oars into water, the mystery was partially explained. Every stroke they made created bright phosphorescent rings in the lifeless sea. Their blades drove through the water in a flame. The navvies cried out at this phenomenon. A sufficient disturbance of the sea beyond the schooner would almost explain the strange light dancing through the rigging. But what made that disturbance?

Reflections of the shining spars made a wavering path over the weed-strewn water, and up this path the dinghy moved amid its own flashing fires. It formed a queer spectacle, a glowworm creeping up on a bonfire.

The fact that the two boys had just traversed the Sargasso lanes a few hours before aided them greatly now in finding their way to the schooner. Presently they were skirting the drift of seaweed where Madden had come so near losing his life. As they rowed, the flashing of the water about their oars only half convinced Madden that a similar cause underlay the bizarre illumination on the schooner. The American's mind clung to the idea that there was somebody on board the *Minnie B*, a madman, possibly, who in some unknown way produced this amazing light.

He groped for some theory to account for a maniac on a deserted schooner in these desolate seas. No doubt if a solitary man were left in these terrible painted seas he would go insane. Madden regretted that he had not searched the *Minnie B* more thoroughly when he had the opportunity.

Similar thoughts evidently played in Greer's mind, for presently he puffed out, between oar strokes: "Did you bring along a pistol, sir?"

"No, but there are two of us."

"They say they are tremendously stout, sir."

"We can use our oars; they'd made good clubs."

"I'm with you, sir."

By this time they had entered a long S-shaped rift that Madden recalled led straight to the schooner. By glancing over his shoulder, the American saw its two curving strokes drawn in pale light against the dark field of seaweed. As they drew nearer, wild notions of what they might encounter played through Madden's mind. What would be the outcome of this fantastic adventure?

The dinghy was moving down the middle of the long "S" when a dull noise from the schooner caused both oarsmen to look around. Such an extraordinary sight met their eyes that they ceased rowing completely, and stood up in the boat to stare at their goal.

The Minnie B no longer lay at rest. Some strange and mighty convulsion was taking place in the schooner. The lights still played about the vessel, but her whole prow rose slowly out of the sea, while she settled heavily by the stern. The most unexpected thing in the world was happening.

The Minnie B was foundering!

In the ghastly light, her masts and rigging swung in a slow drunken reel. Presently she settled back to normal with a heavy crushing sound as the water in her hold rushed forward. She seemed some mighty leviathan weltering in agony. She lay on even keel for four or five minutes while a hissing and spewing of air compressed in her hull told she was slowly settling.

In the ghostly light the foundering vessel gave a strange impression of clinging desperately to her life. She seemed striving to remain upright. Her hissing and sucking might have been a living gasp for breath. Very slowly she rolled over, and came the noise of many waters cascading down over her upflung keel. Her masts crashed, yards broke, rigging popped in the wildest confusion as they dashed into the sea. Great phosphorescent waves dashed through the prone rigging and over the hull in liquid fire. A sea of quicksilver leaped up to lick her down. With great bubbling and sucking and groaning, the Minnie B fought for her last gasp of life. For several minutes she lay thus, on her side, every detail clearly delineated as liquid fire roared down her open hatches. At last, as she filled with water, the schooner straightened with a mighty effort, a last stand between sea and sky, then sank slowly out of sight in a scene of wild and ill-starred beauty. Her mainpeak disappeared in a shining maelstrom. The convulsed water flashed and hissed, and the circling waves here torches into the dead seaweed and moved the black fields to a whispered sighing.

Toward the south the waves moved with great velocity and brilliance. Indeed something seemed to be rushing away from the wreck, clad in long winding sheets of flame. It might have been a continuation of the waves in that direction, or it might have been some dolphin or shark flying from the roaring vessel.

In ghastly mystification, the two watchers stared at the last weird gleams that marked the foundered schooner. The waves reached the dinghy, raised it and dropped it with a slow gurgling, then died away in firefly glimmers. The sea presented once more a dim gray surface. To Madden's mind there came, with a sharp sense of pathos, the picture of the little sunny-haired girl he had seen in the chart room.

"Sunk," murmured Greer in a strange tone, "sunk--when she was as dry as

a chip."

"Heeled over," shivered Madden, "heeled over in a dead calm--God have mercy on us!"

CHAPTER XI

CARADOC SHOWS HIS METTLE

Heat, that grew more terrific as the dock drifted southward; hunger, that gnawed like rats at the empty stomachs of the crew; withering heat, aching hunger, growing despair--that was life on the floating dock.

Of all the crew only Gaskin remained in good condition. It would have required more than a hero to cook food and go hungry, but the crew made no such allowances. They berated the dignified Gaskin, they eyed each other's scant portions jealously. Their quarrels over food at last forced Madden to weigh each man's allowance to the fraction of an ounce.

The nerves of the crew frayed out in the heat. By night they slept amid tantalizing dreams of food; by day they sprawled in dreary silences under awnings which held heat like sweat boxes. The high metal walls of the dock caught the sun's rays and threw out a furnace heat. The men endured it in net undershirts clinging to dripping bodies; their eyes ached against the glare, their stomachs rebelled, their brains sickened with monotony and despair.

The men developed little personal traits that exasperated their mates unreasonably. Mulcher had a way of breathing aloud through his coarse lips that chafed Hogan's temper. For hours at a time the Irishman would stare at those flabby spewing lips, filled with a desire to maul them. Yet before this isolation, he had never observed that Mulcher breathed aloud.

The only occupation the men had now was to stare at, listen to and criticise each other. All painting had ceased, for work consumes energy, and energy consumes food.

Caradoc Smith found peculiar and private grievance in the fact that Greer often whistled to himself in a windy undertone. The tune Farnol chose for these unfortunate performances was an American ragtime, that repeated the same strain over and over.

Caradoc strove not to listen to this dry whistling. Sometimes he left his awning and climbed up the walls through the sapping sun's rays to escape it, but his ears caught the faintly aspirated air at remarkable distances.

One day he said to Madden: "I don't see how you stand that Greer

fellow's eternal whistling," and Leonard answered:

"Does Greer whistle?"

"Whistle! He whistles everlastingly, abominably--one of those confounded American rags. He's at it now--what is that thing?"

Madden had to listen very carefully before he caught the faint blowing between Farnol's lips. Presently he identified it.

"That's 'Winona, Sweet Indian Maid.'"

This reply seemed to arouse an irrational anger in the Briton.

"'Winona, Sweet Indian Maid'--_sweet_ Indian Maid!" he snorted.

"Did an Indian write such a nightmare? Is it a war song? Do they murder each other by it, or with it?"

Madden grinned with fagged appreciation, thinking the remark meant for humor, but Caradoc grimly chewed his blond mustache.

It was noon, three days later when Caradoc's endurance broke down.

"Greer!" he snapped with all his pent-up irritation in his voice, "will you never stop mouthing that beastly tune?"

The stolid fellow looked around in the blankest surprise. "Tune?"

"No, groaning, wheezing! You spew it out all day long! What do you think you are? A tree frog, a locust, a katydid? Doesn't your mouth get tired? Does that hideous tinkle go through your hollow head all day long?"

The Englishman's long face was a dusky red. He had not intended to be insulting when he first spoke, but all the sarcastic and abusive epithets that he had _thought_ during the long super-heated days of nerve-racked listening, now rushed out like steam from a boiler.

Farnol stared straight at the nervous fellow. "Are you insane?" he asked in wondering contempt,

"A wonder I'm not--with that diabolical wheezy spewing boring in my brain--you never stop a minute--over and over----"

"Have you run out of stolen whiskey again?" interrupted Greer with cool malice.

The whole crew came to hushed attention.

Caradoc seemed to collect himself with a great effort. The blood ebbed from his face, leaving it the color of clay.

"Stolen?" he asked in a contained voice. "Yes, isn't there another medicine case for you to steal?"

"Greer!" cried Madden reproachfully. The American knew it was hunger, heat and nerves that were nagging these two miserable men to quarrel.

"I believe he said I was no gentleman," pronounced Greer sarcastically, "because I didn't know a little French. I say _he's_ a thief."

Caradoc was drawing long breaths through dilated nostrils. "Mr. Greer," he said with cold evenness, "it is impossible to obtain swords or pistols on this dock. We will have to fight with our hands. Choose a second!"

Greer nodded shortly. Both men got to their feet and both glanced at Madden.

The American shook his head. "I can't serve for either of you. I'm in command here. I'm impartial."

"Will you oblige me, Mr. Deschaillon?" asked Smith with a set face.

The Gaul arose, saluted, military fashion, with a clicking of heels. "Eet ees an honor, M'sieu!"

Greer stared around dourly. "Hogan?"

The Irishman leaped to his feet joyfully. "Oi'm wid ye, Misther Greer, and we'll bate th' long face off th' spalpeen, though I hate to hit Frinchy Dashalong, who is a good frind o' mine."

All the men were up now circling about the principals.

"You don't have to do no fightin', 'Ogan," explained Galton, "you simply stand by and 'old up for your man, an' 'elp fan 'im 'twixt rounds."

"Rounds!" exclaimed the disgusted Irishman. "I thought they were choosin' sides for a free-for-all."

Caradoc began methodically stripping to the waist and Greer followed suit. The Englishman presented his watch to Madden with a slight bow.

"If you'll be so kind as to keep time," he suggested, "that's a neutral position. We fight four minutes and rest one."

Madden considered the warlike preparations askance. He wondered if he ought not to stop it. The Englishman might suffer another sunstroke. However, he took his station at the ringside, and glanced at the watch, which had a coat of arms carved on the inside of its hunting case.

There was a striking contrast between the two fighters. The Englishman was a beautiful taper from his great shoulders to his small aristocratic feet. His muscles were long, graceful and knitted across his arms, chest, and stomach like lace leather. He was built for swift enduring action and could only have sprung from a race of men who had spent their

lives in play and luxury.

Farnol Greer, on the other hand, was as heavily moulded as a bulldog. His arms were short and blocky; his shoulders welted with brawn; his chest was two hairy hills, like a gorilla's, while across his stomach muscles lay ridged like ropes. His waist was thick with pones of sinew bulging over the hips, as one sees in the statue of Discobolus. It was plain that Greer had labored tremendously all his life and that his strength was simply wonderful.

It struck Madden as a strange coincidence that these two extreme types of luxury and labor should meet in this furnace on the Sargasso and fight for the trivial reason that one offended the other's sense of music.

"All ready!" called Leonard.

The two men squared away at each other, Caradoc smiling sarcastically, Greer grim as a gallows. Utter silence fell over the crowd. The fighters crouched, bare fists up, staring at each other over the tips of their guards.

For a moment Smith shifted around his man on his toes. He seemed as light as a cat. Greer stood solid and merely turned on his flat feet. Suddenly Caradoc's long right whipped out with a crack against the shorter man's forehead. Greer made no sign of having received a blow, although a dull red splotch slowly formed on his frontal. Caradoc led another right, which Greer blocked, then the Englishman bored through with a stinging left to the hairy chest.

"Go afther him! Kill him!" cried Hogan to his principal. "Nixt toime he thries to hit ye, knock off his head for his impidence!"

"Aye, 'it 'im! Don't take nothin' off of 'im!" advised two of the cockneys. Sympathy lay with the smaller man.

Smith continued his tiptoe dance and led a straight right. Instantly his massive enemy ducked, leaped in under his guard, and there came the dull thud of in-fighting; Greer's black head jammed up against Caradoc's chin, his great muscular back bent half double, his tremendous arms working like pistons.

The crew howled at this sharp unexpected attack. Caradoc rescued himself by shoving open palms against the big bulging shoulders, and pushing himself away from this battering ram. Smith bumped into some onlookers, and got behind his guard some ten feet away from Greer. The Englishman's fine-grained stomach was covered with pink welts from his punishment. He had ceased smiling and was watching his man carefully. As a matter of fact, he had expected to dispose of Greer easily--as a gentleman disposes of a clod-hopper. But the heavy-set boy's method of fighting was new and effective. Likewise there seemed to be a certain grim system about it.

"First round is over!" called Madden.

"Phwat a shame!" cried Hogan.

With English love of fair fight, the cockneys divided themselves impartially between the battlers and converted themselves into impromptu rubbers and handlers. There was perhaps not a man in the crowd who liked Caradoc; nevertheless they hustled him to his awning, put him down on a box, procured towels, water, sponges from somewhere, and set up a vigorous fanning and rubbing, all out of a desire to see fair play. At the end of a minute they carried their champions back and set them facing each other like human game cocks.

Farnol dashed in at once, whipping right and left hooks to Smith's sides. Caradoc tore himself away and played for distance, stabbing at Farnol's head at long range. The short youth accepted with indifference punishment that cut cheeks and lips. He made rush after rush, driving Caradoc into the crowd, who immediately shifted back and made room. Time and again he landed terrific short arm jolts over heart and kidneys.

The sweating bodies of the fighters glistened in the roasting sunshine. Both were bruised, Smith's body, Greer's head and shoulders. Caradoc's mouth felt slimy and he spit at nothing.

The fighting went in spurts, Greer rushing Land Smith dancing away and stabbing. The two gangs of rubbers bawled encouragement to their men.

"Land on 'is nose there, Smith!" shouted Mulcher. "Don't let 'im to ye! Play away, play away, me boy! Now huppercut 'im! Huppercut 'im, I say!"

On the other side, Galton was shrieking hoarsely, "Bore in, Greer! Bore in, me lad!" and Hogan, "G'wan and mash the spalpeen's ribs! Br-reak his long nick! Cr-rush him! Why don't ye hit him on th' head and lay him out?"

"Time's up!" announced Madden.

During the following rounds, Caradoc stuck to the long range English method of fighting, but over and over Farnol broke through his guard and his short-arm jabs spread a sick numb feeling over Caradoc's sides and chest.

The Briton deliberately worked for Greer's eyes. His first round with the silent man convinced him that he would never be able to stop that massive steel body with a knock-out. On the other hand Greer covered up tightly and lunged like a tiger after Smith's stomach and endurance.

Two or three weeks before, Caradoc could never have withstood that terrific bombardment, but his hard life on the dock, his abstinence from alcohol, and the fact that tobacco had long ago run out, all this had armored his body with hard flesh.

The opening of the twelfth round found both fighters blown, bleeding and

filled with a desperate determination to end the contest. They formed a ghastly sight when they were pitted in what proved to be the final clash. Greer's face was chopped and bleeding, while Caradoc's ribs were a mass of bruises, as mottled as a leopard's skin.

To Caradoc, the whole dock seemed unsteady. The sun bored into the back of his head. The men had ceased yelling, and the circle silently swayed back and forth to give the battlers room. The whole scene was hazy and fantastic.

The Englishman put up his hands automatically when he faced his enemy, and the next moment black-haired blocky bull of a fellow charged furiously. Smith tried to stop him with a heavy right hand smash, but his fist glanced off the man's sweaty shoulder. The next moment, Greer's right landed in a fierce solid jolt on Smith's hip bone. A sickening pain went through the Englishman. He sagged away and went down on a knee, hunched forward, trying to protect his face with his gloves. Greer started another rush, when Madden jumped in, put a hand on his shoulder.

"You can't hit him while he's down!" he shouted in the bull's ear, and then the American began counting: "One, two, three..."

Caradoc rested with his broad chest panting convulsively up and down till the count of eight. Then he sprang backwards away from his enemy. Curiously enough, Greer did not press his advantage home. The heavy lad came forward but stood away from Caradoc, attempting nothing but left-hand jabs.

In an instant Smith saw what was the matter. That blow on the hip had ruined Greer's right hand, strained it, perhaps broken it. Greer's rushes had stopped, and Smith, who was a boxer, not a fighter, could stand off and peck at his man's eyes or jaw without danger to himself.

He hitched wearily up to his enemy, blocked Greer's left hand and let his right have a full swing at his exposed body. Farnol went through the motion of striking, but his blow was a mere tap and caused the heavy fellow to cringe with pain.

[Illustration: Caradoc Stands the Acid Test.]

Caradoc swung a light blow to the neck. Greer countered fiercely with his left, but it was parried easily.

Suddenly the crowd understood what had happened.

"Put 'im out!" "Finish 'im!" "Put 'im to sleep!" bawled a chorus. "He hit you below th' belt w'en 'e broke 'is 'and!"

Farnol continued his chopping one-armed fight. "Put me out! Put me out!" he bubbled furiously. "I said ye was a thief! You _are_ a thief! You're a thief!" and he accented his charges with stabs.

Smith side-stepped the harmless attack, letting it slide first to one

side then the other, men were so tired they could hardly keep their feet. The Englishman looked down on the stubborn fellow, with his chopped, bleeding face and blackened, defiant eyes. A hard swing at unprotected jaw would stretch him out in broiling heat, but he did not make the blow. Instead he pushed the frothing fellow away from him.

"Go to your corner and cool off," he panted. "Yes, I'm a thief. Go on away; I don't want knock you out."

He turned his back deliberately and walked to his own awning. The crowd stared, absolutely dumfounded by this unexpected turn of affairs. Greer himself stared, then moved forward automatically to continue his onslaught, when Hogan grabbed him.

"Come on back," cried the Irishman. "Th' scoundrel has lift ye no icxuse to fight him any more. He says he's a thafe, but I don't belave Come git a wash and let's wrap up yer hand."

At that moment the dignified voice of Gaskin came from the forward pontoon. The crew hushed their hot comments on the fight to listen.

"A sail," called the cook. "A sail to th' sou'west, sir!"

Instantly every man moved forward. The fight was forgot in the great hope of a rescue. Even the gory looking principals hurried forward to see if such welcome news could be true.

CHAPTER XII

THE RETURN OF THE _VULCAN_

Etched against the horizon lay a stumpy masted vessel that seemed as still and dead as ocean that rotted around it. She had not a sail aloft nor a plume of smoke in her funnel. For the moment this lifelessness was not observed by the hungry castaways. A joyous medley arose from the dock.

"Th' _Vulcan_! Hit's th' _Vulcan_! Th' good _Vulcan_!
We'll 'ave full rations t'night, 'at will! Hurrah!"

They fell to cheering. Voices arose in confusion.

"_Vulcan_ ahoy! _Vulcan_ ah-o-oy!" they bellowed in an effort to span the miles with human ices.

"Say, lads, she ain't movin'!" cried someone making the surprising discovery.

"Faith and phwat's th' matter with _her_ now?" exclaimed Hogan in

exasperated wonder.

A silence fell over the boisterous group.

"Out o' coal," hazarded Galton, "that's w'y she harsn't got back no sooner."

"W'ere's 'er sails, then?"

"A tug couldn't do nothin' with sails--she isn't made for sails!"

"It ain't w'ot ye're made for, hit's w'ot ye can git in this blarsted sea!"

"Maybe 'er machin'ry's broke?"

"Maybe they're hall sick?"

"Or dead?"

"Maybe----"

Madden hurried to his cabin and returned with binoculars. The men foregathered curiously about him as he scanned the vessel. He ran his eyes over the tub from stem to poop. She stood out with absolute distinctness in the glaring light. He could see her high prow, the swinging buffers along her side, the wide-mouthed ventilators. He could even make out her name in rusty letters under the wheel-house. Her small boats were in place, but he saw neither life nor movement aboard. She appeared as deserted as a pile of scrap iron.

"W'ot are they doin'?" queried Galton.

"Nothing." Madden was puzzled over the strange condition of the tug.

"Ain't they crowdin' to th' side, sir, lookin' at us and fixin' to come to us?"

"Nobody's on her," replied Madden. "At least I don't see anyone."

"W'ot! W'ot! Nobody on 'er! Is she deserted, too? Just like the _Minnie B_!" chorused apprehensive voices.

"Seems so," frowned Madden, then he made up his mind quickly and moved over to the small boat which had been hauled up on the forward pontoon.

"Fall to, men, lower that dinghy. We'll go over and see what's the trouble."

The crew went about their task with a sudden slump of enthusiasm.

"If the crew's gone, sir," mumbled one of the men, as he paid out the rope, "w'ot's the use goin' across?"

"To get to the tug, of course."

"An'w'ot'll we do?"

Madden looked hard at the cockney. "Get the provisions aboard if nothing else."

"There wasn't none on the _Minnie B_, sir."

"What's the _Minnie B_ got to do with the _Vulcan_? We're going to run the tug and dock out of this sea, crew or no crew--ease away on that rope, Mulcher. Let go! Now climb down, Galton, loose the tackle and swing her in alongside the ladder."

When the cockneys obeyed, Madden ordered the whole crew into the small boat. They climbed down the ladder one by one with a reluctance Madden did not quite understand at the time.

Fifteen minutes later, the little boat, loaded down to her gunwales, set out for the tug. Four oarsmen rowed, one man to the oar. The slow clacking of shafts in tholes echoed sharply from the huge walls of the dock as the dinghy drew away through the burning sunshine.

At some half-mile distance, the harsh outlines of the walls and pontoons changed subtly into a great wine-red castle, that lay on a colorful tapestry of seaweed, with a background of blue ocean and bronze sky.

As he drew away, Madden had a premonition that the dock was vanishing out of his life and sight, that never again would he live in its great walls. Like all crafts in this mysterious sea, it seemed completely forsaken, deserted. With a shake of his shoulders he put the thought from him and turned to face the future in the motionless tug that lay ahead.

Half an hour later the dinghy drew alongside the silent _Vulcan_ and the crew clambered aboard. As they had suspected, there was no sign of the tug's crew aboard.

Although the binoculars had forewarned them of this, the adventurers bunched together on the deck with a qualmish feeling and began talking in low tones, as men converse in the presence of mystery, or death.

"We'll search her first," directed Madden, in a tone he tried to make natural.

"Yes," agreed Greer, "and, men, keep a sharp eye out for lunatics. Don't let anything jump on you----"

"Lunatics!" gasped Mulcher.

"Greer and I fancied someone scuttled the _Minnie B_," explained Madden with a frown, "but that's no sign such a person is aboard the

Vulcan."

"They are wonderful like, sir," observed Gaskin.

"Anyway we'll look her over."

The men agreed and began scattering away, two by two for companionship. Presently from the port side Hogan raised his voice guardedly.

"Oh, Misther Madden, just stip this way a moment, if you plaze."

The call instantly attracted several other men. They moved across deck. Hogan was pointing. "Jist th' same as th' other wan," he said gloomily and significantly. "We knew it would be this way, sir. It was th' same hand as done it"

Leonard looked with rising dismay at the sinister parallel.

The _Vulcan_ also was lying at sea anchor.

In brief, here was conclusive proof that the tug had been abandoned deliberately and with forethought by Malone, Captain Black and the whole _Vulcan_ crew. Moreover, as in the case of the _Minnie B_, they had deserted their ship without taking a boat or even so much as a life buoy.

The amazed group of men collected about them other members of the searching party, who stuck their heads out of ports and doors now and then to see that no evil magic had set the rigging in flames.

"They all go th' same way," mumbled Hogan, staring at the anchor and wetting his dry lips. "Oi'm thinkin' it'll be our toime nixt."

"Piffle," derided the American half-heartedly.

"It makes no difference what happens," put in Caradoc, "we'll see the thing through."

For some reason the men thought better of Smith since the fight and his crisp announcement cheered them somewhat.

"She's got plenty o' coal," volunteered Galton.

"Er engines look all right," contributed Mulcher, "though I know bloomin' little about henginees."

"I weesh I knew what happened to the men," worried Deschaillon in his filed-down accent.

"My quistion ixactly, Frinchy," nodded Hogan emphatically. "Misther Madden says 'Piffle,' but Oi say where are they piffled to? Did they go over in a storm, or die of fever, or run crazy with heat?"

"They didn't starve," declared Mulcher, "for some of th' fellows are in th' cook's galley now eatin'."

Madden lifted his hand for attention, "There's no use speculating on what has happened. It's our job to get dock and tug to the nearest port."

"But suppose--suppose----"

"Suppose what?"

"Suppose th' thing gits arfter us, sir?"

Madden stared, "Thing--what thing?"

The cockney frowned, looked glumly across deck. Galton answered,

"W'y, sir, th' thing that run th' crew hoff the _Minnie B_ an' hoff th' _Vulcan_. Crews don't 'op hoff in th' hocean for amoosement, sir. Some'n' done hit an' that's sure."

"Do you mean you object to sailing this tug on account of some imaginary _thing_?" demanded Madden in utter surprise.

"Imaginary, sir!" protested Mulcher, "If you please, us lads on th' dock, the night th' _Minnie B_ sunk, saw something swim off to th' south wrapped hall over in fire, sir. Imaginary thing! It bit a 'ole in th' _Minnie B_ an' sunk 'er, sir!"

This recalled to Leonard's mind the peculiar phenomenon he had witnessed at the sinking of the _Minnie B_.

"What do you think the thing is?" he temporized.

"A--A sea sorpint, sir," stammered a cockney embarrassed.

"Sea serpent! Sea serpent!" scouted the American. "There is no such thing as a sea serpent!"

"That's w'ot th' hofficers always say," growled Mulcher.

"But it is a scientific fact--there's no such thing."

The well-fed Gaskin, who formed one of the group, made a bob. "That may well be, sor," he said in solemn deference, "but w'ether there is or isn't such a thing, sor, it's 'orrible to see, either way."

From the banding of the men against him, Madden became aware that they had decided on the real cause of the mystery behind his back, and he would have hard work to argue them out of the sea serpent idea.

"You boys saw a shark or porpoise swimming away from that schooner," he began patiently. "I saw it myself. You recall, on that night anything

that moved in the water burned like fire. The ship was brilliant, the oars of the dinghy shone. The thing you saw had nothing to do with the schooner."

"Then w'ot sunk 'er, sor?"

"Aye, an' w'ot come of 'er men, sor?"

"Aye, an' w'ot come of th' _Vulcan's_ crew?"

"Could a sea serpent put out a sea anchor?" retorted Leonard.

The men stared doggedly at their chief. "We don't know, sor."

"You do know that it is impossible!"

"If there ain't no such thing, sor, 'ow do we know w'ot it can do?" questioned Gaskin.

"Then do you want to go back and stay on the dock and starve?" cried Madden at the end of his patience.

There was a silence at the anger in his tone, then Gaskin began very placatingly, "Hi'm not wishin' to chafe ye, sor, but th' dock is so big th' lads 'ave decided the sorpint is afraid o' th' dock."

At Leonard's impatient gesture he added hastily, "Not that Hi believe in such things, sor, but Hi can't 'elp but notice that hever'body on th' dock is alive, an' hever'body on th' other two wessels is dead an' gone, sor."

Madden turned sharply on his heel. "Anybody who knows anything about marine engines, follow me," he snapped. "We must study out a way to start the _Vulcan's_ machinery. We're going!"

As he moved down to the doorway amidship that led below, he heard Galton mumble: "Yes, _we'll_ be going, Hi think, down some sea sorpint's scaly throat, but th' tug an' th' dock'll stay 'ere."

If a view of the _Minnie B's_ auxiliary engines had put hopeful notions in Madden's head of puzzling out their control by mere inspection, a single glance at the huge machinery of the _Vulcan_ filled him with despair.

The tug's hull was practically filled with a maze of machinery. Her engines arose in a tower of bracings, wheels, gearing, pistons, steam pipes, steam valves, with a multitude of the eccentrics and trip gearings used on quadruple expansion engines.

Although he had seen hundreds of steam engines, never before had Madden realized their complication until he faced the problem of running this difficult fabric. His proposed task made him realize that the engineer's apprentice, who serves four years amid oil and iron black, learning all

the details of these mechanical monsters, is probably just as well educated, just as capable of exact and sustained thought, as the lad who spends four years in college construing dead tongues.

Madden could construe dead tongues, or at least could when he left college a few months back, but now his life, the life of his crew, the salving of the dock, and the winning of a possible fortune, depended upon his answering the riddle of this Twentieth Century Sphinx. It was like attempting to understand all mathematics, from addition to celestial mechanics, at a glance.

Nevertheless, Madden's training as a civil engineer gave him a certain aptitude for his formidable undertaking and he set about it with rat-like patience.

He picked out the main steam pipe, larger than his body, covered with painted white canvas, and followed this till he discovered the throttle, a steel wheel with hand grips with which he could choke the breath out of the monster engines. Beside this were control levers. On the steam chest lay a half-smoked cigarette, as if the engineer had been called suddenly away from his post.

Madden turned the throttle, pushed the levers back and forth, and listened to clicking sounds high up in the complexity of the engines. He knew that every lever threw long systems of vents and valves in and out of play. A wrong combination would easily wreck all this powerful machinery. He was tackling a delicate job--like juggling a car-load of dynamite.

An oil can sat under the throttle. The amateur engineer picked up this and a handful of greasy tow. Engines require constant oiling. Madden had never watched an engineer ten minutes but that he went about poking a long crooked-necked oil can into all sorts of hidden inaccessible places.

Madden thought if he tried to oil the engine, he might learn something about it. He glanced around for the usual myriad little shining brass oil cups stuck, one on each bearing. To his surprise, he saw none. The machinery of the Vulcan was lubricated by a circulatory compression system, which used the same oil over and over. Madden did not know this, so it threw him off the track at his first step.

No one had followed the boy into the engine room, so now he was about to go on deck and commandeer a squad, when, to his surprise, Galton appeared at the top of the circular stairs, whistling a rather cheerful tune. He leaned over the rail and called down heartily:

"Do you want me, Mr. Madden?"

"Yes, come along. I wish you knew something about machinery."

Galton laughed buoyantly. "I'm not such a chump at hit, sor," he recommended.

"You know something about it?" inquired Madden in surprise.

"A bit, a bit, Mr. Madden. My brother Charley is chief engineer on the _Rajah_ in the P & O, sor."

"Ever work under him?" asked the American hopefully.

"Two years, only two years, sor. Never did finish my term an' get my papers. Often's the time 'e's begged me to do it, Mr. Madden. 'E'd say, 'Enry, me boy, w'y don't ye finish your term and git a screw o' sixteen pun' per, but I was allus a----"

"That's all right!" cried Leonard delightedly. "I don't care whether you're a full-fledged engineer or not. You're hired for this job. Understand? You'll get full wages, and then some. I'll----"

"Oh! I can 'andle a little hengine like this, sor. That's th' inspirator, sor," he pointed. "That's th' steam chist. In th' other end is th' condensing chamber. That little hegg-shaped thing is----"

"That's all right; I'm no examining board. Just so you can run it and keep it running. Now I'll get a gang at the furnace, if the boys have got over their sea-serpent scare by this time."

"They're jolly well over that, sor. Me and Mulcher 'ave decided as 'ow we're goin' to kill that sea sorpint, if it comes a-bitin' into our tug, sor."

Madden looked at his willing helper curiously. "Kill it--how are you going to kill it?"

"Dead, sor, yes, kill it dead, sor." Galton nodded solemnly, "My brother Charley, cap'n o' th' _Cambria_, sir, in th' 'Amburg-American Line, 'e learned me to kill sea sorpints, w'en I was jest a l-little bit of a--a piker, sor. An' I n-never forgot 'ow 'e told me to do it. You climb up th' mainmast, sor, w'ere you can git at their 'eads, cross your fingers for luck, an' blow tobacco smoke in their eyes. They 'ate tobacco smoke an----"

Leonard stared at the fellow, with a sinking heart. He was drunk. As to whether he knew anything about marine engines or not, there was no way to find out.

The effect of the long strain of heat, hunger and anxiety now told on Madden in a wave of unreasonable exasperation.

"You boozy fool!" snapped the officer, "you haven't sense enough to run a go-cart. Go down and start a fire in the furnace--can you do that?"

"Shertainly," nodded Galton gravely, "Mr. Madden, I can do anything. Go bring me th' furnace, and I'll put a fire in it _that_ quick. I'll start it now."

Here he stooped unsteadily, picked up a piece of oily tow, and before Madden knew what he was about, drew out a match and set fire to the greasy mass.

Leonard made a jump, planted a cracking blow between Galton's eyes. The fellow went down like a tenpin and lay still. The American stamped out the blazing tow before the fire spread on the oily floor.

Just then he heard a yelling from the upper deck. Hardly knowing what to expect, he dived for the circular stairway and rushed up three steps at a jump.

CHAPTER XIII

THE SEA SERPENT

When a new crew is shipped on an old vessel, the mate's first duty is to search the sailors' dunnage for whiskey; when an old crew is shipped on a new vessel, that officer would do well to search the vessel for rum.

Madden had neglected this. While the American was in the engine room, the cockneys in the cook's galley had found intoxicants, had poured raw whiskey into their empty stomachs and the result was the quickest and most complete intoxication. When Madden regained the deck he found his crew singing, laughing, fighting, quarreling in an absurd medley.

Deschaillon roared out a French song. Two cockneys quarreled bitterly over what words he was saying. Mike Hogan jigged to the Frenchman's tune, but shouted as he danced that he was spoiling for a fight. The smell of spirits reeked over the tug as if someone had sprinkled her deck with liquor.

Madden looked with anxious eyes for Caradoc, but did not see him. Smith was probably stuck away in some hole, senseless with poison, his effort at sobriety frustrated, his moral courage shattered, his weeks of painful reform smashed.

Whatever humor there might have been in the ill-starred situation was destroyed for Madden by his friend's moral relapse. It was much as if some invalid, nursing a broken leg, should fall and break it over again.

Gaskin was the first man who came in reach of the wrathful American. Madden caught his arm, whirled him about.

"You ladle rum out to these hogs?" he blazed.

Gaskin revolved with dignity and considered his accuser. "You wouldn't think Hi'd do such a thing, sor!"

"Then how did they get it?" Leonard shook the fat arm sharply.

"In spite o' me, sor! In spite o' me!" defended the cook, shaking his fat jowls earnestly. "Hi rebooked 'em, sor. Says Hi, 'Gents, this is lootin', it is piratin', it is----"

"You should have refused them a drop!"

"Refuse--Hi did refuse, sor! Hi did more. Hi blocked 'em! Hi--Hi fought hout, like a demon, sor! There were too many! Hoverpowered me, sor, they did! I was fightin' and blockin', fightin' and blockin', like a d-demon, sor, b-but--b-but----"

Here Gaskin's utterance grew thicker, his fat head bobbed, then he slithered down by the rail in the hot sunshine; his face stared skyward and stewed sweat in the terrific heat. Madden gave a grunt of disgust. Gaskin was fast asleep.

There was nothing to be done. The men were drunk and he would have to wait till they became sober before making an attempt to run the _Vulcan_. He stood a moment, staring disgustedly at his useless crew, then finally stooped and dragged Gaskin to the shady side of the superstructure. As he passed with his burden some of the men made clumsy tangle-footed efforts to salute.

In the shade Leonard found a deck chair, perched himself on its arm so as not to touch its hot canvas, and sat brooding glumly. He banished the drunken uproar from his brain and began totting up his prospects for escape from this foully beautiful sea. His mind jumped from topic to topic in an exhausted fashion. He wondered whether or not Galton really knew anything of marine engines? If the dock would be discovered by a passing ship? If the tug's crew had really gone demented and leaped overboard? If there were any connection between the fate of the _Minnie B_ and the _Vulcan_?

It seemed to Madden that he had been in the heat and brilliant garishness of the Sargasso for centuries. He wondered if the men would become so starved that they would draw lots to see who should be killed and eaten.

Anything, everything, was possible in this isolated sea. Its normal happenings were unreasonable. It was a place of madness. He recalled the words of the navy on the London dock, "Everything is unreasonable at sea." Certainly that was true of the vast stewing labyrinth of the Sargasso. He had lived abnormally so long that it seemed strange to him now to think that there were comfortable, well-ordered places on the face of the earth. Just as one cannot imagine snow and ice in the depth of summer, so Madden could not imagine the simple comforts of life. It seemed to him the whole world shriveled under a furnace heat.

Such heat, such congestion, he thought, might well breed sea-monsters. After all, why should there not be a sea monster? Who could be sure that

the old megalosauri, and megalichthys were extinct? Those monsters existed once upon a time, certainly. He was half persuaded that they still existed.

A sea serpent!

He wondered what a sea serpent would look like? One might well drive a man insane, cause him to leap overboard in utter horror.

His feverish brooding was interrupted by a wild flood of abuse from the starboard deck. It was Galton's voice bellowing:

"Were is 'e? Were is that bloody Hamerican? 'E 'it me! 'It me in th' eye for trying to 'elp 'im! You lads goin' to see me murdered for nothin'?"

Came a medley of drunken questions:

"W'ot's th' matter? Who bloodied your bloomin' eyes? W'ot 'appened?"

"That Hamerican chap!" bawled Galton savagely. "'E 'it me for 'elpin' 'im make a fire! Goin' to see me run over an' killed?"

"Faith Oi didn't see nawthin'," panted Malone, fresh from his dance

"Won't you stan' by a Hinglishman?" shouted the battered one.

"Sure we will!"

"We're Hinglish!"

"Le's 'lect 'nother hofficer an' court martial 'im!" bawled the sailor venomously.

"Sure, make 'im walk a plank!"

"Son of a shark!"

"Man-killin' crimp!"

The whole crew came lurching around toward Madden, filled with the wordy anger of intoxicated men.

The American arose to his feet with little emotion save a return of his old disgust. He knew he could defend himself from any assault the crew might make in that condition. But they made none. They stopped a little way from him, some drunkenly grave, others winking or leering, some abusive and threatening.

"Go'n' tuh 'lect 'nother captain," announced Mulcher thickly. "You no reg'lar hofficer!"

"You 'it a man for 'elpin' you, and 'urt 'is eye!"

"Make 'im walk a plank!" flared out Galton, shaking a big fist at Leonard. "Make 'im walk a plank!" Leonard observed that the fellow's nose and forehead were badly bruised, and dark circles had settled under his eyes. He started for Madden, when Hogan caught him under the arms.

"Phwat you talkin' about, old scout? Walk a plank--you have to court martial him first."

"I don't b'lieve 'e can walk a plank," surmised a cockney gravely.

"'E's too drunk; 'e'd fall hoff."

"Where's Farnol Greer, Mulcher?" snapped Madden disgustedly. "Is he drunk, too?"

"D-drunk--you don't think we're drunk, sor?"

"We 'ave been drinkin' a little, sor, but we're not drunk."

"Oi am," nodded Hogan, resting his chin on Galton's shoulder as if from deep affection.

"Oi don't a--ack loike it, you--hic--you couldn't tell it on me, b-but Oi--Oi--Oi'm drunk, aw roight."

"I theenk Greer ees in the cook's galley," smiled Deschaillon, who appeared to be rational; then he added coolly: "Eef there ees any fighting, I weel help you, Meester Madden."

"Cook's galley!" sputtered Mulcher. "'E's drinkin' hit ever' drop, lads; come on!"

"An' th' grub, too!" added Hogan.

This news completely disorganized the court martial and election committee. Galton himself forgot his revenge in his thirst. They started aft pellmell in confused haste to help Greer finish the rum.

Leonard made no objection. They were already drunk. They might as well dispose of the liquor once for all, and then it would trouble discipline no more.

When the men and their turmoil had disappeared, Madden remained on deck, filled with a dull, heavy feeling of lassitude and bitterness. It was one of those moments when a man's hope is swamped in present difficulties.

The sun swung slowly down into the western sea, and its reflections made long blinding streaks in the Sargasso. Its yellow light transformed the great red dock into an orange structure that rested on the sea as lightly as the pavilions of the evening clouds.

The perpetual bizarre beauty of the scene was tiring to the youth. For some reason he thought again of the sea serpent. It occurred to Madden

that an enormous scaly thing, in vivid spangling colors, embossed with sword-like spines, with a long convoluted tail, huge red-fanged mouth, would be in keeping with the scene before him, would indeed produce a gorgeously decorative effect, such as he had seen in Chinese pictures.

His thoughts took all sorts of queer turns. He wondered what he would do if he should see such a creature? He walked over and stood by the rail, staring intently into the colorful west, half expecting to see some wild dragon of his imagination. If it should come, he wished for a camera--a moving picture camera. A moving picture of a dragon attacking a ship!

Just then he caught a strange noise that seemed to emanate from the air above his head. He stood quite still, hands on rail, listening. It was repeated. It was a human noise. It seemed to come from the vacant bronze-colored sky above his head. He wondered if he were going insane? Just then he caught sight of Caradoc's torso thrust out from a barrel up in the shrouding of the foremast. The crew of the _Vulcan_ had run up the barrel like a whaler's lookout to post a watch. Into this barrel Caradoc had climbed.

The face of Smith wore a strained, desperate look. Madden stared at him for several seconds, quite taken aback by finding him in such an unexpected place. One thing, however, filled the American with deep gratification. The man was not drunk.

"What you doing up there?" called Madden in surprise.

Caradoc's broad shoulders sagged drearily. "I don't know," he said dully. "I fancy I might as well jump overboard and be done with it."

Madden became instantly alert. "Jump overboard! What for?" A sudden thought hit him. Maybe this was the way they all went? Then another fear entered his heart.

"Say, have you seen anything up there, Smith?... A dragon, or... sea serpent, or..." Madden stared dumbfounded at his friend, marveling what manner of sight had put suicidal thoughts into Smith's head.

"Heavens, yes... dragons, dragons, dragons!"

A weak, watery feeling went through Madden's legs. He felt dodderly.

"Many dragons!" All idea of beauty was lost in grisly horror.

"W-wait a m-minute!" he chattered. "D-don't j-jump--I'm coming up th-there!"

CHAPTER XIV

CARADOC WINS HIS FIGHT

Trembling all over, Madden gained the barrel and stepped through a niche in its side. He stared through the brilliant, hot colors, but no rushing horde of monsters met his eyes.

"Which way?" he asked breathlessly.

Caradoc looked around at him in uncomprehending misery. There was just room for the two in the barrel. Smith seemed to put his mind to Madden's question with an effort.

"Which--what did you say?"

"Which way?"

"What do you mean?"

"The dragons, man, the dragons!"

"Dragons--right here!" Smith beat his broad chest, then waved his long arms about. "Everywhere--don't you smell it?"

The idea of smelling dragons confused the American. "Smell what?"

"The whiskey!" shivered Caradoc. "I came up here to get away from it."

"Oh--so you didn't see--I understand!"

"It's tantalizing--horrible!" he shivered again, as if the superheated air chilled him.

The American's own foolish fancies vanished in the face of his friend's real trouble. Caradoc had met a dragon more terrible than the Sargasso could conjure up, and its fangs were in his heart. His flight to the crow's nest had been an effort to escape its fury, but it had followed him there. Leonard put a hand on his friend's shoulder. He was at a loss what to say. Indeed there was nothing to say.

"Habit--queer thing, Leonard--I thought I was all right."

"Yes?"

"You see, in college I used to take an alcohol rub-down after my bouts, and a drink. And now, after my fight at noon--smelling this--you don't know how it brings it back, appetite, recollections, everything----" he waved his hands hopelessly again.

"Don't think of it. Put your mind on something else."

Caradoc gave a short mirthless laugh. "Stand in a fire--and consider the lilies?"

"We've got to consider how we'll ever get out of here, if we can't run

this tug's engines..."

"We're stuck! We're stuck!" declared the Englishman miserably. "I don't see why I don't go down and be a hog again... we'll finally starve... Somehow I had a mind to die sober... God knows why I ever came on such a junket."

"Starve nothing. We'll get out somehow. We can fish and eat seaweed and distill our own water. I can make a still. And you'll get over that appetite. Bound to--can't last always."

Smith relapsed into silence, staring over the dying colors of the sea. Madden tried to think of simple remedies to abate a drunkard's appetite for alcohol. He had heard of apples, lemon juice, but both were as unobtainable as the gold cure itself.

"How long have you been like this?" he asked at last.

"Been bad two or three years. Drank some all my life. My governor taught it to me when I was a baby. Then when I got older if I went too far he kicked. Naturally I intended to stop in time, till I slipped in deep."

Leonard nodded understandingly. "It always gets a nervous high-strung fellow. The better stuff you are the harder it hits you."

Caradoc stared moodily seaward as he continued his recollections.

"The governor kept warning me. I don't believe he'd ever have kicked me out, but he died. Then they cashiered me--took my commission--and my family let me go, too... Well, I can't blame 'em."

"Your commission--in the army?"

"Navy."

"What were you?"

"Second lieutenant."

Madden looked at his friend curiously. Here was a queer pass for an English naval officer. This revelation explained a good deal about Smith, his autocratic manner, his many-sided education, his emotion at leaving England. It even explained why he had expected Malone to place him in charge of the dock.

"Is there any hope of getting back in?" asked Leonard sympathetically.

"Instauration! Never knew of such a thing in our navy. If I ever get out of here I'll go in trade somewhere."

"In South America?"

"I had British Honduras in mind, or Canada. I'd like to keep in the

Empire."

A noise below interrupted the conversation. The two youths looked down. The deck plan of the tug lay flat and empty save for the inert form of Gaskin. The noise came from inside the cabin and arose to a shouting. It was a drunken ribald sound. A suspicion flashed on Leonard's mind.

"Those pigs below are wasting the stores," he declared.

"They ought to be stopped."

"I couldn't stop them without a fight. They were about to court martial me when they happened to think of something else."

Caradoc stared down in the direction of the noise, "I might talk them into sense if Greer isn't drunk and wanting to fight again."

"He said he never drank--I don't know."

Caradoc nodded, "I'll go down and send them forward," he asserted with conviction, and started to climb out of the barrel.

Madden looked at the Englishman with a certain apprehension, "Caradoc, if you go down there where they are drinking, won't you----"

"No, I'm not going to drink."

"It will be a temptation."

"I have myself in hand now. This talk has done me good. No, I'm all right." He swung out of the barrel and started down the ratlines.

Leonard watched him anxiously, not at all sure of the outcome of his mission, not at all sure that the hot smell of rum in the galley would not again overcome his resistance.

The sun was just dipping into the sea and its last light spread out of the west to the zenith like a huge red-gold fan. Purplish shadows had already begun to dim the tug and dock and ocean.

Fifteen or twenty degrees above the sunset shone a pale crescent moon in the burnished sky. The sight of the moon somehow cheered Madden. He recalled a childish superstition that it was good luck to see the new moon clear. At any rate, as the sky darkened, the clear new moon brought Leonard comfort and renewed hope.

With a grateful feeling of the providence of an Almighty that hung out moon and stars, the youth glanced around the darkening horizon and presently observed a tiny light far to the south. He stared at it quite surprised, and then he chanced to see a star just above it. It was the reflection of Sirius in Canis Major.

The beam of a star must lead any thoughtful soul into endless reveries.

Beneath its calm and infinite light, all human troubles fade to the brief complaining of a child in the night. Death becomes a small, unfeared thing, and life itself, the trail of a finger writing an unknown message upon water.

Filled with such musings, the American noted with surprise that the light on the sea which he had fancied to be the reflection of Sirius was moving. It was not the reflection of a star.

It was a light moving in the gathering darkness.

What sort of light could it be? A Will o' the Wisp? A Jack o' Lantern, some phosphoric phenomenon rising in the exhalations of rotting seaweed?

Ten minutes before, his excited imagination would have conjured up hydras and dragons; now he scrutinized the mysterious illumination unexcitedly. It winked out occasionally, then presently reappeared. But it did not move in an aimless fashion, after the manner of gaseous or electrical phenomena. It pursued a straight line toward the _Vulcan_. That was why Madden had not observed its movement sooner.

Although it had crept only a little way down from the horizon, the wondering boy could discern its progress plainly among the dark masses of seaweed that blotched the graying water. The light was moving toward the _Vulcan_ and at a high rate of speed.

As he watched it, the enigmatical light suddenly disappeared. The youth blinked his eyes, looked again. It was gone. Then he became a little uncertain whether or not he had ever observed any such phenomenon. He glanced down on the dark deck and could faintly discern the form of the cook.

"Gaskin!" he called sharply, "Gaskin!"

To his surprise the drunken fellow stirred and made some mumbling reply.

"Get up. I want to know whether or not you can see anything."

Came a sluggish stirring from below, and then Gaskin's voice, in which deference struggled with a bad headache, "Yes, sor, I can see hever'thing as usual, sor."

"I thought I saw a light to the south. Just take a look in that quarter, will you?"

The dopy cook scuffled to his feet and stumbled over to the rail, hung there, peering intently southward. At that moment, there burst out of the sea a brilliant illumination that fairly blinded Madden. Shocked into spasmodic action, the American jumped from barrel to ratlines.

He hardly knew how he got down, as much of a fall as a climb. Strange fearsome thoughts chased through his head. The men were right about something attacking the _Minnie B_. Now the same thing had attacked

the Vulcan. The Vulcan would be sunk. He must rush the men out of the galley into the small boat. He must race back to the dock. The dock apparently was safe. What the startling apparition was, he had no time to speculate. When he touched the deck he sprinted for the cabin.

As he passed Gaskin the light vanished as mysteriously as it had appeared, and left the tug in inky darkness.

Madden heard the cook give a deferential cough and then say, "Yes, sor, Hi saw it, Mr. Madden, saw it quite plainly, sor."

A moment before Leonard reached the cabin door, someone flung the shutter open violently and shouted his name in the utmost alarm.

"Mister Madden! Mister Madden! Come quick, sir!"

The American lunged through the dark aperture straight into the fellow's arms. In the darkness he could not make out who it was.

"Don't be afraid! Did you see it? Where are the rest of the men?"

"In the galley, sir, with him!" stammered the sailor,

"Are they in a funk?" gasped Madden, feeling that he himself was in one.

"Oh, they are that, sir."

"Why don't they come on out? We must get 'em out!"

"They're with him, sir, 'fraid to touch 'im!"

"With who?"

"Mr. Caradoc, sir."

"Afraid to touch him--why, what's the matter?"

"E's dead, sir."

A feeling as if ice water had been dashed over his body shivered through Leonard. The black cabin seemed to swing under his feet. His arms dropped down and he stood perfectly still staring into the blackness from whence came the sailor's voice.

"You--you don't mean he's dead?" he asked in a shocking whisper.

"That I do, sir, dead as a lump o' seaweed."

Madden turned and walked with a queer light feeling toward the galley. He was in no hurry now. If that strange light sank them, drowned them, it made little difference. An idea came into his mind.

"Did--did you fellows kill him--murder, him?" he asked in a hard undertone.

The tenseness of his voice seemed to scare the sailor, "No, sir, no, sir, no, sir!" repeated the cockney over and over.

"For I'll shoot the man down like a dog! I'll hang him! I'll--I'll----"

"We--we didn't touch 'im!" cried the sailor in hoarse alarm. "'E done it 'isself, sir. Went clean crazy, kilt hisself--'orrible!" As the sailor gasped out "horrible" they entered the cook's galley where a dim light burned and a group of silent, sobering men stood in a knot over some object.

Madden shoved through to where two men stooped over a long body, dimly seen on the decking. The two men were Hogan and Deschaillon.

With his strange feeling still strong upon him, Madden knelt between the two. Caradoc lay limp and motionless, with a dark stain slowly spreading on the boards under his head.

"Tell me about this," commanded Leonard, thrusting a hand under the prostrate man's shirt and feeling for his heart. The request set loose a babble.

"'E did it 'isself, sor!" "Split hopen 'is own 'ead, right enough!"
"W'ack, 'e took 'isself, w'ack!" "Aye, that 'e did, sor!" "It sounds queer, an' it looked queerer, but 'e did, sor!"

Madden made a sharp angry gesture for silence, "One at a time. Mulcher, what happened?"

"'E comes in, Mr. Madden," began the cockney more composedly, "an' says, 'Forward, men, lively now,' an' Galton 'e turns an' says, 'Ye may take that, ye--'"

Again came the irrepressible chorus, "Aye, that 'e did, sor!"

"If a man speaks before I address him, I'll brain him!" shouted Madden.
"Hogan, what happened?"

"If you plaze, Misther Madden, Misther Smith came in and asked iv'rybody to stip forward and quit atin' up th' grub. Galton was mad innyway, an' had a glass o' whiskey in his hand. 'Quit atin'!' yills Galton. 'A officer niver wants nobody to ate but himself.' Then, 'Take thot!' he yills, and flings his whiskey straight into Smith's face.

"Av cour-rse, we expected to see him smash Galton to smithereens, him being dhrunk--Galton, I mane--but he stood still as a post, sir, and tur-rned white as a sheet. I filt sorry for th' gintilmin--him putting up sich a good foight this avening--so Oi thought if he didn't want to fight, I'd help him pass it off aisy. I had a glass o' liquor in me own hand. I offers it to him. Says I, 'Pay no attention to th' spalpeen at

all, Misther Smith,' says I; 'he's a fool to be throwin' away good liquor loike that; and have this dhrink on me, and if he does it again Oi'll pitch him out o' the port.' With that I handed him me glass.

"Well, sir, he took it, an' I belave there was niver another face on earth loike his, whin he hild up that glass to th' lamp. His hand shook so some of the sthuff shpilled. His face was loike a corpse. He shtarted to dhrink. Put it to his lips. Thin of a suddint, loike it had shtung him, he yills out, 'God 'a' mercy!' flings down th' glass, which smashes all over th' floor, lowers his head an' plunges loike a football tackle, head fir-rst, roight into th' sharp edge o' that locker there where ye see th' blood an' hairs stickin'. Down he wint, loike he's hit wid an axe, wid his skull broke in siv'ral pieces no doubt. Mad as a hatter, sir, fr-rom th' hate. Though it's sich an onrasonable tale, sir, I won't raysint it if ye call me a liar to me teeth."

Madden had found the Englishman's heart still beating. He pressed his fingers in the long bloody wound on his head and the skull appeared sound enough under the long gash.

"Get him out on deck," he ordered sharply, in an effort to keep his voice from choking in his throat.

"Out on deck! He's not dead! Get him in fresh air!"

Hogan, Deschaillon, and two navvies caught him by the legs and arms. Madden lifted the bleeding head from which the blood still ran in a steady trickle. The crowd gave back and the five men with their grewsome burden passed through the galley's door into the dark passage.

Just then a sudden vibration went through the whole ship, as if the _Vulcan_ had been struck by some enormous force. The men carrying Smith staggered. There burst out a blare of confusion, amazed cries, shouts of terror. There was a stampede in the narrow passage. Flying men bumped into the bearers of the sick man. They were shrieking, "We're struck! We're foundering! Th' sea sorpint's got us!"

"Launch the small boat and stand by till we get there!" bellowed Madden.

All the carriers dropped Smith's body and bolted in the panic. Madden braced himself against the rush of the crew and held up the senseless man lest he be trampled on in the blackness. The uproar in the passage was terrific as the men tried to squeeze through all together. Every moment Madden expected a rush of sea water down the passageway. Just then, he felt someone else lift at Caradoc.

"Go on," said Farnol Greer's voice. "Let's get him out, sir."

TOWED!

When the American pushed outside with his burden, a breeze swept the deck of the *_Vulcan_* with an unexpected coolness. The vibrations had almost ceased, but there was a slight hissing of water from somewhere, and a feeling of movement. The men were in a hubbub on the port side where the small boat lay tied.

Filled with the idea that the ship was about to founder, Madden stared about. To his vast astonishment, he discovered the tug was not sinking, but moving. The *_Vulcan_* was under way. The noise he heard was the swift displacement of water. For some unaccountable reason, the vessel glided southward at a speed of eight or ten knots.

In the uproar forward, Madden heard the cries: "Th' dinghy's swamped!" "We can't reach 'er!" "Cut 'er loose and jump!" "We couldn't right 'er in th' water!" "Cut 'er and jump! Quick! 'Eaven knows w'ot's got us!"

"Steady! Steady, men!" bawled Madden, laying Caradoc down on the deck and hurrying across to his panicky crew. "What's moving us?"

"We don't know, sir! Th' sea sorpint! Grabbed our cable and made off!"

"Can you see it?"

"Just make it out, sir, ahead!"

"Cut th' cable!" cried another voice; "that'll get us loose!"

"Yes, get an axe--Quick!"

A dim figure came running aft past Madden for the axe. The American shouted at him: "Come back! Don't touch that towing line! Let things alone!"

"Yes, but this'll drag us to the bottom!" chattered one of the men forward.

"We'll get in the dinghy when the ship goes down!"

"We might row to the dock from here!"

The men stood in a string along the rail, below them in the hissing water the dinghy tossing topsy turvy.

"What's towing us? I don't see it?" cried Madden.

Several arms pointed forward. Leonard peered through the gloom. The crescent moon and the stars filtered down a tinsel light. The faint shine merely made the darkness more evident Madden seemed to catch a glimmer of a bulk at the end of the anchor line some hundred yards distant. He listened but heard only the gurgle of the *_Vulcan's_*

wake and the creak of her plates.

When the sheer panic of surprise had worn away somewhat, the weirdness of the uncanny voyage came upon the crew with tenfold force. They stood gripping the rail, staring ahead with the feeling of condemned prisoners on their way to the gallows.

"We're 'eaded for the 'ole in th' sea!" muttered Mulcher.

"We'll go down tug an' hall," mumbled Galton unsteadily. "Fish bait, that's w'ot we are!"

"I've heard sea serpents can sting a man and numb him so he won't live or die," shivered Hogan, "like a spider stings a fly."

They spoke in half whispers under the influence of the unknown terror.

"If anything happens, I shall keel myself," declared Deschaillon, with nervous intensity, "but I shall see it first."

"That's w'ot went with the other two crews--killed theirselves," chattered Mulcher.

Another silence fell. The cool breeze came as a sort of mockery of their unknown peril. For the first time since the storm every man was thoroughly comfortable physically.

"Boys," planned Hogan, "whin th' thing comes aboard, we'll put up th' best foight we can!"

"It don't come aboard--it bites a 'ole in th' 'ull."

"Aye, like th' _Minnie B_."

Just then a figure approached the men unsteadily, and Madden saw that Caradoc had recovered consciousness and was able to walk. As the tall, gaunt figure approached, the crew eyed him as if he were some new danger, then he asked.

"What is this? Are we moving?"

"Yes we're off," replied Madden.

"Under our own power?" he inquired, turning around and staring at the smokeless funnel.

"No, we're being towed."

"Towed! Towed!" exclaimed Smith in a weak voice. "What's towing us?"

"We don't know, sor," replied a cockney.

There was a silence in which Caradoc stood tall and cadaverous as a

ghost. "Am I dreaming this, Madden?" he muttered finally. "Did you say we were being _towed_?"

"That's right."

"What's towing us--not--not the dry dock--don't say the dry dock's towing us!"

"We don't know, sor," repeated the cockney.

"Where are we going?"

"To be killed, sor."

Caradoc moved slowly over to the rail and sat against it near Madden.

"A cool breeze," he murmured gratefully.

The American was lost amid the wildest speculations as to the mysterious agent that had the _Vulcan_ in tow. He was trying to think logically, but found it hard in that atmosphere of terror. The utter weirdness of the whole affair defied analysis. The towing of the _Vulcan_ by an unknown power was the very climax of the fantastic. No hypothesis he could form even remotely approached an explanation.

It could not be some sea monster surging steadily at the tow line of the _Vulcan_. That theory was untenable. A monster might attack; it would never tow.

But any other, attempt to account for the strange predicament fell equally as flat. What human agency would operate so mysteriously in this hot, stagnant sea? Why should any group of men entrap the helpless crew of the _Vulcan_ with such a display of mystery and power? It was useless. It was ridiculous. It was shooting a mosquito with a field gun.

All his thoughts ended in utter absurdity. He felt that he had run up against some vast power. The schooner _Minnie B_, the tug _Vulcan_, were but trifling units in the enigma of this deserted, weed-clogged sea. It must be some power whose operations were ocean-wide.

Why such a spot should be chosen?--Why a power that sank one ship out of hand and towed another mile after mile?--Why it operated only at night?--What lay at the heart of this brooding fabric of terror--he could not form the slightest conception. Outlawry, piracy, smuggling, were all goals too small for such operations.

His thoughts seemed to be physical things trying to clamber up the smooth polished side of an enormous steel plate. They made not the slightest progress. The more he thought, the more unaccountable all phases of the question became.

In absolute perplexity, he turned to the Englishman at his side. He

could just make out the blur of Caradoc's face.

"Have you a theory about this, Smith?" he asked in a low voice.

The Englishman nodded in silence.

"What is it?"

"I--I got my head hurt awhile ago. I believe I'm delirious--dreaming."

Leonard thought this over without any feeling of amusement. "That doesn't explain why I see it too," he objected gravely. "Nothing wrong with my head--that I know of." He tried the time honored experiment of pinching himself.

"I shall assume that I am awake," he decided after he had felt his pinch. "I may not be, but I'm going to act as if I were."

Madden had an impression that Caradoc was smiling in the darkness. Just then Gaskin began laughing shrilly in a queer metallic voice.

"Quit that!" snapped half a dozen thick voices at once, as if his laughter had violently shocked their tense nerves.

Gaskin pointed a stumpy arm off the starboard bow, "Look! Look!" he gasped. "It's that rotten whiskey! Whiskey done it! Whiskey made me see that! Look w'ot whiskey done!"

Leonard had no idea that anything could be added to the nightmarish quality of the adventure, but there off the starboard arose a great bulk, blotting out the stars. It was not a ship; it was not a barge; there was not a light on it, but it seemed somehow dimly illuminated. It was as shapeless as death.

"The Flyin' Dutchman!" shuddered Galton.

"It burns a blue light!" corrected Hogan with chattering teeth.

"Th' ship o' the dead!" shivered Mulcher.

A sudden explanation flashed into Madden's head. "You fools are afraid of our own dry dock," he whispered briefly. "We've traveled in a circle and reached the dock again."

"Oh, no, sor, it ain't that! Tain't th' dry-dock, sor!" aspirated several fear-struck voices.

The crew held their breaths as if the apparition might vanish as suddenly as it appeared.

By this time the moon lay flat on the sea, throwing a faint shining streak across the dark Sargasso. This vague light was enough to show Madden, when he took a close look, that it was not the dock.

The thing he saw was an enormous mass without the severe angular shape of the great dock. Its outline rose crude and shapeless, as well as he could trace it among the canopy of stars, and gave not the slightest intimation as to what use it could be.

As they stared, the speed of the *_Vulcan_* slackened sensibly. The faint rippling of water under the prow ceased. The breeze fell away into a dead blanket of heat. It was as if a sweatbox had been cooped over the crew.

"The thing's cut loose from us," said a weary voice.

Hogan laughed shortly: "Everybody out--fifteen minutes for refreshmints."

"Yonder goes that thing!" cried Galton. "Hi can see it!"

Indeed, by peering carefully, Madden could follow the slender outline of the mysterious craft that had towed the *_Vulcan_* to this uncanny spot. It had now left the tug and was gliding away to the great misshapen fabric that sprawled on the sea.

Every eye strained to see the outcome of this strange maneuver, when suddenly from the gliding vessel there shot a dazzling light that spread over the bulky mass. Under the beating illumination every detail of the huge vessel stood out garishly. She was immense, with a broad flat prow like a railway ferryboat. She stood high in the water and seemed to have three promenade decks around her.

There was no mast, no rigging, no outside gearing. One squat funnel amidship told that she used steam for some purpose, and out of this funnel black masses of smoke rose slowly in the motionless air. She resembled no craft Madden had ever seen.

Notwithstanding her enormous size, everything about the vessel impressed Madden that she was built for secrecy. She was squat, considering her length and breadth. It was as if her designer were trying to make a craft invisible at sea. As near as Madden could determine in the strange light, she was painted a pale sky-blue. During the day, no doubt, she melted into the sky like a chameleon.

As the smaller craft approached its huge mate, its circle of light contracted until it finally concentrated into a dazzling white spot centered on the prow of the monster. This spot diminished to an intense point, like an electric arc between carbons. A sharp reflection of this point streaked the water between the tug and the mysterious vessels.

Then, under the unbelieving eyes of the crew, the little vessel ran completely into the larger one and was gone. The light vanished instantly. Utter blackness fell over the dazzled eyes of the watchers.

There were gasps, explosive curses of bewilderment, amazement. The

little boat had disappeared into the larger. Impossible! Gaskin began his shrill laughter again. Then he gurgled in the darkness as if somebody's fingers had clamped his windpipe.

Madden's mind attacked more violently than ever the incomprehensible motives behind this inscrutable mystery. What was the key to this incredible affair? In the midst of his mental struggle, he felt a hand on his arm, Caradoc said in his ear,

"What do you say we get in the small boat and pay them a visit?"

"It's a big risk. I daresay we'll get our heads blown off."

"I had thought of that," agreed Caradoc.

"Come on," said the American, and the two moved across the deck to see if they could still use the dinghy, which had been trailing along all this time.

Nearly an hour later, the two boys in the dinghy approached the puzzling craft with muffled oars. As Madden and Caradoc drew near, the vast size of the strange ship grew more striking. The faint impression of light which they had first received grew stronger and Madden saw that the decks were illuminated by long bands of diffused light, although he could not guess its origin.

On the lowest deck, the American made out the small figure of a man marching back and forth with a gun.

At this sight, both boys stopped rowing, lifted the oars from tholes and began paddling noiselessly, canoe-fashion.

"That must be the accommodation ladder," whispered Madden, "where the guard is."

"Who are they afraid will board them?" queried Caradoc. "Mermaids?"

"It is a strange precaution to take in the Sargasso," agreed the American. "It is going to make our entrance difficult."

They ceased paddling now and drifted silently toward the monster.

"I wonder if they aren't smugglers," hazarded Caradoc,

"Must be up-to-date, to use submarines--a submarine would defy detection, wouldn't it?"

"And rich--nobody but millionaire smugglers could get together all this paraphernalia."

"I'll venture insurance is at the bottom of this fraud, Caradoc," hazarded Madden. "These swindlers insure a cargo, bring it to this place, reship it, sink the vessel, or repaint and rebuild it, then

collect the insurance money--do you remember the log of the _Minnie B_?"

"No, I didn't read it."

"It stated her cargo had been reshipped--reshipped from the Sargasso. The entry may have been for the benefit of Davy Jones. Anyway, they are methodical scoundrels."

The lads fell silent as the hugeness of this nefarious business gradually dawned on them. For insurance swindlers and smugglers to work on such a large scale, very probably the organization branched over the whole civilized world. This vast shapeless vessel was a spider at the center of a great network of criminality.

"Say, the Camorras are mere infants in crime compared to these men," shuddered Leonard. "I suppose they murder the crews--drown 'em."

"They would have to get 'em out of the way somehow."

"Then Malone and all the tug's crew are..."

There was an expressive silence.

After a while Caradoc whispered, "Well, shall we try to get aboard?"

"Wouldn't do any good."

"It won't do any good to stay here."

"No, we can't hide on the tug always, and we can't run her engines. _You_ don't know anything about marine engines, do you, Caradoc?"

"Very little. I couldn't run one."

For several minutes, the two adventurers sat in silence, watching the small erect figure of the guard pace and repace his short path. Presently Madden said:

"I've thought of one chance, Caradoc, to escape being starved or murdered."

"Yes, what's that?"

"It--it's almost too wild to propose, but it's all I can think of. As far as I know it's absolutely our last chance."

"Go on, go on," urged the Englishman impatiently. "I don't know of any way out whatever."

"If we could slip aboard there and--and--well, kidnap somebody who knows how to run our engines, bring him back to the tug, fire up and make a race to South America--but there's no sense to a scheme like that."

Captain Kidd himself wouldn't be up to it."

A long silence followed this ultimatum, then Caradoc said, "Oh, it's possible, I suppose. The mathematical formula of possibility would work out about ten million chances to one that we lose."

"Yes, I know it's risky."

"And how do you hope to get in past that guard?"

"We'll have to climb up the ladder right under him, hang there until he is on his up-deck walk, then swing inside and when he turns around we could be simply strolling up the deck toward him. There must be a lot of fellows on such a big ship. Maybe he doesn't know them all."

"Why do you want to stroll _toward_ him?"

"Because if he saw us walking off in the other direction, he would know we had not passed him, and so we must have come up the ladder."

Caradoc shook his head in the darkness. "I'm going to try to jump on that guard when he turns his back, and down him."

"He'd give an alarm sure. We mustn't disturb him till we get ready to leave, then let him yell."

"What you are planning, Madden, is simply impossible. I like to be as conservative as possible."

"We can turn around and row back to the _Vulcan_--and starve."

"Go ahead to the accommodation ladder. However, it's impossible."

As the two moved silently nearer a murmur of machinery in the vast fabric came to them. As their tiny boat swung in beside the high hull, they could hear this noise quite plainly, and they trusted to this rumble to screen their operations somewhat. They ceased paddling and allowed the dinghy to drift against the iron side of the vessel. They could no longer see the deck and the guard, owing to the swell in the high metal wall. But presently they came to the rope ladder which they anticipated hung below the guard's station.

Madden caught this and tied the dinghy to it with the crawly feeling of a man who expects to have a gun fired at him the next moment.

Caradoc came up and the two adventurers stood in the boat's prow, both holding to the ladder.

"I'll bet that scoundrel shoots down," whispered Leonard, "before we get halfway up."

"Don't talk so loud--are you ready to try it?"

"What are you going to do--jump on him?" breathed Leonard.

"No, your plan. If you see he is going to shoot you before you get inside, jump backwards and dive."

"And remember to go far enough out not to hit the dinghy."

"Good."

Madden stared up into the mysterious vessel, caught the ladder and swung himself silently onto the rungs. Caradoc mounted close behind him. They had mounted only two or three steps, when a sudden terrific report thundered above their heads.

It was so unexpected, so violent, that the two boys almost tumbled into the sea. The next instant they found themselves wrapped in an atmosphere of hot, stifling steam. They clung to the rungs in a veritable steam-bath that roared and plunged around them. When Madden collected his senses, he realized that it was merely a safety discharge from the boilers. The main steam pressure did not strike them, but they swung in the hot wet fringe of the exhaust. Had they been ten feet farther aft, they would surely have been boiled to death. As it was they were immersed in uncomfortably hot vapor.

They clung, rather unnerved by the uproar, enduring the heat for four or five minutes, when suddenly an idea occurred to Madden. He leaned down to Caradoc and shouted in his ear.

"How about going up now? Couldn't see us in this steam."

For reply, Caradoc shoved his friend upward, and so they scrambled aloft like two monkeys.

Fortunately for them, the night was windless and the white steam drifted straight up and as it rose, it spread out in an impenetrable fog. Cloaked in this vapor, the two adventurers scrambled up some thirty-five feet to the first deck. The steam was thick inside the rail. Covered by the noisy shriek of the exhaust, they jumped inside the promenade without being heard or seen, and a moment later, they dropped arm in arm, like two casual strollers, and moved up deck.

Two minutes later, when the roaring exhaust had ceased and the vapor had cleared away, the guard with the gun could never have guessed that the two men he saw slowly promenading the deck had drifted over the rail, out of the night, with the clouds of the noisy exhaust.

Neither of the lads so much as glanced at the sentinel as they strolled past him. Caradoc was saying in the low tones men use when conversing in the darkness:

"Do you suppose that fellow knows anything about engines?"

And Madden replied just as confidentially, as he sized the gun man up

out of the tail of his eye, "No, I'm sure he doesn't. An engineer never has to stand guard."

"How are we ever going to spot an engineer?"

For the first time since starting, a little thrill of the joy of adventure crept into Madden's heart. He felt like a ferret venturing into a rat's den.

"Why you can tell an engineer easily," he murmured. "You've seen 'em, oily fellows, with black smudges."

"That describes a fireman, too."

"No, a fireman's not so oily and is more cindery--then we'll know one by his cap."

"Certainly," breathed Smith. "I hadn't thought of that."

Notwithstanding his danger, Madden could not help smiling as he moved along after the fashion of a careless stroller, when he was really keenly alert for a man with an engineer's cap.

The two youths were walking up a long deck, dimly lighted by small incandescent bulbs placed on the inner surface of the outside stanchions about thirty feet apart. Each bulb was carefully blinded from the ocean by a sheath, which confined its glowworm radiance exclusively to the promenade. On the inboard side were a long series of port holes, likewise hooded from observation. Some were aglow, others dark.

The deck, rails, cabin walls, ports, hoods, joists of the top-deck were newly washed and scrupulously clean. Fifty yards up-deck, where perspective and the sheer of the ship gave the promenade the appearance of a long, up-curved tunnel, the boys caught sight of a gang of men scrubbing down deck. A little beyond the scrubbing gang, some garments fluttered on a line drying in the night air.

As they drew nearer, Madden perceived they were muscular men, with faces bronzed by tropic sunshine. Some of their necks and cheeks were peeling, as if from sunburn. On the whole they had a healthy, hearty appearance that fitted in badly with Madden's theory of murderers and thieves. Instead of a piratical aspect, the promenade bore a strong resemblance to a deck scene on some crack transatlantic liner, except for the blinded lights and ports and the armed guard.

The wanderers passed the scrub gang without trouble and came to the drying laundry. The number of these shirts and trousers and under clothing suggested the hulk must contain a large number of men. If these men were smugglers and insurance swindlers, they had systematized their life after rigid military discipline.

They moved through the laundry with fading hopes of kidnapping an engineer from such a formidable institution, when they were startled by

a human laugh. It sounded in their ears and was as unexpected as a shriek in church. For an instant they thought they were apprehended. Then they understood the sound came from one of the lighted ports.

They moved softly among the shirts and trousers until they reached the suspected port. Inside they heard a very trivial conversation in English.

"I'm after that jack of yours, Captain Cleghorne," declared a thick voice with a laugh.

"I played low, remember that,"

A silence, then a burst of laughter.

"He ran that jick over your king!"

Leonard stood beside the port blind making a tantalizing effort to recall something. Where had he heard the name "Cleghorne?" He repeated it mentally several times.

"Cleghorne, Cleghorne----" of a sudden it came to him. He had never heard it, but had seen it framed in the license that hung in the chart room of the schooner, Minnie B.

With a heart thumping against his ribs at this strange and amazing coincidence, the American ducked his head carefully under the port hood and looked in.

For a moment his eyes were blinded by electric lights. Then he observed a group of men sitting around a table playing cards. They were in obviously comfortable spirits, nothing criminal or warlike. One was a long cadaverous figure that suggested to Madden, Cleghorne, the Yankee commander of the Minnie B.

When his eyes strayed across the table to Cleghorne's partner, Leonard's knees almost crumpled in surprise. He was looking at the old commander of the floating dock, Mate Malone.

CHAPTER XVI

CARADOC TAKES COMMAND

Notwithstanding that Madden's head was under the hood, Caradoc sensed the fact that his friend had experienced some profound shock.

"What's the matter? What's wrong?," he whispered from the outside.

"The mate--the mate of the Vulcan is in there!" gasped the

American.

"Impossible!" Smith dived under the hood for himself.

Both heads just managed to squeeze in and the two men stared at Malone as if he were raised from the grave. The mate, however, was not funereal. He seemed in the pink of condition, rather fatter than he had been on the dock, and he wore the pleased expression of a man well content with life.

As men will do when under a fixed stare, he presently glanced about and his eyes fell on the porthole. He looked at the dim port for several seconds intently, as if he could not quite make out their faces. Madden frowned, jerked his head up and down in a signal for Malone to approach.

The mate's little eyes went round at the request. He made a surprised gesture to his partner, scrambled to his feet and drew near. The whole cabin followed his motions.

"W'ot is it?" he whispered, still peering into the half-faces seen in the round hole.

"Madden and Smith."

"_W'ot_!"

"Yes."

"Great sharks! W'ot you lads doin' 'ere?"

"Came off the tug--what is this?"

"W'ot is w'ot?"

"This ship we're on?"

It seemed as if Malone's little eyes would pop out of his head.

"W'ot--didn't they ketch you? You don't mean to say you--you jest straggled aboard?"

"Sure we did. Catch us? Who is there to catch us?"

Malone stared as if at two ghosts. "Say! Say!" he said hoarsely. "You don't mean to say you ain't caught? You don't mean you run th' tug up 'ere an' boarded us! You don't mean----" He turned and whispered hoarsely inside: "It's th' lads off th' dock, though 'ow they got 'ere, an' w'ot they're--douse th' light, some o' you fellows."

A stifled consternation seized the card players, who crowded up to the port. A moment later all the lights were snapped out one after another.

"Tell us who there was to catch us," begged Leonard in a whisper.

"Who? W'y a German warship, that's who! One caught us--an' Cap Cleghorne. Caught th' Cap away hup on th' Newfoundland Banks. Caught us first day----"

"Why should a German warship capture _us_!" demanded Leonard in a voice that threatened to rise in excitement.

"Quiet! Quiet! 'Eavens, lad! Don't you know? Ain't you 'eard? W'y it's war! War! War's broke out all over th' world! Everyw'ere! Ever'body!"

"War!" gasped Madden.

"War! What countries?" demanded Smith in an excited whisper.

"Hall countries! Hingland, France, Rooshia, Japan, that's one side, an' Germany and Austria on th' other."

"America in it?" demanded Madden.

"Right enough. Canada is sendin' troops and----"

"America! America! The United States of America!"

"Oh, no, she's the only nootral in th' whole world among th' big powers! But she'll be in soon enough!"

"What's this we're on?" inquired Caradoc. "It isn't a warship?"

"Kind o' warship. It's a mother ship for submarines--sort of floatin' dry dock for the little sneakers. She takes 'em aboard, over'auls 'em, gives 'em new stores and torpedoes."

"England at war!" repeated Caradoc in a maze. "I must get out of here!"

"That's th' word, war!" whispered Malone thickly. "They say Hingland's got a tight blockade aroun' th' German ports, so th' German cruisers bring their prizes here in th' Sargasso, load all the prize stores they capture out o' Hinglish bottoms into submarines an' run it into Germany _under_ th' blockade. See? That's w'y this mother ship is 'ere. She fixes 'em up at this end for their run back."

Malone told all this in a hoarse breath.

"What do they do with their prisoners--keep them here?"

"No, ship 'em to German East Africa an' intern 'em. The _Prince Eitel_ is due 'ere tomorrow to ship us."

So that was the explanation of all this mystery--War!

Madden fell silent with the sensation of a man who had lost his footing on earth. All his life he had been accustomed to peace. He thought of

wars as small affairs that broke out now and then in South America or when the American Indians got hold of whiskey. But for Germany, France, England to fight, to hurl millions of men at each other! It was inconceivable!

The boy's brain felt numb as if crushed beneath an enormous horror. The world was at war!

Unless a person actually witness a murder, he cannot imagine the shock and dreadfulness of seeing one man shot down, writhe, gasp, grow pale and cease struggling. To picture ten men murdered simply stuns the mind. An effort to realize hundreds, thousands, millions of men mangled, wounded, bayoneted, crushed, blown to atoms by shells and mine--all this becomes vague, formless, a dim, dreadful picture that is as unreal as a dream, or history.

"What caused it?" asked Madden in a strained tone.

"I don't know," whispered the mate huskily. "They say it all started because an anarchist killed an Austrian prince, but I don't believe it--that sounds too onreasonable for me."

"What has an Austrian prince to do with the rest of the nations?"

"I told you I don't believe it!" repeated the mate.

Madden felt impotent at the conclusion of the narrative. As long as he had conceived himself to be attacking a force of pirates and thieves, he was ready to board this great vessel, hunt for an engineer, or attempt any desperate scheme. But now when he learned that men were being murdered, goods stolen, ships scuttled, in accordance with a kind of wild law, called rules of war, he no longer knew what to do. The world was mad. Its people were murdering each other.

He finally said aloud to Caradoc: "I suppose we may as well hunt up the commanding officer, surrender ourselves and sail for Africa with the others."

"No," interrupted Smith, "don't do that." Then he called softly inside, "Malone!"

"Well, w'ot is it?" inquired the mate gruffly, for he persevered in his dislike of Smith.

"Look sharp, Malone! I am an officer in the English navy--it is my right and duty to assume command of all English seamen in case of war!"

A blank silence followed this remarkable assumption of authority. The tone in which it was whispered prevented any doubts in the minds of his hearers.

"Do you understand?" inquired Caradoc in a sharp undertone.

"Yes, sir," replied the mate doggedly.

"How many men have you in there?"

"Eleven Hinglishmen, sir."

"I assume responsibility for those men. From now on accept orders from me!"

"Yes, sir."

"Pass the word around. I am going to hand in some German uniforms through this port. Let every man put on a uniform!"

"Very well, sir!" came the dismayed reply.

Caradoc withdrew his head from the hood. In the faint gleam from the outside incandescents, he fell to untying the strings by which the suits were leashed to the lines. He handed eleven suits to Madden, who passed them under the hood and Malone received them inside. Then Smith deliberately stripped off his own clothes and drew on a pair of German trousers.

"Get on a pair, Madden," he advised. "Civilian trousers will be conspicuous in a bright light. You are going to see this thing through, aren't you?"

Madden nodded and followed his companion's example. Five minutes later the two, transformed into German sailors, walked out of the hanging laundry.

"Don't seem, to observe anything," whispered Caradoc. "Appear to be going somewhere, on an errand. Walk just as if you belonged aboard."

A moment later the Briton turned down a stairway that led to a shadowy deck, which was hung with long rows of hammocks with men sleeping in them. The air down here was remarkably cool, although Madden did not have time to give much thought to this. Caradoc pursued his way unhesitatingly among the sleeping sailors, and presently came to another hatchway, out of which poured the rumble of machinery and a stream of light.

Down this flight of steps, Smith moved with certainty, and a moment later Madden saw they were entering a great machine shop. A full complement of men worked at every lathe, table, drill or saw. The clang of hammers, the guttering of drills, the whine of steel planes smote his ears in a cheerful din of labor. The laborers worked at their tasks with that peculiar flexibility of forearms, wrists, fingers that mark skilled machinists. The scent of lubricating oil the faint tang of metal dust filled the air. Strange to say, the air down here was even cooler than that in the sleeping deck above.

All sorts of queer tasks were progressing. Here, men were working on

gyroscopes that fitted into the shells of torpedoes; there, they fabricated little hot-air engines which propelled those instruments of destruction. They were repairing gauges, steam connections, electrical fittings, what not.

Madden was tempted to pause and stare about this wondershop, when it occurred to him that if he and Caradoc were discovered they would be executed as spies. He had not thought of this before, and the mere suggestion somehow made him feel stiff and wooden. He was not frightened, but he felt clumsy, as a schoolboy does when he makes his first public speech. His arms and legs felt wooden; his head did not seem to sit in a natural manner on his neck. He felt that if anyone glanced at him, he would immediately betray himself. His walk, his looks showed it. He could not imagine why some workman did not leap out, seize his arm and yell "Spy!"

After a long stage-frightened walk, Caradoc turned down another flight of stairs. Here Madden discovered the secret of the cool air. On this deck was a big refrigerating plant, with frost-covered pipes leading in all directions. The sight of this plant gave Madden some faint insight into the thorough preparation made by the German government to carry on their struggle by sea. Long before war was declared, Germany must have planned a naval base in the Sargasso, and have foreseen the use of her submarines in evading the blockade. She had chosen these untraveled seas as a depot, then established a refrigerated machine shop in order that the full-blooded German might work comfortably in the tropics. The plan seemed to have been worked out with infinite detail.

From the refrigeration deck, they descended to still another deck into the very bowels of the ship. This descent brought them to a long gallery that was formed by a bulkhead running down the center of the ship. As they entered this passage, three workmen came out of a small steel door that opened into this central wall. One of the workmen carefully rebolted the door, yawned sleepily and followed his comrades toward the companionway. As he passed he grunted something to Caradoc. Madden's heart beat faster lest they should be discovered at this last hour. He had no idea what mission moved the Englishman, but he sensed that here was his destination. Smith made some reply in German, moved briskly ahead until he came to the small steel door. He laid his hand familiarly upon the bolts, shot them back, swung open the door. One of the men whirled about and stared back at this assured intruder. Smith stood aside and with a curt military gesture motioned Madden to enter. The American drew an uncertain breath, glanced at the three Germans out of the tail of his eye and stepped into the dark square. Caradoc followed him. The laborers went on updeck apparently satisfied.

An electric wire was let in through the door. Caradoc reached for it, followed it with his hand and presently turned a switch. Next moment a bright flood of light bathed the tubular chamber in which they stood.

Madden glanced about. He stood in a room whose roof formed a half circle over his head. The place seemed as full of machinery as a watch case. Fore and aft were circular partitions of steel, like drumheads. These

were penetrated with sliding shutters, which stood open. Through the after shutter, Madden saw a large Deisel oil engine, flanked by a compact heavy dynamo. Looking forward, he could see steel cylinders trimmed in shining brass, and a maze of levers, gauges, dials, valves.

The central compartment in which the two stood was dominated by a little spiral stairway leading up into a steel dome. On a shelf set in the bulkhead was a chart, a telephone receiver, speaking tubes, dials with red and black hands, an array of electrometers, pressure gauges.

Glancing up the stairway into the little dome, Madden saw a pilot wheel, more levers and speaking tubes and telephone receivers, and a square of ground glass, that was lined off with delicate cross-lines.

"Where are we?" asked Madden, amazed. "What do they do here? I never saw so much machinery before in so small a space."

Caradoc was stooping over a heavy metal box down at the floor level at the side of the desk. It was one of a series of such boxes. "We're inside of that submarine you saw enter a few hours ago," explained the Englishman shortly.

Leonard stared around with new eyes. "So this is a submarine! Do you know anything about them? What's that spirit level for?" He pointed at a horizontal gauge.

"Measures air pressure--it's not a level."

"What's in these steel tanks overhead?"

"Compressed air."

"What's that you are getting into?" Here Caradoc lifted the lid, and Madden got a view. "Say, that's a torpedo, isn't it?" he asked quickly as he saw a long needle-pointed steel cigar with propeller and rudder on the aft end.

The Englishman made no reply. He leaned over and selected a small steel crowbar from a tool locker, drew it out with a quick nervous movement.

"Say!" cried Madden catching the strange expression on the face of his friend, "are you going to try to launch this and escape on it--escape on a torpedo?"

A mirthless smile flickered over the Englishman's gray face. "Nothing so fanciful."

A sixteen foot torpedo lay in a steel frame on a runway, just ready to slide forward into the big expulsion tube that was the salient feature of the forward compartment. Caradoc walked quickly to the nose of the terrific missile. He looked at his friend and said in a strange voice:

"Madden, I'm going to wipe this German ship-trap off the map!"

A sort of spasm clutched the American's diaphragm. "You don't mean----"
he managed to gasp.

"Yes, this is for----" He swung up his crowbar.

Madden on the other side the gasoline-scented chamber had a sensation as
if someone had jabbed keen needles into his throat, breast, stomach.

"Caradoc! Don't! Don't!" he screamed and leaped toward the desperate
man.

It was all done at once.

"For England!" completed Caradoc Smith, and fetched down a furious
doubled-handed blow on the primer of the big steel chamber packed with
guncotton.

The crowbar landed with a crash!

CHAPTER XVII

THE GET-AWAY

Both lads leaned against the machinery, limp, dripping cold
perspiration. Caradoc was the first to speak.

"Didn't have its war head in!"

Leonard mumbled something through the slime in his mouth.

"I ought to find the connection and explode it," repeated Caradoc
doggedly.

Madden moved weakly over beside him. "No you won't. You aren't going to
murder us all... not going to do it!"

Caradoc remained motionless, his long face gray under the electric
lights. "I fail--at everything," he mumbled.

Leonard sat down on the edge of the torpedo case and looked at the long,
slender destroyer. He had a watery feeling, as if just arising from a
long illness.

"Let's get out of here," he breathed.

"Wait... we must seem normal. You--you look blue--spotted."

"I feel blue and spotted. I was scared--never was so scared in all my
life."

"Sit here till you get over your j-jolt."

"What are you going to do?" asked the American apprehensively as Smith arose.

"I must disable this machinery and give the tug a chance to escape."

"Still got that in your head?"

"I must do _something_--I ought to explode that torpedo!"

"You're not going to do that, Caradoc. You're not! I have no--no appetite to be a martyr."

The Englishman made no reply, but began moving around among the machinery with the crowbar. Leonard stirred himself to follow.

"You--you're not up to anything--not going to blow us up?"

"No, I'm not going to blow you up. That's my word."

Oddly enough, Madden accepted it very simply, and went back and sat on the torpedo case. He fell to stroking the smooth steel flank of the thing as if it were some animal. The thing had, as it were, refused to blow him to bits at Smith's request.

The Englishman walked about busily, thrusting his bar in among dial connections, snapping brass pipes, wrecking the telephone connections. He laid about him viciously, knocking, crashing, smashing. Then he hurried back into the rear compartment, knocked to pieces the bearings and valves of the Deisel engine, tangled up the wiring of the storage batteries and the dynamo, beat off her brushes, disrupted the clutch on the crank shaft.

It was shocking to Madden to see Caradoc smash and destroy such delicate and costly machinery. He went about his task with a kind of bottled ferocity, and in a short time the submarine looked as if it had let loose a cyclone. Presently the youth paused in his vandalism and glanced about with satisfaction.

"All right," he said in a more normal tone, "if you are ready to go, get a wrench and a cold-chisel, smudge your face with a little oil and iron black, and we'll get away from here."

Madden saw the importance of completing his disguise in this manner. He splotched his face, found the tools indicated by Smith in the locker, then walked out through the manhole into the passageway once more.

There was no one in sight as they came out. They passed up through the cool refrigerating room and through the machine shop with its contented workmen. Madden wondered how those men would feel if they knew that a few minutes past, they were hanging on the fringe of eternity.

The two smudged tool-bearers, who walked rather shakily to the upper deck, did not even provoke a questioning glance from the workmen. A few minutes later the boys emerged once more from the sleeping deck onto the boat deck. It was still deserted save for the solitary guard who paced back and forth in stiff military fashion.

Caradoc moved down to the hanging laundry and paused under the port hood. He tapped it gently. From the interior came Malone's thick whisper. Smith passed in the tools and whispered.

"Force the door open gently. Walk out as if you were sailors. Close the door and pretend to lock it. Meet me out here at the head of the ship's ladder, where the guard is stationed."

"Very well, sir," came a whisper.

Then Madden and Smith strolled on down toward the man with the gun. As they walked, Smith whispered:

"When you hear me clear my throat, get within striking distance. When I cough, silence him. I'll help you."

Madden nodded slightly, and the two drew near the pacing guard. Caradoc lifted hand to forehead as they passed and a little later seated themselves on the rail near the ladder. Madden looked down curiously and thought he could make out the shape of the dinghy below, but was not certain.

The American's nerves still tingled from the torpedo incident, and now he glanced out of the tail of his eye at the guard, whom he would probably have to fight.

The fellow was a broad-chested, short-necked German, armed with rifle and bayonet. The bayonet had a bluish gleam under the incandescent.

It was a queer thought to Madden to know that within the next fifteen minutes, he would perhaps be under rifle fire, rowing or swimming away through the black night, or he might be dead. Dead, and the world would end for him, and the war of the world or the peace of the world would be all the same for him.

Madden shrugged his shoulders, drew a long breath and stared out in the direction of the *_Vulcan_*. He could see nothing of the tug. The moon had sunk and the stars burned with a more vivid fire. The musing boy noted the position of the Hydra, and fancied it might be somewhere near midnight. Just then his guess was confirmed by four double strokes of the bell. There would be a change of guards. Perhaps the next man would not be so unsuspecting.

Just then Madden observed another deck gang coming up the promenade. He wondered how often they scrubbed deck on this vessel. He hoped this crew would soon pass, as it would make escape impossible if their men made a

break while the sweepers were in hearing. Their slow approach made him nervous. Suppose one of them suspected something wrong?

Just then Caradoc yawned and cleared his throat. Madden looked around at his friend with a slight start. The Englishman did not see the approaching sailors. Madden frowned conspicuously, but Smith's long face was placid, and he cleared his throat again.

The guard was now about to pass Madden. The American shifted his legs slightly for a position to jump, nevertheless frowning warningly at Caradoc. The scrubbers were fairly close now. Caradoc arose negligently and coughed.

In the teeth of the scrub gang, Madden leaped headlong at the guard and his fingers gripped the man's throat. At the same instant, Caradoc ducked under his legs. As the foremost of the scrub gang wrenched the rifle from the guard's hands, Madden saw with joy that they were Malone and his men. The three fell with a dull thumping on the deck. The guard tore at Madden's fingers which crushed in his throat. From underneath, Caradoc panted in sharp whispers:

"Overboard! Down the ladder! Quick!"

As he snapped out his orders, the Englishman was working his hold up past the floundering guard's waist. Madden's grip was about to break under the strain the Teuton put on it, but his fingers clung desperately to the fellow's throat, for one shout would bring a hornet's nest around the fugitives. Just then Malone whispered hoarsely:

"They're all overboard, sir."

Leonard caught the soft stir of oars in the water below.

"Shall I stick 'im, sir?" whispered Malone, grabbing the guard's bayoneted rifle. "Yonder, comes the new guard!"

Caradoc, who had been willing to blow up a whole shipful of men, panted out a sharp "No!" Just then the Englishman's long fingers slipped up on the tendons that ran down the guard's neck from his ears. He pinched them sharply. The struggling man suddenly gasped and lay still. Caradoc leaped to his feet. Madden scrambled up. Both were dripping with sweat. A man with a rifle was running down the deck toward them. The fellow raised his rifle.

"Overboard!" gasped Caradoc and took a sudden leap over the rail into the night. Madden followed, trusting not to hit the dinghy and kill himself. Malone was already scrambling down the rope ladder as fast as he could go.

While a dive of one or two hundred feet is not uncommon, still Madden's thirty-five foot drop sent chill tickly sensations through his chest and throat. It seemed as if he would never stop falling through the darkness, but at last he struck the water and went down, down, down.

When he finally kicked himself back to the surface and thrust his head out, he heard a violent whispering among the excited boatmen. A moment later an oar struck him under the armpit. Madden seized it, whispered his own name and scuttled in over the gunwale. The men were shoving desperately at the ship's side in an effort to get the dinghy under way.

From the deck overhead came guttural shouts in German and fainter answers. Fortunately the guard did not take upon himself the responsibility of shooting down into the boat, and in a minute or two the refugees had assembled the oars and were rowing furiously from the mother ship.

In the dim zone of light that belted the promenade, Madden could see a number of hurrying figures. Then came a sharp command, and a rifle stabbed the darkness with a knife of fire and a keen report.

Immediately came another, then another, then several. Bullets chucked viciously into the water about the dinghy.

Under the straining arms of four oarsmen the little boat moved briskly out of its perilous position. Jammed between two sailors, the boy sat staring back at the men gathering on the promenade. The flashing of many rifles kept a constant streak of light along a considerable section of the deck. Bullets seemed to whine within an inch of his ears. The dinghy appeared to be retreating at a snail's pace, and the frightened boy gripped furiously at the gunwale in an absurd effort to speed it up. He twisted about, trying to keep his shoulders in a line with the flashing rifles so as to offer the thinnest target. A man in the stern of the dinghy groaned, and slumped down into the bottom.

Just then a searchlight leaped into play from the top deck of the ship. Its long ray shot out in a trembling cone through the darkness. It switched here and there with appalling swiftness. The crew in the little boat stared at it, holding their breaths. When that leaping ray fell on the dinghy it would be followed by a rain of steel.

The firing on the promenade deck ceased, waiting for the searchlight to direct their aim. Just then the beam fell on the Vulcan with dazzling brilliance. The tug stood out sharply against the night, and she proved to be much closer than Leonard had fancied. The little rowboat had been traveling faster than he thought.

Then the brilliant circle left the tug and, began crawling carefully over the water toward the dinghy.

The crew stared at the approaching light as stricken birds in a snake's cage. Just then Caradoc said in a low tone. "Let every man slide into the water and swim for the Vulcan."

The men in the stern slipped into the sea first with muffled splashes. The men amidship climbed over the side and went in headfirst. The oarsmen shipped their oars and took the water. Madden made a long dive

over the side and shot well away from the little boat. When he came up, he looked around. The fringe of light was just playing on the bow when Caradoc leaped. According to English traditions, he was the last man to leave his vessel, even though it were only a dinghy.

An instant later, a queer metallic ripping sound broke out in the mother ship. Madden looked back quickly. From the top deck there was a jet of fire, as if someone were turning a hose of flame in the direction of the small boat. Leonard looked back at the dinghy. It appeared as if the ray of light were beating the little vessel into splinters. It seemed to crumble into itself, to wither, to go to dust, and the water beneath it beat up in a froth through its shattered hull.

A head bobbed up near Madden, and Caradoc's voice observed collectedly.

"They're chewing it up with a machine gun. You'd better dive again--travel most of the way to the tug under water. They'll be picking us up, one at a time, in a moment, with the same stream of steel."

CHAPTER XVIII

NERVE VERSUS GUNPOWDER

Fifteen minutes later a dozen men were kicking exhaustedly in the water on the port side of the *_Vulcan_*, shouting in urgent voices for ropes. A few were already clambering up the bobstays. There was no reply from the utterly terrorized men on the tug, then came the whiz of missiles thrown through the air.

"Hogan! Mulcher! Galton! Ropes! Give us your ladder!" bawled Madden at the top of his authority.

"Is--is that you, Misther Madden?" chattered Hogan.

"Yes, yes, ropes, before we drown!"

"Was that you shootin' at us over there?"

"They were shooting at *_us_*! They hit two or three of us! Hurry!"

"And who's all that wid ye? Faith, the wather's alive wid min!"

"We're the crew of th' *_Vukan_*!" "Throw down ropes!" "Shut up and throw down ropes, ye bloody Irishman!" howled an angry chorus.

"Th' crew o' th' *_Vulcan_*, and thim all dead, these weeks ago! Sure if it's a lot o' ghosts----"

But others of the crew summoned enough courage to fling down aid to

their old comrades, and soon the men came crawling up the dark sides of the tug and dropped limply inboard.

The utmost excitement played over the crew of the dock when they identified the former crew of the *_Vulcan_*. The air was full of excited questions and tired answers, but presently the word got out. It was "War." The news passed from mouth to mouth and grew in portentousness. War! Nations were at war! These men had escaped from a German warship!

It was unbelievable. It was stunning. Presently Caradoc shouted out in the darkness for Malone, Mate Malone. The cockney answered.

"Put your firemen at the furnace! Set your engineers to work on the engines. We must have steam up and be away in an hour!"

The two crews fell into silence, and Malone ordered his men below. Some of the dock's crew hurried off with the others to cut down coal in the bunkers. Another gang fell to work; pulling in the sea anchor. But over all their various activities hovered the vast consternation of war.

Caradoc had climbed to the bridge of the *_Vulcan_* and stood staring silently at the bulk of the mother ship that was barely discernible through the night. The searchlight had been switched off. Neither ship showed a signal. From below came the muffled sounds of men working at the furnace, and in five or ten minutes a film of smoke trickled out of the *_Vulcan's_* great funnel.

Madden climbed up on the bridge beside Caradoc.

"How long before the submarine will be out?" he asked in a low tone.

"Small boats will come first," replied Smith. "That's why they shunted off the searchlight--to surprise us."

"Will they try to board us?"

"Certainly. We'll have to defend ourselves with anything we can pick up, sticks, knives, hand spikes--"

At that moment Malone appeared from the other end of the bridge.

"We'll have steam up in an hour," he announced, glancing up at the funnel.

"An hour?" thought Madden. "That's time enough for us all to be killed."

Caradoc said to the mate: "Go forward and tell the men to arm themselves, then take position along the rail to repel boarders. Tell them to look sharp for grappling hooks and throw them down."

"And what will they arm with, sir?"

"Use anything you can find, hand spikes, knives, sticks. They might throw lumps of coal. A cricket player ought to give a good account with a lump of coal."

"Very well, sir," grunted Malone and he hurried down on deck.

A few minutes later the men were scurrying around to their positions. One or two men had gone down for a sack of coal, a queer ammunition that might possibly effect something. On the other hand, Leonard knew the attacking force would come armed with mausers, rapid fire guns, grappling hooks, swords. A onesided fight was brewing.

The American looked anxiously at the funnel; a ribbon of black smoke filtered out into the air.

"Madden," said Caradoc, "they will make the hardest fight around the anchor ports and amidships. Which position do you prefer to defend?"

"I believe I'll take the forecastle."

"Good, I wish you luck."

"Same to you."

As Madden moved down the ladder to the deck, he heard, above the murmur of the busy men, the strong measured beat of a ship's cutter approaching the tug with deliberate swiftness.

There were some good men stationed to defend the forecastle, Hogan, Mulcher, Greer and two or three of the _Vulcan's_ former crew whom Madden did not know. As the American approached in the gloom, two men came up, laden with sacks, and poured out a pile of coal on deck. Every lump was about the size of a baseball.

Hogan recognized Madden in the darkness. He was exuberant now that he had learned his enemies were human beings and not ghouls.

"Do ye think those Dutchmen will be able to put up a daycent foight, Misther Madden?" he inquired hopefully.

"They have plenty of arms, Hogan."

"Sure, that'll hilp 'em some. But Oi'm going to knock th' head off the spalpeen that firrust sticks his mug over that rail."

"Your chance is coming," said Madden soberly, as he listened to the increasing noise of the oars.

"Now, men," directed the American, "lie flat down behind the rail and use your sticks and hand pikes to prize off grapnels. They will shoot your hands."

"Very well, sor," breathed several voices.

The noise of the oars grew louder until it sounded immediately beneath the defenders. Hogan stood up suddenly, leaned over the rail with a lump of coal in each hand, and threw down viciously. There was a whack as one lump hit the boat, and a grunt as the other struck some man. In return came a terrific crash of rifles, and bullets spattered the iron plates of the _Vulcan_. Fortunately Hogan had flopped down on deck in time.

At that instant, the searchlight of the mother ship swept the _Vulcan's_ deck with startling brilliance. The first volley had perhaps been the signal, and the fight was on.

There came a clanging of grapnels on the rail over the crouching defenders. Madden flung down the one nearest him, but others came flying through the air to take its place. The prostrate men worked busily dislodging the flukes. The fusillade from below prevented their getting on their knees, and they were forced to lie on their backs as they worked at the hooks. It seemed some sort of queer game: the attackers flinging up scaling irons, the defenders flipping them down. Madden had dislodged two or three, when Mulcher cried out for help.

The enemy had succeeded in catching a fluke on the rail, and putting so much weight on it that the cockney could not prize it off. Immediately Hogan and another defender crawled to Mulcher's aid like big lizards. They thrust in sticks and spikes and prized vigorously, while the bullets were drumming on the plates outside.

It stuck and Leonard started to their aid, when a hook in his own territory demanded his attention. Just then a head came up over the rail just above Hogan and Mulcher. The German had turned his automatic on the defenders when Hogan's shillalah caught him on the temple. He reeled backwards, his pistol spitting into the air. He knocked down the whole line of men below him amid crashings, shoutings and splashings in the water below. The moment the weight was off, Mulcher loosed the grapnel and flung it down into the confusion.

The hail of bullets was immediately renewed, and more hooks came flying over. The iron rails rang like a boiler shop, and the steel missiles glanced off whining like enormous mosquitoes. Madden whirled his head for a glance aft.

The same sort of drama was taking place amidship, boarders were climbing over the rail and arms, sticks, and iron spikes snapped out of the inky shadows and smote them. The invaders fired blindly into the darkness that rimmed the deck. As to whether they were killing or maiming Caradoc's crew, Madden could not tell.

One thing, however, he did observe, that aroused an anxious hope in the boy's heart. A heavy column of smoke ascended from the tug's funnel, and a tongue of steam played in its edge.

A frenzy of impatience seized Madden. If the _Vulcan_ could only

get under way and escape the fight! Why didn't they start at once! In the vivid light, he saw the steering wheel turning, apparently of its own accord, and he knew that someone was manipulating the hand grips from the bottom side.

From those slight signs of preparation, Madden's attention was suddenly whipped back to his business, by the sight of two figures climbing on over the prow of the _Vulcan_. These men had no doubt caught a hook in the anchor port and had climbed up without opposition.

The invaders stood clearly limned by the searchlight, trying to pick out a target for their fire, when Madden reached for the coal pile. The American had once been pitcher for his college team, and the lump of coal crashed under the first man's jaw and he dropped backwards as if hit by a piece of shrapnel. The second gunman banged at the shadow where Madden was hid. The bullets sang about the American's ears, when Deschaillon's ostrich-like kick flashed through the light and caught the sailor in the pit of the stomach. The automatic dropped from his hand, and he crimped up like a stuck grubworm.

But while the defenders were occupied with this little flank attack, half a dozen hooks were firmly lodged on the rail, and at least eight men were mounting swiftly. At their head came an officer waving a sword. The firing from below suddenly ceased, lest they hit their own men. In the silence that followed, Madden heard the hiss of rising steam, and from somewhere the tinkle of a bell.

Suddenly out of the shadows, the whole force of the defenders leaped at the Germans and attacked them as they strode over the rail. There was a clattering of revolvers, a thwacking of sticks and iron pins, and the smashing of thrown coal.

Then the combatants grappled hand to hand on the rail of the tug, swinging eerily in and out like wrestlers, a strange sight in the beating searchlight.

Madden closed with the officer, and by good fortune caught his right wrist, so the fellow could not shorten his sword and stab him. The American kept trying to twist the German's arm and make him drop his blade, but the fellow had thrust his left hand under Madden's arm pit and reached up and caught him about the forehead. The result was a back half nelson, and put Madden's neck under a terrific strain.

In return he choked his adversary, but Madden's mastoid muscles slowly gave way before the German's punishing hold. His head bent back, while he clung desperately to the sword hand and crushed in the fellow's gullet. There was a roaring in Madden's ears that was not from the fighting men. His neck and back slowly curved backward under the strain. Had it not been for the menace of the sword, he could have wriggled out with a wrestler's shift, but if he loosed the right hand... Madden wondered if he could fall backwards and still maintain his hold on the sword. If he could ever get down without being stunned by his fall, his strangle hold would give him an immediate advantage. He swung backwards,

but the fellow did not go with him, but began a furious struggle to loose his weapon. Madden clung grimly. His whole body dripped with sweat, as he held away the sword and tried to choke the fat neck of his antagonist. He shoved the fellow's throat with all his power, trying to break the nelson, but the pressure jammed his own head back till a hot pain streaked through the base of his skull.

At that moment a tremor ran through the tug, and there came a chough-choughing in her stack. Immediately followed a great shouting and a frantic pelting of grapnels from the sea below. Madden knew that the _Vulcan_ had at last got under steam, and would probably escape. This came to him dimly as his left hand, which had been struggling to fend off the sword, gradually lost its grip on the German's sweaty slippery wrist.

Along up and down the rail, he knew that the men battled with varying results. Came dimly to his roaring ears shouts, groans and blows. In another minute the sword would split his ribs.

A breeze sprang up. The _Vulcan_ was gathering headway.

He was bracing his last efforts against the force that was bending him double, when a long-legged figure rushed from amidship, seized the swordsman around the waist, and with a mighty heave, flung the fellow upward and outward into the sea, falling end over end--a grotesque gyrating figure in the searchlight, still waving his sword.

"Down! Down! Everybody!" yelled Caradoc, as he waded up the rail, overthrowing the last of the boarders.

Madden and the defenders fell prone on the deck, and it was not too soon. The moment the boarding party was definitely repulsed, there broke out a crashing volley from the long boat, and their bullets played a ringing tattoo over the ironwork. Then the tug drew steadily away from their assailants.

The searchlight played over the steamer for several minutes in order to afford a target for the small boats, but the crew lay close, only trusting an eye over the sheer strake now and then for a glimpse of the enemy. Up on the bridge, Leonard could see the steering wheel still turning of its own accord this way and that as the _Vulcan_ gathered speed.

Presently the searchlight was switched off, leaving the deck in utter darkness. The cutters had given up the chase. Leonard sat up on deck and wriggled his sore neck this way and that. He could see nothing now save the stream of sparks that leaped out of the funnel and flowed aft into the black sea.

"Men!" cried Caradoc's voice, "is anyone hurt?"

"A few of us 'ave 'oles punched in us, sor!" came a reply.

"All the wounded will report to Captain Black in the main cabin!" called Smith.

There was a shuffling of feet on deck, as the men passed aft through the darkness.

At that moment, out of the mother ship there flared another bright light that wavered about the horizon for a moment and finally settled on the _Vulcan_. The wounded men dodged below the rail again, but no bullets came.

This light was not stationary. It crept down through the inky sea toward the fugitives and grew larger and brighter in their eyes.

"W'ot is that?" cried several apprehensive voices.

Caradoc stood erect by the rail, watching this new development.

"Malone," he called to the man hidden on the bridge, "what speed can this boat make?"

"Hi've got as 'igh as eighteen knots out of 'er, sir."

"Signal 'full speed ahead' and call down to the firemen for all the steam we can carry."

"Very well, sir."

Caradoc looked at the light for a minute or two longer and then remarked to Madden.

"They couldn't have repaired that submarine for several hours longer. They must have had two."

CHAPTER XIX

CHASED BY A SUBMARINE

Wheezing, coughing, shaking in every plate, vomiting into the sky a trail of smoke that extended clear to the eastern horizon, the _Vulcan_ shouldered her way at top speed across the mazy lanes of the Sargasso. The tug had come a queer crooked path across that sea, and the lay of her smoke trail down the pearly glow of dawn still marked her tortuous course.

Not a breath of air stirred, but the speed of the vessel sent a breeze whipping over the poop of the steamer where a group of battered men stared fixedly over the long frothing path of the screw. Several of the group wore bandages, two, unable to stand, sat in steamer chairs, all

had the pale faces of all-night watchers, but every eye in the crowd scanned with feverish intensity the spangled ocean over which they fled.

The wind snatched at the clothes and bandages of the intent men. Masses of seaweed swept like gray blurs down the sheer of the tug's wake. Just beneath them the propeller rushed with watery thunder.

"Yonder she rises!" cried one of the watchers, pointing at two wireless masts that rose like the fins of a racing shark above the green surface of the Sargasso.

"Yonder she rises!" repeated a voice amidship, and more faintly still came the repetition from the bridge, "Yonder she rises--hard a-port!"

A sudden shift of the rudder shook the *Vulcan* from peak to keelson. Next moment the tug was speeding squarely across a seaweed field, and another crook was added to the smoke mark in the sky. The *Vulcan's* blunt prow drove through the seaweed at a great rate, while the clammy mass swung back together not sixty yards behind the churning screw.

A strange race had developed between the tug and submarine. When both crafts were on the surface in open water, the submarine had a knot or two advantage of the *Vulcan* and could have picked her up in four or five hours. But early in the night Caradoc had discovered that the powerful screw of the steamer, designed, as it was, to propel vast loads, could make the higher speed across the algae beds.

On the other hand, if the submarine dived to escape the drag of the weed, she again became the faster craft. But, in this instance, when the submarine dived, the *Vulcan* would immediately take to the open lanes and do more than preserve her distance. These constant shifts and turns explained the ricocheting course that was marked in smoke across the whitening dawn.

The submarine stood well out of water and skimmed along in the pink gleam like a long, slender missile. Its flat deck, wireless masts and conning tower stood etched in black against the morning light. She was consuming a fairish stretch of open water at a high speed.

"She's game for a long chase," observed Hogan, gently shifting a wounded arm in its sling.

Leonard Madden replied without removing his eyes from the rushing boat, "She has to be. All of Germany's naval plans depend on her destroying us."

"It does--and, faith, may Oi ask why?"

"If we get to Antigua and report this to the British admiralty, how long would this Sargasso reshipping arrangement last?"

"Right you are there, Misther Madden," agreed Hogan at once. "We'd woipe

'em out, wouldn't we? We'll make it, too. If we stood off th' little didapper all night, you know we can all day."

Madden considered the fleet little vessel. "No, I rather think she will capture us."

"And how's that?"

"The Sargasso doesn't extend indefinitely. In fact we are nearing the southern limit. Have you taken a look forward?"

"No, I haven't," said Hogan, taking vague alarm at Madden's tone.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't see many more big seaweed fields ahead. If she gets us in open water----"

"Why bad luck to it! Bad luck to it, Oi say!" cried Hogan as the wind whistled about him; "running us out o' the bushes loike a swamp rabbit."

Just then the submarine veered off her straight course somewhat to extend her open water run for two or three miles up the edge of the field. A length view showed her to be a delicate looking craft. Her sharp prow cut the water with hardly a ripple, in sharp contrast to the _Vulcan_, which shouldered up a waterfall as she lunged forward.

Suddenly, and rather unexpectedly, the submarine porpoised. There was a swash of foam, and she was gone.

The men on the poop stepped around to the side of the tug and stared anxiously southward. Bits of flotsam mottled the blue expanse, but it really appeared as if the saving drift weed were thinning to nothing. Hogan glanced back over the way he had come.

"Sure it'll be a fair field and no favor, sweet Peggy O'Neal!" he hummed nonchalantly under his breath.

At that moment a violent shaking went over the _Vulcan_, and the short boat swung her prow about with tug-like promptness. It was as if the stout little craft had swung around on her heel.

"Faith and would ye shake a man's arrum off!" shouted Hogan at nobody in particular. "And are ye going back to meet the friendly little wasp?"

That was exactly what Caradoc was doing. He had swung the _Vulcan_ about in less than a hundred yard circle and was plowing straight back the way they had come.

The crowd on the poop held their breath at the daring maneuver. Tug and submarine were now rushing at each other full tilt, only one ran under water, the other on the surface. Suppose the submarine should thrust up a periscope for an instant--a cough of the torpedo tube and the _Vulcan_ would be blown to scrap iron.

The men on the poop ran forward, staring with frightened eyes over the gray-green soggy field through which the _Vulcan_ ripped her way.

It seemed fantastic to think that somewhere under that lifeless weed human beings spun swiftly along, freighted with the most terrific engine of destruction. What strange warfare! Who could have fancied that when savages began to use clubs to maul each other it would end in this diabolical refinement! Weapons, weapons, weapons--the history of man's undying savagery working under new forms of civilization! The war submarine--what a monstrous offspring of genius!

The sun rose like a white-hot ball in the brazen sky and the men held to the rails, mouths open, and stared ahead into the safe open water, expecting every moment for the _Vulcan_ to spatter skyward in a volcano of fire and steel.

The boat itself rattled along with that insensibility of mechanism that sometimes astounds an apprehensive man. Twenty minutes later, she turned into the open lane, and was rushing westward again at full steam.

An immense relief spread over the crew. Galton, who stood on the bridge at the wheel beside Caradoc, blew out a long breath and wiped the sweat from his face, Farnol Greer began a windy whistling of "Winona, Sweet Indian Maid." Madden felt as if a weight had been lifted off his brain. Hogan was humming a tune. But all eyes turned anxiously seaward, to see where the submarine would "blow."

Ten minutes later, a distant ripple in the water caught their watchful eyes and the wireless masts popped up, on the opposite side of the great weed field, four or five miles distant.

A spontaneous cheering broke out on the _Vulcan's_ decks.

"Double crossed! Double crossed!" bellowed Hogan.

"Back track! We put one over! Hurrah for Cap'n Smith!" they shouted above the pounding of the engines.

Everyone but Caradoc wore the fixed exultant grin of the man who outwits his rival. The submarine had been thoroughly outgeneraled. North and west of the _Vulcan_ lay the whole Sargasso for an endless chase. The diving boat had lost the great advantage of having the steamer cornered.

As the crew whistled and sang the _Vulcan_ kicked a frothy course down the long westward lane. To every one's surprise, the submarine did not dive immediately, but straightened herself on the other side of the seaweed field on a course parallel with her quarry.

Madden climbed up on the bridge and found a pair of binoculars in the chart room. He took these outside and trained them on the little vessel. Apparently the submarine intended to remain at the surface for some

time, for she had opened her hatches and an officer had come out on the slender deck, and stood looking at the _Vulcan_ through a telescope.

At the distance, Madden could see the fellow plainly, and even the inky shadow he threw on the deck. The officer perused the tug for several minutes, then allowed his glass to wander around the horizon.

"They've come up for air," observed Caradoc, who had approached his friend from behind. "I believe we'd best stop that. Good air is a luxury with those fellows." He turned to Galton, who was steering. "Swing her into the northwest, my man."

The tug answered to her helm with a quiver, and in twenty minutes more was nosing her way again through the ooze of weed. The German officer calmly completed his survey, folded his telescope, then disappeared down the hatch. A few minutes later the submarine dived and the ocean lay empty in the burning sunshine.

From below came the clanging of Gaskin's gong announcing dinner. It was odd how the little details of life went calmly on even when life itself was threatened with extinction. As Madden went below to his meal, he met Malone who came from below, looking as black as an Ethiopian. The mate had been directing the firing in this extreme necessity.

The two fell in together as they walked to the wash room.

"I daresay those fellows wish they had sunk the _Vulcan_ when they had her," observed the American.

"They needed 'er theirselves," explained the mate in a matter-of-fact way. "Those German cruisers 'ave captured a whole flotilla of prizes lately, and they needed th' tug to 'andle 'em for 'em."

"And they didn't need the _Minnie B_?"

"Oh, no, not at all."

"Why didn't they sink her at once?"

"Her cap'n told me she carried more copper than one submarine could reship, so they 'ad to wait for another, as they didn't want to throw no copper away."

Madden nodded. "It was the second submarine I saw on the night she foundered." He began smiling when he thought what a bewildering mystery the vessel had been, and how very simple was the explanation.

By this time Caradoc had joined the two men, hoping to snatch a sandwich and a cup of coffee before he was needed again.

"Have we plenty of coal, mate?"

"Bunkers are 'arf full, sir."

"What's she turning over now?"

"Six, seventy-five to th' minute, sir." There was a pause, then Malone asked, "Is there any 'opes of them running out o' fuel?"

"Not likely; they make the trip to Hamburg, you know."

They were just turning into the smelly galley, when a startled voice sang out forward:

"Sail ahoy!"

This stopped the trio instantly.

"Where away?" called Caradoc.

"Dead ahead, sor!"

All three turned and went running back updeck. When they regained the bridge, Madden stared in the direction indicated. At first the western horizon looked empty, then along its level line his eye caught two tiny marks against the brilliant sky. As it was too small for his naked eyes, he resorted to the binoculars once more. Caradoc was doing the same thing.

"W'ot is it, sir?" inquired Malone anxiously.

When he had focused his glasses, Madden made out two fighting tops--steel baskets circling steel masts, thrust up menacingly over the slope of the world.

"W'ot is it, sir?" repeated Malone uneasily.

Just then Madden's eye caught the flag at the peak, as it fluttered under the drive of the distant ship. It was the black cross on the white ground, with the dark upper left quarter of the German navy.

Caradoc took down his glass at the same time.

"They've been using the wireless," he stated evenly, "to run us in a cul de sac. I might have known German cruisers were close around." He looked steadily at the distant fighting tops, then turned to Galton.

"Steer due north, quartermaster."

After a moment, he said to Malone:

"When you go below, send me up coffee and a biscuit."

CHAPTER XX

THE LONE CHANCE

Rushing up the slope of the world in a battle line that covered a wide sector of the southwestern horizon, steamed four German battle cruisers. They were four sea eagles dashing at a little water beetle of a tug--the hammer of Thor swinging forward to crush an insect. The submarine had signaled by wireless the whole German South Atlantic fleet to destroy the tug.

Only in the face of this demonstration did Madden realize that a great German naval stratagem hinged upon the fate of the little English boat. The slow, clumsy little *_Vulcan_* would decide the fate of millions of dollars worth of English shipping. The little vessel was freighted with huge consequences.

At first glimpse of the battle line, the *_Vulcan_* had sheered about, and now rushed northward, stringing her black smoke flat behind her. Up from the south, the submarine followed on the surface, although she could not make as good time through the weed as did the *_Vulcan_*. However, the burden of destroying the English craft had been transferred to the cruisers that came rushing forward at at least twenty-five knots an hour.

As Madden stood on the bridge in the skirling wind, the little *_Vulcan_*, the seaweed drifts and the cruisers reminded him of nothing so much as a rabbit flying across cotton rows in front of four greyhounds; only here there were no friendly briar patches or fence corners in which to double or hide. Never had the Sargasso appeared so vast, so empty, so brilliant, so hot.

"Any chance?" he shouted to Caradoc above the rumble of machinery and the whistling of the wind.

"There's always a chance! They might foul in these weeds!" he nodded aft.

"Improbable."

"Lloyds would hardly insure us," admitted the commander dryly.

At that moment, as if to lend point to the remark, came a sharp clap of thunder off their port bow. Madden whirled quickly. A ball of white smoke, the size of a balloon, drifted up in the air a quarter of a mile distant.

The American stared at the smoke quite wonderstruck, then looked around at the distant ships that had not yet topped the horizon.

"Did they shoot this far?"

"A request to heave to."

"Are you going to do it?"

At the bursting of the shell, the men on deck came walking aft to the superstructure, with the apprehensive gait of men getting under shelter from blasting operations.

Caradoc leaned over the rail of the bridge. "Greer!" he shouted, "go to the flag locker, get out a union jack and show our colors on the peak!"

The men pulled up at this, and half a dozen men, two or three of them crippled, hurried to carry out the order. In a few minutes they came running back on deck with the flag. They tangled the sheets after the manner of landsmen, but finally the red pennant traveled skyward. There was a brief hoarse cheering from the cockneys.

The flag was scarcely at the peak, when above the throb and rumble of the machinery, Madden's ear caught a queer droning noise, and a moment later came a deafening crash about two hundred yards to the starboard. The water beneath it was beaten to a foam, while another balloon of smoke slowly expanded and thinned in the breathless air. A long time after the bursting of the shell, Leonard heard the grumble of the cannon that had fired it.

"Now, lads," shouted Caradoc, "go below and bring up some rockets!"

The men set off with a will, but Madden viewed the situation without any thrill of patriotism to gild a death under the union jack. The cruisers were slowly coming into full view. Through his glasses he could now see their turrets and the black gun ports.

"What's the idea, Smith? You can't fight with rockets?"

"Some English vessel may see us," answered Caradoc shortly.

Madden was still more astonished. "What good would that do?" he called above the wind. "She'd be captured, too."

"Certainly," agreed the Englishman brusquely, "but if she had a wireless, she might report the situation to the Admiralty before they sank us."

Madden removed his binoculars and stared at his friend. "Are you staking your life on as long a chance as _that_?"

"My boy," said Smith, in an oddly matured tone, "when the safety of one's country is at stake, one man's life doesn't amount to _that_!" he snapped his fingers. "If there's a point to be gained, you accept any chance automatically--or no chance at all."

The American returned no answer, but there flashed into his mind the legend of the Tyrian who beached his galley in order to save the secret of Cornwall. Caradoc's narrative was oddly prophetic of the fate of the _Vulcan_. And Madden wondered with a quirk of grim humor if there were a foreigner aboard that Tyrian's galley, and what _he_ thought about the sacrifice.

There was another jagged report as a shell burst just aft the tug, then a missile of some thousands of pounds shrieked through the air just above the stumpy masts and filled the sky with fire and thunder a hundred yards ahead.

Out of the cabin came the rocket bearers, quite over their fright by now, and acting with the nervous steadiness which acute danger brings. One of the sailors from the regular crew of the tug moved along the rail, mounting the fire signals one after the other for shooting. Immediately behind him came Hogan, using his one good hand to fish matches from his watch pocket and light the fuses.

The first rocket lit with a sputter, for a moment its fiery blowing filled the deck with smoke, then it darted skyward, with a tremendous swis-s-sh! Up, in a long black column it went, into the very heart of the hot brazen sky, then it exploded with a faint pop, and a black head of smoke expanded at a prodigious height. In the midst of the smoke-filled deck, Hogan was applying his match to another. So as the tug plowed forward, tall slender pillars of smoke, crowned with swelling palm-like heads, arose to dizzy heights out of her path.

By this time huge shells were bursting about the _Vulcan_ with crashing monotony. Sometimes the dodging little vessel ran through the pungent gases of the shells that were sent to destroy her. Now and then the giant missiles exploded under water and sent furious waterspouts leaping over her decks. Something touched the top of her steel mainmast and snapped it off as if it were a straw. A few minutes later the crew had cleared the union jack from the wreckage and had it flaunting defiantly from the forepeak.

It was an odd defiance, a tugboat's challenge to a German battle line. The nibbling of a mouse once set a lion free. Here was a mouse endeavoring to net a whole herd of lions.

The cruisers did not overhaul the little vessel as rapidly as Madden had anticipated. The _Vulcan_ skurried through the seaweed fields, dodging this way and that in order to take advantage of every lane of open water, but the unwieldy battleships could not accept small advantages, and were forced to plow straight ahead, through weed or wave as it came.

Thus the cruisers still fired at extreme range, and the tug escaped destruction as a gnat might jiggle between raindrops and survive a summer's shower.

Amid steady crashes, Madden awaited stoically for the shot that would

erase the _Vulcan_ from the face of the sea. There came another splintering shock; the upper half of the foremast made a curious jump, and came down with its rigging and plunged overboard in the rushing water. The obstruction instantly choked down the tug's speed. Every man in the crew seized axe, saw, anything, and rushed forward in a fury of impatience, hacking, chopping, sawing, working through the wreckage and cutting the ropes with jackknives, in an effort to clear the tug of debris. After an intolerable while, the last ratlines snapped like pistol shots, the whizzing end of a rope struck a sailor and laid him out as if clubbed, then the foremast fell away and the _Vulcan_ rushed forward again.

"Look ahead, Madden!" shouted Caradoc in the uproar. "We've got to run among thicker fields than these!"

By this time the tug's rockets were spent and the German cruisers were rushing down a line of gigantic smoke-palms that were planted by the little vessel.

"You might as well surrender," called the American coolly. "You won't find a merchantman if you go in thicker fields--you know that."

"Surrender!" bawled Smith. "Do you think they shall have this tug to haul their prizes? Let 'em sink us, and then pick us up in boats! Look ahead!"

The American turned his binoculars obediently and scanned the west and north. His eyes traversed skein after skein of the brilliant colorful patternings, but he was unable to find a very closely netted region. He was about to announce his discovery to Caradoc when his lense focussed on another grim menace almost dead ahead.

He stared at it with a curious dropping of hopes that he had not suspected were in his breast.

What he saw was another fighting top. That pertinacious submarine had apparently surrounded the elusive _Vulcan_ with German fighting ships.

Leonard removed his field glasses and stood for a full minute filled with a keen frustration. The splitting din about him roared on uninterruptedly, and yet somehow he had been hoping the _Vulcan_ would escape.

"What do you make of it?" bawled Smith, who had been watching the submarine, which was once more drawing dangerously close.

"We can't go in this direction, Smith!" shouted Leonard hopelessly. "There are more ships in that direction."

"Warships?" demanded Caradoc swinging his spyglass around.

"Yes, fighting tops!"

Both lads focused in the new direction.

"Those Germans do everything thoroughly," shouted Leonard, "even to sinking a tug!"

But instead of despairing, Caradoc, after a single glance, rushed over to the speaking tube to the boilers. He blew the whistle shrilly, then folded it back and screamed down.

"Malone! Malone! Malone!"

"Very well, sir!" came back the muffled voice through the pipe.

"Give her all steam possible! Blow her up! Speed her, man, speed her!"

"Very well, sir!" returned the same voice.

"Caradoc! Caradoc! Are you insane!" bawled Leonard. "Do you imagine you can outrun two squadrons of German cruisers?"

"German cruisers! That's England's line of battle, Madden! England! Old England! God let me get to them and tell 'em what I know, then I don't care what happens!"

CHAPTER XXI

THE BATTLE

"Th' signal book! Get the signal book!" bawled Greer amid the uproar.

"W'ere is it?"

"In the flag locker! Chuck the flags out, too! Scatter 'em out!"

"W'ot you want to signal?"

"Submarine--tell 'em to look out for submarines!"

Hogan, who held the volume in the crook of his bandaged arm, licked his thumb and jabbed through the leaves in distracted attention. "There aren't no code letters for submarine!" he cried at last--"not in here!"

"No," shouted Black, the _Vulcan's_ former captain, "that's an old code--wasn't any submarines then!"

"Spell it out!" commanded Caradoc from the bridge. "Sharp about it!"

The men worked in a clutter of buntings, assembling the flags in nervous

haste. Black laid out the nine letters and the crew hurriedly hooked them together. Ten minutes later, they strung the signal between the two splintered masts with a queer drunken gala effect.

The *_Vulcan_* was no longer the German squadron's sole target. Down on the Teuton battle line thundered five English cruisers, filling the north with rolling smoke, their turrets spangled with cannon flashes, prows shearing white walls of foam.

The sky above the *_Vulcan_* was filled with the drone of hurtling shells. They sounded as thick as swarming bees. The cannon fire of the approaching English ships mounted to a ragged roar. When the on-coming line was less than five miles distant, Caradoc shouted an order to Galton and the little tug swung around broadside on, displaying her warning signal like a billboard. Through the battle smoke, Madden saw an answering flag go up on the nearest ship. A cheer broke out from the crew at this recognition of their work.

"They'll pass it around among the fleet by wireless!" shouted Caradoc in Madden's ear.

"Do you know that ship, Smith?" called Madden excitedly.

"The *_Panther_*--held a commission on her once."

"Is it possible?" Madden peered at her through his glasses with renewed scrutiny.

They were so close now that the American could pick out the crew of range finders working in the fighting tops; he could glimpse the huge guns in the forward turrets as they flashed and roared amid shrouds of smokeless powder haze. Madden realized he was seeing what every landsman dreams of seeing: a naval battle. For some inscrutable reason, Caradoc had headed the *_Vulcan_* clear around and now faced the enemy, like a rat terrier amid a battle of mastiffs.

Madden turned aft as the tug swung around to follow the fortunes of the *_Panther_*. He could see German shells exploding now and then on her decks; sometimes they would strike the sea and send up typhoons of water and weed. As he gazed a small-calibre gun was struck, and there was nothing but a ragged smoking hole where the port had been. An instant later, the mizzen top was shrouded in an emerald flame, and when the smoke cleared, only a jagged stump of iron thrust skyward. The crew of range finders had been wiped out in an instant. Several hours later, Leonard learned that the whole German gunfire had been focussed for several minutes on the *_Panther_*.

But now that gray, smoke-wreathed cruiser rushed on indomitably, flanked by her thundering consorts. The half-naked men on the *_Panther's_* decks looked curiously small in their huge rushing fortress. German shells battered her decks amid spangling green flames but could not stop her. As she overtook the *_Vulcan_*, the concussion of cannon fire and bursting shells grew so terrific it ceased to be noise. It resolved

itself into blows, terrific air movements that smote Madden all over. It pounded his ear drums with physical blows; it tore at the bridge of his nose, jarred his teeth, sent shooting pains through his head, for he was not wise enough to stuff his ears with cotton and hold his mouth open. It shook the pit of his stomach and nauseated him. It was a sound cyclone. Added to this the sickening acrid smell of niter explosives filled the atmosphere.

On came the Panther through the green foam of German fire, mingling the mighty vibrations of her engines, the hiss of leaping walls of water, tempests of cannon fire and vindictive shriek of leaping shells.

Caradoc leaned over to Madden and yelled something at the top of his voice. Madden shook his head as a signal that he could not hear. Smith repeated so loudly that his long face grew red with the strain. It was impossible to catch a word. Besides, Leonard's ears ached as if the drums were ruptured.

Caradoc caught up a speaking trumpet and held it to his friend's ear.

"Don't look at the Panther!" cried a drowned voice. "Watch ahead for the submarine!"

The submarine! Sure enough, there was the submarine, silent stiletto, waiting beneath the sea to stab this fiery monster. Madden's heart leaped into his throat. Was it possible so slight an antagonist could engulf the battle cruiser?

The American turned and stared ahead over the shell-beaten sea with all his eyes. The little Vulcan was now racing along some half-mile in front of the English battle line, her warning signal still stretched between her splintered masts. She rushed at top speed, vibrating under the stress of her engines. Five or six miles ahead the German squadron had turned and was flying southward before the superior English force. Flashes of fire and dull thunder still belched from their after turrets.

Leonard tried to confine his attention to the adjacent waters in careful search for the diving boat's periscope, but the terrific spectacle across the smoky spangled sea gripped his eyes beyond his control.

The ship on the eastern wing of the Teuton line was in flames. The fire burst out of the gun deck ports, lapping up over the boat decks in long red curling tongues. Her cannon fire had ceased, and from what Leonard could see, he thought the English ships had quit firing at her. She still fled southward, however. Smoke began to roll out of her turrets, and her crew came swarming out on her deck like a disturbed ant's nest. Through his glasses, Madden saw them hunched against the fire, working to launch a boat, when of a sudden there was a blinding flare; a huge cloud of smoke leaped from the sea, and after four or five minutes, a thunder heavily audible even amid the roar of battle rumbled in Madden's ears. It was the solemn note of a battleship destroyed by its own magazines. When the smoke cleared away there was left nothing save

tossing waves and bits of flotsam here and there.

The horror of the tragedy was lost for Leonard in another, more appalling scene. The right central battleship had lost control of her steering gear, and now she ran wildly amuck in the fleeing line like a drunken giant of steel.

Through accident, or by the last shift of seamanship, she veered about broadside on, her huge guns still belching defiance. In crazy flight, she barely missed one of her own squadron, then rounded back in a great circle for the English line. No doubt her crew did not try to stop her, hoping that her unguided charge might work some damage to the enemy.

On she came, against the focussed storm of English cannon, her prow, forward turrets, bridge, masts, fairly disintegrated under a bastinado of twelve and fourteen-inch shells. Yet it seemed as if she would survive it all and ram some English cruiser, when a cloud of steam broke out of her hold. A lucky shot had exploded her boilers. Her wild charge ceased instantly, but her sub-calibre guns still chattered defiance at the crushing odds. Giant shells were now pounding her at point-blank range. At some stroke of a cruiser to the right of the Panther, the German ship heeled heavily on her starboard side.

Through his glasses, Madden could see the sailors still struggling to work the guns, though scores of them were wiped from the deck at every English shell. Amid clouds of smoke the black cross of the German battle flag fluttered undaunted.

In a few minutes the enemy listed until her guns were at such a high angle they could no longer be trained against the enemy. Her forward turret was completely blown away. Bursting shells kept a constant glare around her. Her boiler and furnace rendered her hold untenable, for her crew came out of the smoke and formed orderly platoons on her crippled deck. Shells swept gaps through their files, but they closed again in regular formation, standing oddly erect on the up-tilted deck. There was not a gun they could man, not a blow could they strike, yet the men stood firm in the steel cyclone sweeping across their shattered deck. Then Madden turned his lens on a group a little to one side of the main formation, and his eye caught the gleam of silver horns, the rise and fall of a drummer's arm, the fierce beating of a director with a baton. It was the ship's musicians. The band was playing, the men were chanting the battle hymn of the empire; out of the heart of the foundering cruiser, out of the souls of the passing warriors rose triumphantly, "Die Wacht am Rhein."

Sudden tears filled the eyes of the American and dimmed the splendid sight. He turned impulsively to his friend.

"Caradoc! My God!" he screamed in his ear, "why don't they quit firing!"

"Their flag is still flying--no doubt the halyards are shot away!"

Even while Smith screamed, a sudden and startling attack was launched from the _Panther's_ rapid fire and machine guns. They sounded a shrill treble amid the profound shaking bass of the giant cannon. The boys looked sharply about to see the object of this abrupt attack, when they suddenly heard the shrill whistling of steel all about their ears.

With the utmost horror, Madden saw every tiny port spouting continuous flame in his direction. Steel frothed the sea all around the _Vulcan_. Missiles struck the little tug and glanced off with sharp musical twangs. The crew of the little boat, who swarmed on deck, wonderstruck at the battle of the giants, suddenly darted to cover with wild yells.

"They're crazy! They're daft!" screamed Madden. "Shooting at us! What's the matter with 'em?"

Caradoc, also, seemed to share the madness. He suddenly spun his wheel to the left, veered in a sharp circle, and dashed straight toward the course of the _Panther_ into the thickest of the hail. Leonard stood beside him, frozen stiff, when straight ahead, he suddenly saw a periscope show for an instant, then disappear in a little swirl of water. The submarine had come into the action.

The tug rushed straight through the bullet-rumpled water to the point where the metal fin had disappeared, like a terrier dashing at a rathole.

With the disappearance of the submarine's "eye," the fusillade ceased abruptly. The great cannon were firing more slowly now and there came short intervals of comparative silence in the battle.

From the bridge Caradoc bellowed fiercely at his men: "Spread around the rail--keep a sharp lookout for the submarine!" The crew came back with a will now that they learned the bombardment had not been intended for them.

In the meantime the tiny David had put the great Goliath to flight. The _Panther_ was endeavoring to save herself. She veered out of the thundering battle line and zigzagged easterly, in full flight from any enemy that she could almost drop down one of her smokestacks.

And the little _Vulcan_ swung about in an effort to keep up with her principal. On she rushed, shaking and puffing like a locomotive, her bright flags flying the submarine warning, as if the speeding giant ahead of her were likely to forget it.

Suddenly Hogan bawled out: "By th' port! By th' port, sir! There she rises!"

Another shrill storm from the giant showed that the gunners aboard the _Panther_ also saw the periscope.

Again the _Vulcan_ dashed at the diving terror as it disappeared and the cruiser swung clear around in a northerly tack. Her commander was trying to outguess the man under the sea.

A strange game of blind-man's-buff the three dissimilar crafts were playing. Caradoc assumed the submarine pilot would guess that the _Panther_ had fled north, and he sent the tug spitting along a course that would lie between the cruiser and her enemy. The _Panther_ was forced to repass the _Vulcan_ in the new maneuver. The giant and pygmy were flying along at top speed, fairly abreast, scarcely five hundred yards apart.

Leonard took his eyes off the starboard sea a moment to look at the lion which this mouse was trying to nibble free, when suddenly, not thirty yards on the _inside_ of the tug popped up the periscope.

The American rushed to the wheel, jerked it to the starboard. "Yonder! Yonder!" he bellowed in Caradoc's ear, pointing.

[Illustration: The Battle.]

Again the guns shrilled forth; a steel sleet wailed about the _Vulcan_. Into the teeth of this blast, the tug circled and lunged.

With fascinated eyes, Madden watched the periscope cut a swirling circle on the midst of the beaten water and straighten on the _Panther_.

Now the metal eye was directly under their swaying starboard. A moment they sped side by side, toward the imperiled cruiser. Madden could almost have touched the wireless masts. A whine of bullets ripped one of their lifeboats like a saw and splattered through the superstructure.

The periscope, which thrust six or seven feet out of water, disappeared under the swell of the _Vulcan's_ hull. Suddenly the tug swung her blunt beak around with the sidelong blow of an angry swine. Madden went flying to the right rail of the bridge to stare down at the imminent tragedy.

A dim shadowy bulk was hurtling through the blue water. Suddenly, just as the tug's prow swung athwart her course, the submarine lined up straight with the _Panther_. A great belching of bubbles wallowed up through the turbulent sea as a sign that the torpedo was launched.

A heart-stopping moment, in which the diving boat, the darting shadow of the torpedo, the blocking prow of the _Vulcan_ was clear.

A titanic upheaval of water; volcanic fires leaping out of the heart of the deep; a roar so absolutely appalling that it reduced the battle to a whisper!

The prow of the _Vulcan_ reared up and bent back over the main deck. In the same instant, out of the cauldron sea, an enormous

cigar-shaped object was flung end-over-end, as a child flings a spindle. There was one flashing glimpse of conning tower, smashed plates. Then a clap of surging air that seemed as solid as oak picked Madden up as if he had been thistledown. He felt himself whirling through space. Somehow, he caught a glimpse of a string of signals that had been blown from the wrecked masts of the shattered _Vulcan_. Then he felt a stinging blow of water as he hit the sea.

The submarine had destroyed both herself and the tug with her first torpedo.

CHAPTER XXII

THE VICTORIA CROSS

Shocked, stunned, half blinded, Madden found himself kicking in the water amidst a wreckage of spars, planks, buoys, with here and there a swimmer struggling to stay on the surface. The whole mass of flotsam swung slowly around the whirlpool where tug and submarine had sunk.

The circling water was filmed with oil, the life-blood of the stricken submarine. Presently the concavity in the ocean mounted to level, and its rotation slowly died away. The American found that his arms had unwittingly clasped something which proved to be an empty tin canister with a screw top. He hung to it apathetically. His ears bled from the concussion of the torpedo, and it was with difficulty that he focussed his eyes on anything.

Presently he became aware of a voice calling his name. It seemed a long way off, but when he looked around he saw Farnol Greer quite close to him. The thick-set black-headed fellow motioned for Madden to approach, and the American kicked himself and his float in that direction. A little later he saw that Malone was with Farnol, and that the two were supporting a third man.

"Lend us a 'and, 'ere, Madden," called Malone; "our chap's knocked out."

"Who is it? Oh, it's Caradoc!" Madden stared down into the still, upturned face with a dull emotionless feeling. He was too numb to feel or sympathize. "Is he dead?" he finally asked.

"Wounded, sir," replied Greer.

At that moment, the Englishman moved slightly, opened his eyes.

"We--stopped it, Madden."

"Are you badly hurt?" inquired the American, becoming more nearly normal himself.

"Punch through my shoulder."

"Were you hit in the explosion?"

"One of the _Panther's_ machine guns--ricocheted, I think."

"What rotten luck!" growled Madden.

Smith reached his good arm to the float. "Had it all my life in little things, Madden, but the _Panther_--that torpedo----"

"Boat ahoy!" called Farnol Greer suddenly.

Leonard looked about and saw that the _Panther_ had laid to, a good two miles distant, and two of her cutters were coming back to pick up the survivors. A blue-jacket on the sharp bow of the little vessel waved an arm at Farnol's cry, and presently the rescuing party was alongside. Caradoc went up first, then Farnol, Malone and Madden, who automatically clung to his tin canister.

The sailors from the warship were chattering excitedly over the miraculous preservation of the _Panther_.

"If that tug had been 'arf a second later," declared one, "she'd 'ave 'ad us, Sniper, sure--to th' port, there, Bobby, there's another chap kickin' in th' water."

One of the sailors had a roll of bandages, and he now moved over to Caradoc and stooped over the wounded man.

"You're pinked," he said in a tone of authority. "I'll take a turn o' this linen around your shoulder." Suddenly he paused as he glanced into the sufferer's face. "Why--why, hit's the Lieut'nant!" he stammered. Then he stood erect and saluted properly. "Would you 'ave a bandage, sir?" he asked in a different one.

Caradoc assented wearily and shifted his shoulder for the band of linen. The fellow must have been a surgeon's helper, for he applied the strip rather dexterously as the cutter steamed about picking up the rest of the _Vulcan's_ crew who had survived the catastrophe.

Half an hour later friendly hands helped the waifs up the _Panther's_ accommodation ladder, where a group of officers and men waited to be of service to the _Vulcan's_ crew.

The deck of the cruiser was torn and blackened from the German fire; here and there were sailors in bandages. Stretchers were placed at the head of the ladder for the tug's wounded.

The crew, of the _Panther_ showed the utmost cordiality and also the utmost curiosity toward their visitors. A dapper young midshipman gripped Madden's hand as he stepped on the broad deck.

"Where did that tug come from?" he inquired at once. "Most extraordinary sight--whole fleet pounding away at a tug--Ponsonby is my name."

Madden mentioned his own, and several brother officers, seeing that here was an intelligent fellow, gathered about the American. Two or three were introduced with English formality.

"If you are not too bowled over, old chap," begged a middy named Gridson, "explain to us how a tug ever happened in the middle of the Sargasso in full flight from a hostile fleet."

Some of the wounded were still coming up from the cutter, as Madden made a beginning of the tug's story. Just then he was interrupted by Ponsonby.

"Pardon, Madden, but who is that chap coming up--Say, Gridson, that isn't--why that's Wentworth!" The middy suddenly dropped his voice. "That's Wentworth or his ghost, fellows--off of a _tug_!"

Madden looked. Smith was coming on the deck under the solicitous escort of a surgeon.

"That's Caradoc Smith," said Madden. "He assumed command of the tug when he found out war was declared."

"Smith was part of his name," explained Gridson. "Caradoc Smith-Wentworth was the way he signed the register. He's of the Sussex Smith-Wentworths. His brother took the title, you know."

"Just fancy!" marveled Ponsonby. "Cashiered six months ago, comes back chasing submarines on a tug, a hero, from boot strap to helmet--a bloody hero----"

"Hold there, Ponsonby," cautioned another officer named Appleby. "The chap may be hurt seriously--you oughtn't to laugh."

"Just look at the old man shaking his hand!" ejaculated Gridson, as a very erect gray-headed officer came down off the bridge and extended his hand. "You wouldn't think he had cashiered him six months ago."

"I hope he gets his commission back," said Ponsonby, "but he will likely lose it again from tipping."

"I believe he is cured," said Madden.

Appleby made some reply as the little group moved forward to meet the wounded man. However, the surgeon and three senior officers were walking with him below to the ship's hospital.

It required two full days to get the _Panther_ into shipshape condition, and during that time the entire fleet kept a sharp lookout for the German mother ship, but that huge mysterious vessel had disappeared as utterly as if the Sargasso had swallowed her up.

Perhaps she did destroy herself to prevent capture, or perhaps her sky-blue hue allowed the fleet to sail under her very prow while she remained invisible. No doubt the two German warships which escaped had warned their consort of her danger, and she had sailed for some port in German Africa. At any rate she was never captured or destroyed.

However, on the evening of the third day, the looming red walls of the floating dock appeared on the eastern horizon. It was so huge and vast that even the crew of the battleship burst into a cheer.

Captain Ames of the *Panther* immediately communicated with the admiralty and arrangements were made to tow the dock to Antigua, where she would be kept as a naval reserve until the end of the war and then allowed to proceed to Buenos Aires.

The British Towing and Shipping Company was repaid for the loss of the *Vulcan*, and a prize of five hundred thousand dollars distributed among the tug's crew for sinking the submarine. Thus the dreams of wealth aroused by the ill-fated *Minnie B* were realized in a small way by the dock's crew. No doubt Deschaillon has his frog pond, old Mrs. Galton her plot of flowers, and Hogan a tall hat, a long-tailed coat and a silver-headed cane.

One week after the Battle of the Sargasso, a formal dinner was given in the officers' mess. At this affair two civilians were present, Leonard Madden and Caradoc Smith-Wentworth.

Under the radiance of many electric lights, Caradoc appeared rather weak and bloodless. However, everyone seemed quite cheerful. The talk was naturally of the war. The officers were speculating upon the entrance of Italy and Turkey into the struggle.

Presently Captain Ames touched an electric button and Gaskin, serene, deferential and wearing an added dignity along with his new uniform, entered the cabin with a basket full of ice and bottles on his arm.

When his helpers had cleared the table, the fat fellow moved decorously from diner to diner, announcing each port of call by the subdued pop of a champagne cork muffled in his napkin. Madden shook his head when the solemn fellow bent solicitously over him. "Make mine water, Gaskin," he requested in an undertone, laying three fingers over his goblet.

The cook changed almost imperceptibly from a straw colored bottle to a glittering carafe of water; then he moved to Caradoc.

The Englishman hesitated a moment, glanced at Madden and said, "Same thing, Gaskin."

Captain Ames must have observed his action, and showed his silent approval by requesting water for himself. A few moments later the captain arose.

"Gentlemen," he began in his crisp military voice, "His Majesty, and all England, are greatly pleased at the work of the South Atlantic fleet. In the report of our recent victory, the commander of the _Panther_ had an extremely cogent reason to commend very heartily the action of a former officer of this vessel. To be exact and fair, it was an act upon which the safety of this vessel and her crew depended."

A little polite applause filled the slight interval in the speech. Caradoc colored somewhat and the captain continued.

"It is pleasant to me to announce that His Majesty, through the Admiralty, has seen fit to reward this act by tendering Caradoc Smith-Wentworth his commission as first lieutenant in His Majesty's navy."

A real outburst of applause greeted this announcement, but the captain held up his glass and raised his voice for silence.

"And I have the further pleasure to tender to Mr. Smith-Wentworth, at his Majesty, George the Fifth's, express command, the Victoria Cross for conspicuous bravery upon the field of battle."

"Let us drink his health!" he finished above the congratulatory uproar that broke out on the announcement.

The men held their goblets at arm's length.

"Here's to you, Wentworth!" "To your deserved honor, my boy!" "To your well-earned promotion, Wentworth!" they chorused heartily.

In the lull of drinking, Madden lifted his water to his friend.

"Here's to the _remittance_ man," he proposed solemnly, "who vanishes to-night and leaves a _Man_."

Caradoc's long face was deeply moved as he looked into the eyes of the youth whose life Providence had so intimately entwined with his own. After a moment he responded steadily enough, "With all my heart, Madden. And here's to the land which you taught me how to serve, my country--my home--Old England!"

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