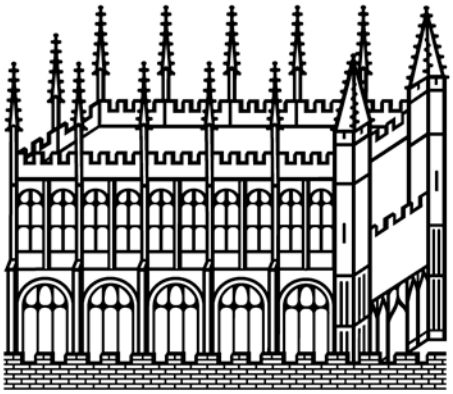


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ATONEMENT

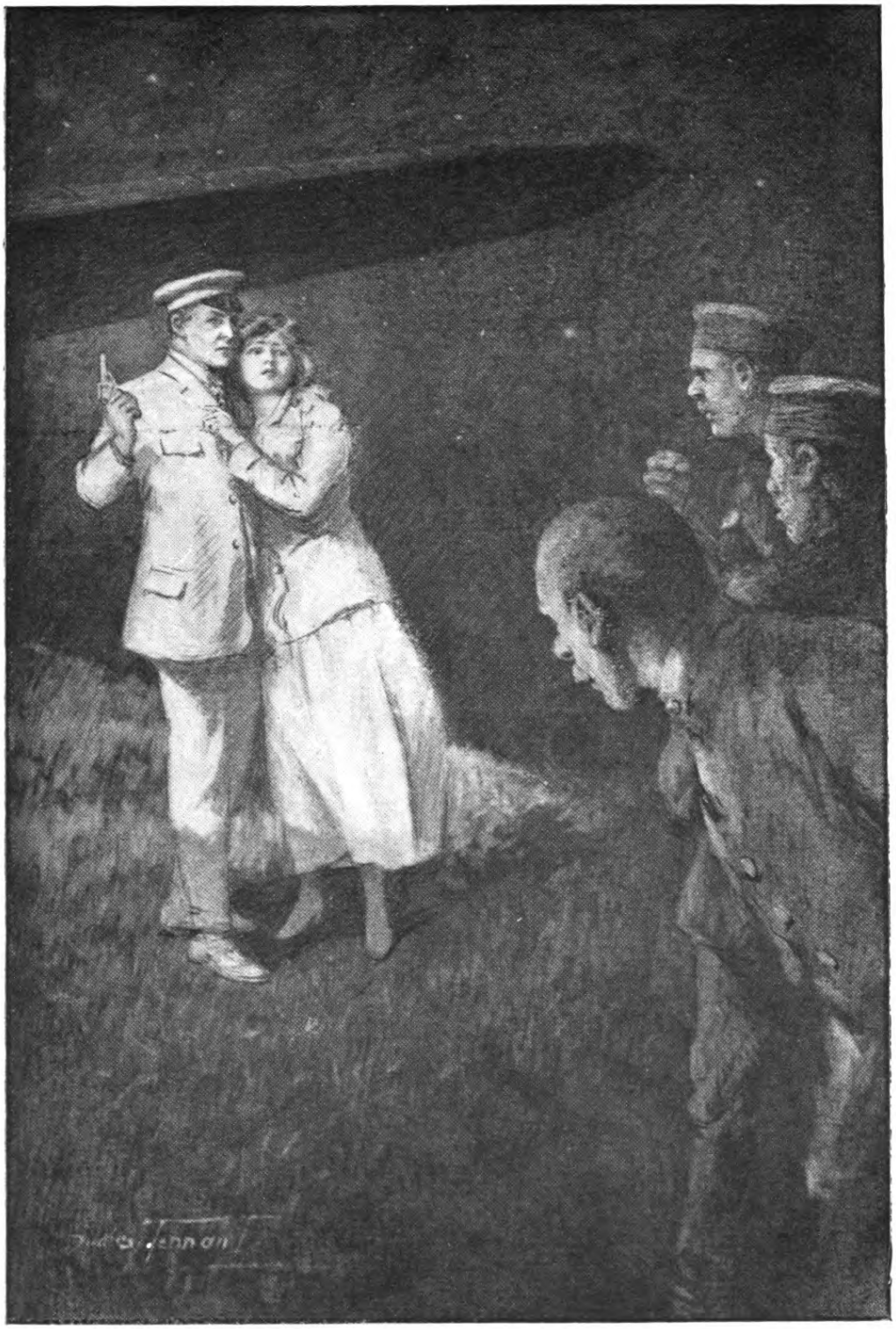
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THE ATONEMENT





"I ranged up beside Ruth, and caught her in my arms."
(Chapter XXXV.)

The Atonement] [*Frontispiece*

THE ATONEMENT

A STORY OF MODERN ADVENTURE

BY

JAMES BLYTH

Author of "A Hazardous Wooing," etc.

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THE ATONEMENT.

CHAPTER I.

THE "OTTER" RISES.

As usual, my little five-ton cutter, the *Dabchick*, was one of the first of the pretty fleet of yachts flying the red burgee with the white Prince of Wales' feathers to leave winter quarters and push her dainty bowsprit along the winding reaches of the Wensum and Waveney. On the opening cruise of the club in May, with the swallow-tailed pennant of the Commodore leading, I had already been afloat full three weeks, and had got the little craft into perfect trim, both for sailing and for cosy living aboard. Few of the fine weather yachtsmen were yet about the waters. May had opened with nor'-westerly breezes which were reminiscent of the bitter March winds of the East Coast, and, to a hardy, weather-seasoned lover of peace upon the waters, like myself, the rivers and broads of Norfolk and Suffolk were more delightful than they would be from June to October.

It was on the night of the fifteenth of May that the first of the many strange experiences happened,

experiences which were to change the whole course of my life, and to lead me many times within a hair's breadth of both death and dishonour.

I had been up the Wensum, or Yare, as the old river is usually but improperly called, as far as Buckenham Ferry, and had spent the previous day fishing with the famous "professor." On the fifteenth I sailed leisurely down with a westerly breeze, and reached Reedham an hour before dusk. I brought to at the staithe above the bridge and laid in a few necessary provisions, then I got under way again, and sailed down to the point made by the river and the canal which runs into the Waveney near St. Olave's. As I have already hinted, I like to be by myself, and at that time of year there was no likelihood of any other craft bringing up near me.

As I moored the cutter fore and aft to the rond on the right side of the river, the sun was sending a good-night blaze across the marshes, all agleam with golden crowfoot, and redolent with the promise of meadow-sweet, although the white tufts of feathery blossom were not yet unfolded.

It was slack water at the bottom of the ebb, and, as I got my oil-stove alight and began to prepare for supper, the incoming tide commenced to rustle and murmur past the cutter's bows. Away in the dykes of the lonely marshland a waterhen cried thrice, and all about me were wheeling hornpie, flying low, flashing their white breasts in the last ruddy light of the sunset ere they settled on their nests of bare black peaty marsh mould. A few red legs darted about uneasily, their plaintive whistling blending with the still more plaintive "Peeweep, Peeweep," of the crested plover.

I gave a look round before I went down into the cabin to eat. But for a Yarmouth bound wherry,

booming over Breydon, with her great sail bellying out like half a balloon, not a mast was in sight but that of my own craft.

When I returned to deck to smoke my after-supper pipe, I found that the night would be very dark. There was no moon, and with the setting of the sun a bank of sombre clouds had overspread the sky. I smoked in an ecstasy of enjoyment. Astern were the lights of Reedham, pretty enough in the distance, and not near enough to spoil the effect of loneliness. All around me were the sounds of the wild life of marsh and river.

Glip, glip, went the flood against the bows, and "swoosh, swoosh," against the bulge of the lines of the hull.

Never does tobacco taste better than on deck. Whether at sea off Ushant or on my beloved Norfolk waters there is no place nor time to compare with a deck and a pitch dark night to bring out the full flavour of a pipe.

I think I must have sunk into a reverie that was very like sleep, for when I looked about me again the lights of Reedham were all out. Yet I had not noticed their extinction, one by one, as I should have done had I been fully alive to my surroundings.

Then something startled me. To this day I do not know what it was, for the wonder that was coming to me must have been too far off for me to hear a murmur from it. Without any reason that I can give I turned my eyes down river and sat expectantly, waiting for I knew not what.

The lamp alight in the cabin poured up through the entrance and fell full upon me, as I lay asprawl on the counter.

I had flung out a few eel lines "on the chance," and, annoyed with myself for looking for nothing, I

hoisted myself up and began to fidget with them, feeling to see if there were any tug of a fish.

Suddenly I dropped the lines. There was indeed something to be heard now. A rushing sound of water, furiously displaced, came towards me in a tremendous crescendo. It was the sound of no motor boat, for the exhaust of such a craft going at a speed which would set up all that hubble-bubble would roar like a Gatling gun in action. And, but for the hissing savage sough of the boiling river, there was no sound upon the waters other than that of the wild life familiar to me.

Although it was, as I have already written, a very dark night, I could distinguish the sheen of black steel rippling on the surface of the eager flowing tide. It was impossible to hear that rising threat of noise without excitement. I strained my eyes to the east'ard, but could see nothing to account for the sound.

And then it grew less, fainter, but—and this was, I thought, the strangest thing of all—although it softened to a hush, nevertheless I could sense that it came nearer.

"Ahoy!" I yelled, unable to keep silent longer. "Ahoy! What's that?"

A ridiculous question to put, and, even as I put it, I saw the water abreast of my yacht gape, and from out it reared the dome-like cap of the man-hole of a submarine as raised for surface voyaging. I learnt afterwards that I was mistaken in thinking that the underwater boat came to the top against me, for she had risen when half-way up Breydon, and spun upriver afloat. But it seemed to me as though she had leapt to the surface at my very feet.

The instant which preceded action sufficed for a dozen suspicions to flash through my mind. What

was a submarine doing so high up the Wensum? She was not one of ours. That I was ready to swear to. I had seen too many of the grey deaths in Yarmouth and Lowestoft harbours not to know that this craft was smaller than any of those flying the white ensign, and of a different pattern. Although the night was so dark the surge of the boat betrayed her shape. Was this some deadly secret service vessel from the other side of the North Sea? A moment's consideration would have told me that there was nothing which a German submarine could learn concerning the "Hierus" estuary which was not already known to the War Office on the other side. My excuse must be that in times of tension such as that few men are reasonable. Certainly I was not, nor, if I had been, was there time to do more than wonder. For, before I was aware that anyone was on the deck of the submarine, I heard a voice say, "Just step aboard him, Bob and Dick."

I was about to protest, when a couple of burly fellows swung on to my counter from the inward sheer of the submarine, and seized me, one on each side. The little *Dabchick* went perceptibly down by the stern.

"Here," I cried, "this isn't a public landing-stage!"

I heard one of my assailants chuckle, but the two men hemmed me in so closely that I was to all intents and purposes a prisoner on my own boat.

"Look here," I cried, "what on earth's the game? What the dickens is a submarine doing at Reedham?"

"Don't trouble about that," suggested a deep musical voice from the craft alongside, the same voice as that which had issued orders to the hands

who had leapt aboard me. "What's more to the point is what are we to do with you?"

"Do with me?" I said, beginning to grow intolerant of this insolence. "Why, clear out, and be quick about it!"

"Ah!" replied the voice; "but you see it might not be quite safe for us. See? Now look here, Mr. Haakon, we know you and your cutter too, and we don't wish to cause you more inconvenience than is absolutely necessary. But we must safeguard ourselves. See?"

One of the men who held me gave vent to a rumbling chuckle, and it seemed to me as though I knew that deep ventral growl as the voice of a friend.

The clammy moisture which I don't mind admitting was beginning to chill my body, grew warmer. I hoped that I had given no sign of my inward feelings, but, to be entirely frank, I believed that I was in as tight a place as I had ever been in my life. It is not an every-day occurrence for a solitary and harmless man preparing for sleep on a five-ton cutter in Broadland to be boarded by two stalwarts from a submarine. Their reasons must be poignant; and the more pressing their reasons, the tighter was the place in which I was fixed.

But that grumbling chuckle cheered me. No evil-hearted man had so genial an internal rumble as that.

The voice continued: "You see we would welcome you as a friend, and gladly. But now that you know of the *Otter* you might be extremely obnoxious as an enemy. Will you swear by all that you hold sacred that you will never breathe a word of what you have seen and experienced here to-night to anyone? That you will never try to ferret us out or learn our business? That you will be content

to let the matter pass—forgotten as though it were a meaningless dream?"

There was no doubt that he who was speaking was a person of refinement and education. His voice was penetrating, rich and sweet. His accent that of a cultured gentleman.

I hesitated before I replied. The question again arose in my mind. What was a submarine doing there? The hands aboard her were English. I could take my oath of that, and that rumbling chuckle was not only English, but, unless I were wide of the mark, East Anglian. Yet there are English traitors. Treason is not necessarily confined to members of Parliament and strike leaders. There is plenty of Teutonic gold both for strike pay and for secret service. And there are always plenty of discontented agitators "agin the gover'ment" who are not overscrupulous in their methods of enriching themselves. At the same time I longed to be friends with the man who owned that voice; to ascertain from what jolly throat came that rumbling chuckle; to learn what the dickens it all meant. But I dared not give the promise. I have my faults, God knows; but I am an Englishman, a member of the Navy League, and a believer that sooner or later war between the two coasts of the North Sea is inevitable.

"No," I cried, "I'll see you damned first!"

"Bring him aboard, men," was the immediate response.

I struggled for the sake of salving my own feelings; but I knew that it was utterly useless. I am a strong man, but I had to do with two men, each of whom was stronger, and who already had their arms about me.

In an instant I was turned about and made fast in those scientific hitches and turns which only sailors know.

I felt as nothing in the hands of Bob and Dick. They quietly and very gently swung me outboard over to the open manhole of the submarine, and as I felt the hand of someone beside me on her deck steady my descent, I again heard the rumbling chuckle which had already given me encouragement. And now a voice that I had heard before muttered hoarsely: "Yew doan't want ta be afeared, Master Jack. Noobardy oan't hurt yew."

I heard a scrambling aboard my yacht as I waited at the orifice of the manhole, and saw that one of the marauders had run down and turned out the lamp. Probably he also locked the cabin door and brought the key with him.

Then, with two mighty thuds, my captors leapt aboard the steel shell where I stood in my bondage, stayed by the hand of the man who seemed to be set in authority.

"Will you give your parole not to attempt to escape for, oh, say, for twelve hours?" said the same sweet voice as had spoken before. "I assure you you are in no danger if you will, and that we are not concerned in anything hostile to Great Britain. You know," said the gentlemanly voice, "you can't be comfortable with all those hitches round you."

What was the use of cutting off my nose to spite my face? If I did not give my parole I should be kept tied up like a newly-roped elephant in the Keddah. I might just as well give my promise for the twelve hours. After that, well I should see.

"Yes," I agreed, "I give you my word."

I fancied I heard a sigh of relief, and immediately the hands of Bob and Dick were busy about me, so that I stood unbound and free as to my limbs within two or three seconds.

"That's well," said the gentlemanly voice. "Now

come below and let's make each other's acquaintance. You will excuse me if I go before you to show you the way."

He slipped down on the companion ladder, and I followed him. As my head came to the level of the manhole, Bob stooped and whispered, "Yew're all right, Master Jack. Doan't yew reckernise me?"

I peered up in the gloom, and saw the hairy face of an old friend as clearly as I could in the darkness. But for his voice I doubt if I should have known him. I followed my leader with good heart. I was sure that if Bob Baldry was aboard no great harm would come to me.

CHAPTER II.

IN THE WHALE'S BELLY.

WHEN I was fairly within the circular hollow of the manhole I found that a companion ladder ran at a for'ard slant down to and through a steel floor. A cross beam, about a foot in width, ran across and over this from starboard to port. A bell-shaped mouth astern showed that there was a ventilator for use when the boat was on the surface. There was barely room for the four of us: Bob, the man with the gentle but commanding voice, Dick, and myself.

"Let her down, Bob," said the leader of the party, shifting his feet to the iron ladder of the companion as he spoke. "Set his feet on the right path first," he added with a chuckle.

Bob leant down and placed my feet on the cross beam, taking his stand beside me on the same support. Then he stopped and pulled a lever, as it seemed to me. The round floor sank like a trap-door, and a blaze of light shot up from below. The skipper—as I may as well call him—went down the companion ladder first, beckoning me to follow. Bob came on my heels, and Dick brought up the rear.

I found myself in a small cabin, far smaller than the chief cabin, saloon, what you choose to call

it, of Class C and Class D of the white ensign submarines, and indeed barely three-quarters the size of the old Class A. But, small as was the place, it was furnished in a very different manner from that of the business-like craft designed for the purposes of war. Swan lights were in the roof and at the sides. Glass, silver, and gleaming brass glittered on all sides, and the upholstery and carpets were of the richest and most beautiful material and pattern. The cabin led aft to a space where I saw the wheel and a number of shining levers and handles, connected, I did not doubt, with the mechanism of the boat. In the strong light showered down upon the wheel and the binnacle adjacent stood an old yacht hand whom I had known for years. This, I told myself, made two hands aboard who were not strangers to me and whom I would never believe to be traitors to their native land. I began to take heart, and almost to enjoy the adventure.

The man at the wheel, after a glance at some instrument or plan before him, turned on me with a genial grin of welcome. "How dee ye fare, Master Jack," said he. "Yew doan't want ta be afeared. But doan't ye make no noise till I tall ye ye can."

Inasmuch as I might have shouted my throat out at that time of night and in that place without arousing any attention, I thought that I might as well fall in with his advice, even if the spirit of adventure were not already laying hands upon me. At any rate I obeyed, and continued to observe as much of this wonderful fresh water submarine and her workings as I was able to see. For'ard, where the cabin ended and the boat tapered to its torpedo end, I saw another door of steel. This was closed.

The skipper turned to me now. "I'm sorry," he said, "to have been obliged to give you so

unceremonious a welcome aboard the *Otter*, but I assure you that I thought it necessary."

"I daresay you did," I said, with as little resentment in my manner as I could manage. "What puzzles me is why you bothered about me at all. If you'd gone past it's ten to one I should not have spotted you for what you are. I was infernally sleepy and I believe I should have thought it all a dream."

The skipper laughed. "We couldn't risk that," he said. "From what Fred here and Bob have told me you are not often caught asleep. No, no! If you'll think for a moment, when we saw you on your counter as we came up, with the swoosh of our bows to draw your attention, it wouldn't have been safe to pass you. Besides, we want you. I'll tell you that at once. But never mind that now. Have a whiskey and soda just to show there's no ill-feeling."

For the life of me I could not help laughing at his sublime impudence. "You've got the cheek of the devil," said I. "You calmly kidnap me, and then offer me hospitality. What on earth is your little game?"

"Oh, that's all right," said he, in his musical, fascinating tones, "you shall know all about us to-night. Say when," he continued, as he poured from a bottle of whiskey into a long tumbler.

"Thank you, that will do," I cried. "Right up, please," as the siphon foamed into the glass.

My captor, or perhaps I should say the captain of my captors, seated himself in a comfortable lounge and motioned to me to follow his example. He reached up to some shelves which were probably nickel, but which looked like silver, and brought down a fifty box of very long, plump and shapely cigars. "Try these Upmanns," he said, holding the

box to me. "You'll find 'em fair. Bob," he added, "sink her to the dome. Fred, get under way, and, Dick, you may as well lower the hatch. The ventilator will give us all the air we want for the few yards we have to go."

There was a throb, a plunge, a shock of vibration, and the submarine seemed to sink a little and then to move forward.

"Now," said the skipper, "we'll have a little talk. But first I have some directions to give."

He left me and went through to the space where my old friend, Fred Banham, was at the wheel. This had been closed off from the cabin since I had been permitted to enter it, and when the skipper had passed through the doorway he closed it behind him. I heard nothing of the directions he gave to his man at the helm.

But I was very comfortable. I have never tasted softer or fuller-flavoured extract of malt than the whiskey I had aboard the *Otter*, and certainly the Upmanns were good enough to compensate a real lover of good Havanna tobacco for a lot of inconvenience.

The submarine could be felt moving through the water, but I judged that she was not going at the same speed as that which had caused that tremendous hurly-burly of rushing water when first I heard her. I felt no sudden change in her course, so I gathered that we did not swing round into the cut; indeed, I doubted if there would be enough water in the cut to hold her sunk. It was evident we were proceeding up-river towards Reedham Bridge, in the direction of Cantley. Well, it did not seem to matter much to me where we were going.

Presently the skipper returned with a word of apology for his absence.

"Now, let's have a little talk together," he said,

as he reseated himself on the cosy lounge which he had previously occupied.

I cast my eyes about me. There was no doubt that, whatever was the *raison d'être* of this extraordinary craft, the cause of my kidnapping, of the whole enterprise, comfort reigned supreme in the cabin of the *Otter*. I felt assured that she was not meant for war. She gave me rather the impression of a pleasure boat, a yacht, than of an engine of destruction. Not but that she could do the work of a destroyer if she were called upon. I did not doubt, though the space for'ard of the cabin had not been shown to me, that she had torpedo tubes in her eyes. With but slight effort I thrust away from me all ominous forebodings. My host was courteous, his whiskey and cigars irreproachable. Why should I worry? With Bob Baldry and Fred Banham aboard I could not believe that the boat was engaged in any nefarious undertaking. I determined to make the best of the position and to play up to the courtesy of the skipper to the height of my ability.

I scrutinised my host closely, as he filled himself a glass from the bottle and the siphon and lit an Upmann.

He was a man of about thirty, nearly six feet in height, with a graceful, wiry frame. His face was clean shaven, his complexion dark. His hair curled profusely, and was as black as a rook's wing feather. His cheeks were thin, his cheek bones a little too high, his nose was aquiline, long, and thin, prominent, with wide nostrils. His mouth was large, and very firm, the lips rather thin than thick, refined rather than sensual, but above all were they masterful.

His chin was square and strong. His whole personality was that of a man born to be a leader of men. I felt that I had to deal with a great intelligence, if not a genius.

He was clad in ordinary yachting costume, and he wore the colours of the burgee that flew at my own masthead during the day. The other hands I had seen about were the ordinary type of Broadland yacht hands, but were better dressed, and seemed smarter than the average. Fred Banham, at the wheel, was an exceptionally tall man, of over sixty years of age—so tall was he, indeed, that he could not stand upright at his wheel. He wore small, bristly grey whiskers, which came round beneath his chin, in the fashion so beloved by East Anglian river and sea sailors, but was otherwise clean shaven. As was the case with the skipper, his strength lay rather in the superb quality of his wiry sinews and muscles than in his bulk. I had known Fred from my childhood as the most skilful helmsman and fresh water pilot to be found on the Norfolk and Suffolk waters. He had long had charge of the champion racing cutter of the two counties, and it was a pet grievance of his that when the owner of *The Privateer* died he left testamentary directions that his beloved boat should be broken up, instead of leaving her as a legacy to the man who had so often steered her to victory.

What with the admirable cigars and the stimulant, I began to assure myself that no harm could come to me aboard a boat containing two such good friends of mine as Fred Banham and Bob Baldry. I would have put my hand in the fire to vouch for the honesty of either of these. I felt enjoyment of the adventure tingling in my veins.

"Now," said the skipper, when he had got his Upmann well alight, "tell me why you would not give me your word to say nothing of having seen us."

I hesitated. At the moment it seemed as though it would be an intolerable insult to tell this man

that I suspected him of treason, of shameful dealings with a future enemy of England. But then the suspicious circumstances of my capture recurred to me, and I remembered the indignity to which I had been subjected. After all, Bob and Fred might easily have been deceived as to the character of their employer. Straightforward Englishmen as they were, I knew that a little "brass" and a hearty *camaraderie* as of man to man might blindfold them. That the skipper was too shrewd to attempt to patronise them I understood. With a handful of gold and another handful of gallant sportsmanship, a fascinating personality like the skipper's could throw dust in the eyes of even the shrewd East Anglian watermen. I flushed with anger and doubt. "Because," I cried, "I believe you are here as an enemy, as a spy for some foreign secret service."

I felt ashamed of my suspicions almost at once. No one could doubt the honesty of the laugh which transformed the rather stern features of my captor, or host. It was genuine amusement which lit up his eyes, and genuine contempt which gave an edge to his penetrating voice. "No, no!" he laughed. "Hang it all, do I look like a spy? Do you think Fred and Bob are built for spies? Ha! Ha! Ha! No wonder you were not compliant. And, by George! I am not sure that I should not have had the same suspicions in your place. But, I give you my word, that view of the matter never even occurred to me. Ha! Ha! Ha! Oh, I must tell Ruth that! I assure you that every man aboard the *Otter* would fight for the old country to his last drop of blood. Does that satisfy you? I don't say that we may not have a few little secrets from the law of the land. But, as for treason! Well, I'm hanged! I tell you again, man, I never thought

I should be suspected of it." He paused, still chuckling, and gradually his face grew serious again. "We are nearly there," he said. "I'll tell you more when we get home. Perhaps you'll give us your word to be secret then, or perhaps you'll actually go so far as to become one of us. You never know." Here he began to laugh again. Then he looked me fully and frankly in the eyes. "To tell you the truth," he said, "I have heard all about you from Fred, and have been waiting for some time to find an opportunity of making your acquaintance."

I hardened my heart against the charm of the man. "That's all very well," said I. "I've known Fred Banham all my life, it is true, and I'd trust him with what's left of it. But you will admit that the circumstances are so extraordinary, and your treatment of me so arbitrary, that even my knowledge of Fred is hardly enough for complete reassurance. Where are we going? Why have you kidnapped me?" Then, warming as the remembrance of the insolence with which I had been treated stung me to a sense of shame, I fought against the magnetic charm which the skipper possessed to a greater extent than any other man I ever met, and cried, "What the deuce do you mean by it? I can't take you at your own valuation without a full explanation. You must see I can't, man!"

"You'll see—you'll see," was the bland reply. "Wait till we get home."

"But where is home?" I persisted.

"We are nearly there," replied the skipper. "Have you not noticed that we have been almost motionless for some minutes. We are only waiting for the signals. I have your parole. Come on deck."

He led the way, and I followed him up the companion ladder to the manhole.

I saw at once that we must have been cruising about, backwards and forwards, for when I looked about me I saw Reedham Bridge looming darker in the darkness. The lights of Reedham were all extinguished. But close to the water, against a house known as "The House of the Three Skippers," there was a red light shown for a second at intervals of two or three minutes.

"There we are," said the skipper.

As I looked ashore, my attention was drawn by a noise as of the stealthy shifting of cases behind me. I turned and, in the starlight—for the clouds had now left the sky clear for a space—I discerned four or five men busied in bringing up square cases from below to the rail-enclosed deck of the submarine, which was now entirely above water. In the dim light the figures were shadowy and eerie, their movements seemed soft and smooth in the obscurity, like those of some dark phantasms. But the sound, subdued as it was, of case as it was placed on case, told me that they were no feather-weight boxes being brought up, even if the strain of the muscles and the poses of the men at work had not betrayed that they handled heavy goods. The men worked almost silently, it was but a whisper of case on case that had caught my ear, yet that whisper was the muttering of heavy bodies. Those who have seen stealthy loading by night will know what I mean. It is impossible to describe it so that it will be understood by those who have never heard the soughing slide of case on case, and learnt the note from treble to bass which tells of the power of gravity which stretches sinews and bends backs.

The sight of this work went some way to reassure

me. Surely, I thought, the hands would hardly work so openly if their cargo were felonious. For the moment I forgot how solitary was the river by night in mid-May.

Then, as I managed to estimate the cubic contents of the cases, I was struck by two ideas. The first was the more agreeable.

"By Jove!" I said to myself. "It is a simple smugglers' lay"—and then came the afterthought—"or is it ammunition?"

CHAPTER III.

LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT.

I FELT the boat swerve and head into the left bank of the river. A little to the east of "The House of the Three Skippers" was a small inlet into the marsh which used to be what is known in the district as a "fleet dyke." Over the mouth of this a large boathouse had been erected within the last two years, and I saw that the *Otter* was being steered for the gates of this, which now stood wide open.

Presently we glided beneath the roof, and the doors swung close behind us. Instantly the interior was ablaze with electric light.

I could now look about me, and did so to my wondering admiration.

The first thing I noticed was that the old dyke had been widened and dredged out. I tried the depth afterwards and found that it was sufficient to permit the submarine to enter beneath the gates if ever it were desirable. The width had been increased in proportion to the depth. The basin which the tarred weather-boarding enclosed was quite a little harbour. Moored along one side was a very handsomely-fitted pleasure wherry, of some thirty tons, her mast lowered, and the great balancing weight visible in the bows of her. I

recognised the craft. I had often seen and admired her about the waters. Here and there three dingheys were hitched by their painters to iron rings let into the wooden platform which surrounded the oblong basin. Even when the submarine took up her place there was still a great deal of room to spare. Overhead, on cross beams or joists, spars and sails were lying, and about the platform were strewn small boat rudders, lugs'ls and their masts, oars, rowlocks, and a score different paraphernalia of sailing boats.

"By Jove!" I cried, as I looked wonderingly round; "this must have cost a small fortune!"

The skipper answered me, I believe, for I have a faint recollection of hearing his musical voice utter some words which seemed pertinent to my remark. But before he had commenced to utter them, a door to the left—that is, on the Reedham side of the boathouse—opened, and a girl entered. The first sight of her drove all else from my thoughts, and rendered me incapable of doing aught but gaze upon her with a reverence and exquisite delight that were soon to blaze into the passion of my life.

She was singularly graceful. There was no curve in all her delicious contour which was not perfect in its line of beauty. Tall, and nobly built, her proportions were so delicately modelled and so symmetrical, that her carriage, gait, and every gesture were sylph-like in their daintiness. Her features somewhat resembled those of the skipper, but her cheek bones were not so pronounced as his, were neither so high nor so prominent. Her chin was firm, but rounded and dimpled, the nose straight and delicate, the mouth smaller and more curved than the skipper's, her lips more full and of a richer crimson. Her eyes were even larger than the man's, and were brilliant with fiery vitality and

intelligence, yet at the same time gave promise of such depths of tenderness as I had never seen on woman's face before. In the glare of the electric light I was unable to discern their true colour. Indeed I was never able to decide if they were blue or violet. They changed their lambent hue according to her mood. Whatever was their true tint—blue, violet, or violet shot with grey—they were the loveliest eyes which ever held man thrall.

Her age could not be more than two or three and twenty by the freshness of her beauty, nor less than twenty from the dignity and self-possession of her manner.

She seemed to hesitate an instant when she saw me on the deck of the submarine beside the skipper. But as the latter hailed her she came forward, and leapt lightly over the four or five feet which separated the edge of the platform from the railed-in space around and fore and aft of the dome which was the "deck" of the *Otter*.

She held out both hands eagerly, and there was the glad light of a loving welcome in her face which made me wish fervently that it were for me.

"Back again, Raymond," she asked, "and all well?"

"All well, dear," replied the skipper; "and, as you see, I have brought a visitor for you. Let me introduce him. Miss Ruth Pettingill, Mr. John Haakon, my sister. By the way, Mr. Haakon, I may as well introduce myself now. I am Raymond Pettingill."

The girl bowed, and I thought I caught the glimpse of a smile upon her lips and in her eyes. It was a smile of recognition, as though she were not greatly surprised to see me. I remembered that the skipper had told me he had long had an eye upon me.

With a word of apology, the brother and sister drew aside for a few seconds. I saw them glance at me as they talked, and guessed that I was the subject of their conversation. I was glad to notice that the smile was friendly.

I did not like to stare at them, and looked about me. I saw that six or seven men were busy transferring the wooden cases from the *Otter* to the pleasure wherry. Case after case was transhipped and carried below. The more I saw the less did I believe that there was any conspiracy here against my country. And I was relieved by this more than I can say, for already I had a suspicion that, if my love for my country were to be brought into conflict with the pleasure of Ruth Pettingill, I might prove a truer lover than patriot.

How is it that a mere second suffices to enthral a man to a woman's charm? I had not lived the life of a recluse. I had always been fairly well to do. Before my sisters married, and in the lifetime of my parents, I had spent much time in tennis parties, dances, and picnics with the most fascinating specimens of young womanhood to be found in Lothing Land and for miles round. I had danced to the girls' playing, and seen them dance to mine. I had my favourites, naturally. My sisters had allotted me to more than one charming girl, and, I must admit, with some justification for their disposition of my future life. I liked many girls, enjoyed their society, took pleasure in making myself as agreeable to them as I could. I had even entertained thoughts of asking one of them to be my wife. I daresay there are hundreds of men like me, who have played the game of youthful gallantry in all innocence, and who had "married and settled down" complacently, believing that they loved their wives as well as man can love.

It might have happened to me!

But when my eyes fell on Ruth Pettingill, and I heard her voice, I saw that all my philandering had been shameful, childish, beneath the dignity of manhood. I knew nothing of the girl. The circumstances in which I had encountered her brother were certainly not such as to reassure me as to his character or his profession. The appearance of the girl herself, at that hour of night, in such a place, was sufficient to "shock" the sedate matrons of any of the halls and manor houses where I had been a welcome guest. Yet I knew that this was the one woman in the world for me; that for good or for evil, for misery or felicity, for shame or honour, for poverty or riches, I was hers to make or to mar, to destroy or to save, for all the days of my life, and perhaps for all that mysterious and unrealisable time which we call "Eternity."

This sudden devotion, this love at first sight, must surely be either Divine or satanic. It is God's mercy alone when it proves to be Divine. For whatever be its influence, for good or ill, man is not master of his fate when once he has the gyves of this all-devouring passion upon him. Such love as this is beyond all argument, beyond all definition. Sent from heaven it purifies and ennobles a man's whole existence. Risen from a more sinister source it may destroy a man body and soul without any volition of his, poor fellow. God grant, my friends, that if and when any of us are smitten with this fever of the very blood, the very soul, it may be vouchsafed that we receive the irresistible impulse from a Celestial source, and not from that Terrible Power which assumes a virtue which it has not, and which apes the Divine in its fair exterior while it is unclean, foul, and corrosive within.

Alas! No man can analyse or anatomise the

mighty passion which enslaves him. He can but trust to the goodness and mercy of God to help him to win the golden virgin or to save himself from the base metal simulacrum. For when the moment comes to a man he always believes that he holds the golden virgin in his arms. Never from the first did I entertain a doubt of Ruth's purity and honour. To me she was the incarnation of all the virtues of mind and spirit, of all the charms of feature and body. Ah, me! I can philosophise now! I did not then even pause to consider that I knew nothing of this girl. Ruth was Ruth, my queen and my beloved. And I was hers to lead to the height of worthy achievement, or to the depths of infamous remembrance.

Which would be my story?

CHAPTER IV.

SWORN IN.

THE skipper did not remain apart with his sister for many minutes. Presently he left her and came to me. "Come ashore!" he said. "Ruth tells me that supper is ready, and I can leave all the rest of the work to the men."

He called out a few directions to Bob Baldry and Fred Banham, who nodded their heads in reply. Theirs was to do and achieve. "Not to jaw," as they would have put it.

One of the men ran a gangplank from the platform of the boathouse-harbour to the deck of the submarine. It seemed unnecessary to me, for, I thought, surely if Ruth could leap from wood to steel over five feet of water, I and her brother could take the same jump from steel to wood. And if the girl had done it the one way she could do it the other, especially as the leap ashore was rather the easier of the two. However, there was the gangplank, and, with an uneasy suspicion in my mind that this supererogatory help was for my benefit, I followed the girl ashore. The skipper came on my heels.

As we walked along the platform I could not repress another word or two of admiration. Really, this vast boathouse, or roofed harbour, with

its superb installation of electric light, its extraordinary magnitude, and, indeed, the mystery of the whole affair, amazed me.

"It must have cost a little fortune," I remarked fatuously, for the second time.

The skipper laughed. "Give a sprat to catch a cod," said he. "And you've seen nothing yet. By the way, I suppose a true East Anglian son of the waters like you knows that you are on one of the first landing-places of the Danes, and the Romans before them. It is doubtful whether the Romans set foot to British earth hereabouts first at Reedham or at Burgh Castle. Of course, Burgh Castle is Garionanum, and they made their great camp there rather than here because they could keep a better watch on the Iceni of Lothing Land, you know, from that eminence. But there are indications which go to show that they settled here not later than they started to build the walls which still remain at Burgh Castle. You shall see for yourself." He chuckled, thought for a moment with a frown upon his face which was rather humorous than sinister, and then continued his little lecture, or rather lesson, for there was no reading about it. "You see," he said, "before the sand silted up and made Fuller's Hill at Yarmouth, it was all open water between Gorleston Head and Caister. The two points of the Hierus estuary were Burgh Castle and Reedham, where the church is, and where our land goes—as you'll see," he added, with another chuckle. "I'll show you. But first there is a little ceremony to be gone through on your part. I am going to let you into the innermost secrets of my brotherhood. You must take an oath not to reveal anything you may see to-night."

Ruth looked at me and smiled. I believe she knew then, better than I did, although she always

denies it, that I would have sworn black was white or red blue in order to remain with her and have a chance to win her favour.

"Of course," I said, "I should consider myself to be on my honour without any oath. But I understand that in all brotherhoods, or secret societies, or whatever may be the nature of the organisation of which your association provides an example, oaths are *de rigueur*, and an initiate is lucky to get off without having to undergo the details of a mediæval ritual worthy of *Gilles de Retz*."

"*Gilles de Retz!*" cried the skipper. "Hang it, man, we are not like that! What the——"

I laughed in my turn. "I know that," I chuckled. "It was only a sort of leading question. But you are a gentleman, and I hope I am one. What is the matter with a man's word of honour?"

"Because a leader must not distinguish himself from the rank and file in matters of this kind," replied the skipper very reasonably. "And the rank and file, especially in marshland, are best awed by the fear of what will happen to them in the hereafter if they break a formal oath. See?"

I had seen from the first, but I wished to learn the skipper's point of view. I had called him a gentleman, and he "had all the marks of one," as Huck Finn would say, but I knew nothing of him, and there are plenty of men of good birth, good breeding, and good manners, who are far from being gentlemen, and whose word of honour is not worth a tinker's ejaculation. True, their oaths are not much better. Yet there is the chance that in their case "the fear of something after death, that unexplored bourne," may have power to keep them faithful to their hideous and solemn oaths.

On the whole my experience of the marsh people and watermen of Broadland inclined me to believe

their words of honour, their frank "I'll prarmuss ye, master," as soon as I would the word of honour of a Bayard. And the thought struck me that there might be many members of this brotherhood whom I had not yet seen, who did not belong to the class either of gentrice or of honest Broadland or marshland manhood, and whose membership, therefore, imposed the necessity for a ghastly form of oath (more or less blasphemous, as all these absurd survivals of middle age ritual are) upon all the others. It must be either that or the skipper did not understand the real nature of my beloved Norfolk brothers of the fens and rivers, the broads and ronds.

"You know best," was my audible reply to my captor. "I'll write my own name in my own blood and stand on my head while I mutter conjurations if you like"—here I turned to Ruth as whimsically as I could—"provided," I said, "that a new recruit will not be objectionable to Miss Pettingill."

If I had not believed that the girl had seen me before ever she saw me on the deck of the submarine, I should not have risked the last sentence. I watched her as I said the words, and, to my intense delight, I saw a flush bloom beneath her chin and her dainty ears for just a breath.

"Oh——!" she began.

"My sister has nothing to do with this matter," cried the skipper, testily. "I am the captain, and even I dare not show you where—what you will see if you take the oath, unless you are willing to pledge yourself in the prescribed form."

"Oh, don't administer the horrid thing now, Raymond!" pleaded Ruth. "Wait till you get down to the cellars. I need not hear it then."

"You've given it half away already," grumbled

the skipper. "I should not have thought you would have been so squeamish after all these weeks! Well, Mr. Haakon, will you give me your word to take the oath when I ask you to do so?"

"It's a little round-about, isn't it?" I could not refrain from saying. But I thought, with delight, that it might be that Ruth did not wish to hear me —ME—demean myself by going through a farcical ritual. I'd have sworn anything in any words to confirm myself in that notion!

"Yes, man, of course I will," I replied. "I've told you I consider myself bound to secrecy anyhow. But I'll take all the oaths you like so long as I am not expected to drink the blood of the unwashed. I refuse to spoil the flavour of your admirable whiskey with the vital fluid of the lower members of your fraternity."

Despite an annoyance which he was unable entirely to conceal, the skipper could not help laughing. "Lord, man!" he said, "there's nothing of that kind."

"That's all right," I remarked, "only I know the elaborate notions of my marshpeople in the way of oaths and of witchcraft ritual, and if I am expected to imbibe any witchcraft brewage I may as well warn you before I go any further, that I don't see my way to it."

I watched him as I chaffed, and I saw that he did not know the people of the waters and valleys as I knew them. He had not heard of the witches, the horrible rites and spells which are still believed in in remote marsh villages, the brewage from ingredients as foul as or fouler than those of the hags in "Macbeth," which may to this day be found corked in iron bottles for use when a "spell" has to be removed or a witch or wizard punished. No; the skipper might be the skipper of this fraternity,

whatever it was. But I flattered myself that if the majority of his society was composed of men like Fred and Bob, I should be greeted as a true brother of the blood before he would.

For I knew the tongue, the loves and hates, the superstitions and faiths, of my people, and I own that I am not sufficiently self-conceited or materialistic to put my modern education before their experience, their traditions handed down for centuries. I did so once in my life, and it taught me a lesson. It may be that it was in my own blood, that as a son of the marshes I had " the sperrit " in me. I am certain that this mystic instinct of mine served me in the days which were to come better than any lore of the mathematical, classical, " stinks," law or history triposes could have done.

" No, no ! " cried the skipper ; " there's nothing of that kind. It's only a verbal form of oath. You'll only have to swear not to reveal our secrets in words which are a little out of date, that's all."

" I'll go on, Ray," said Ruth. " I hate to listen to the horrible stuff."

The skipper nodded to his sister, and she slipped out of the boathouse. Then, as we halted by the door to the left at the inner end of the place, the skipper recited to me an oath which might have been terrible to a superstitious illiterate, but was only nauseous to me. There was, however, one point about it. The man who took it, whether he were the most ignorant or the best read man in the world, could retain no scrap of honour or decency if he broke it. It may be said that neither could a man who breaks his bare word retain a scrap of honour or decency. And that is true. But the man who uttered the words dictated by the skipper and then was untrue to his oath would, I believe, be haunted by a sense of bestial terror all his life,

however materialistic he might be. There was a cold and elaborate horror about that oath which was enough to chill the heart of a V.C.

I felt some disgust as I pattered through the form, it was the disgust one feels on seeing a loathsome reptile, venomous, hideous, menacing, a disgust accompanied by a feeling of noisome dread.

"Come on," said the skipper, opening the door. "You flatter yourself you know these waters! Ha! Ha! Ha! I'll wager you'll be more surprised to-night than you've ever been in your life."

"I'm that already," I suggested, as I followed my leader out of the building.

CHAPTER V.

THE ROMAN CHAMBER.

I REMEMBERED as I passed out into the night air that, during the winter, a large space extending from the old Fleet dyke to the high walls surrounding the grounds of "The House of the Three Skippers" had become a timber storage yard. Mighty heaped-up piles of sweet-smelling pitch pine, of deal, walnut, and oak, had been raised in great blocks so that the frontage to the river looked as though it were one solid mass of smoothed trunks and sawed boards.

Until I passed out from the covered-in harbour I never realised what "cover" this timber afforded. Now I observed that a roof had been put on an alley or gangway leading from the door of the boathouse through which we had passed to the garden wall of the house, a roof which was fixed about a foot below the summit of the great blocks so as to be invisible to anyone not in the gangway. It was obvious that the electric light which made our ten foot wide passage bright to us could never be seen from river or high land. The extent of this brotherhood, its wealth and its power, grew upon me every minute. There must be thousands of pounds' worth of timber stored there, and all, as it seemed to me, to act as a blind to the real purpose of the storage yard. That it was capital, valuable

property, I understood. Yet, unless I was greatly mistaken, the main enterprise of this association into whose hands I had fallen had little to do with the buying and selling of timber.

At a later date I had reason for greater wonder at the extent of the property which had been acquired for the "Reedham Dock and Timber Company," but it would be to anticipate to enter upon that at this stage.

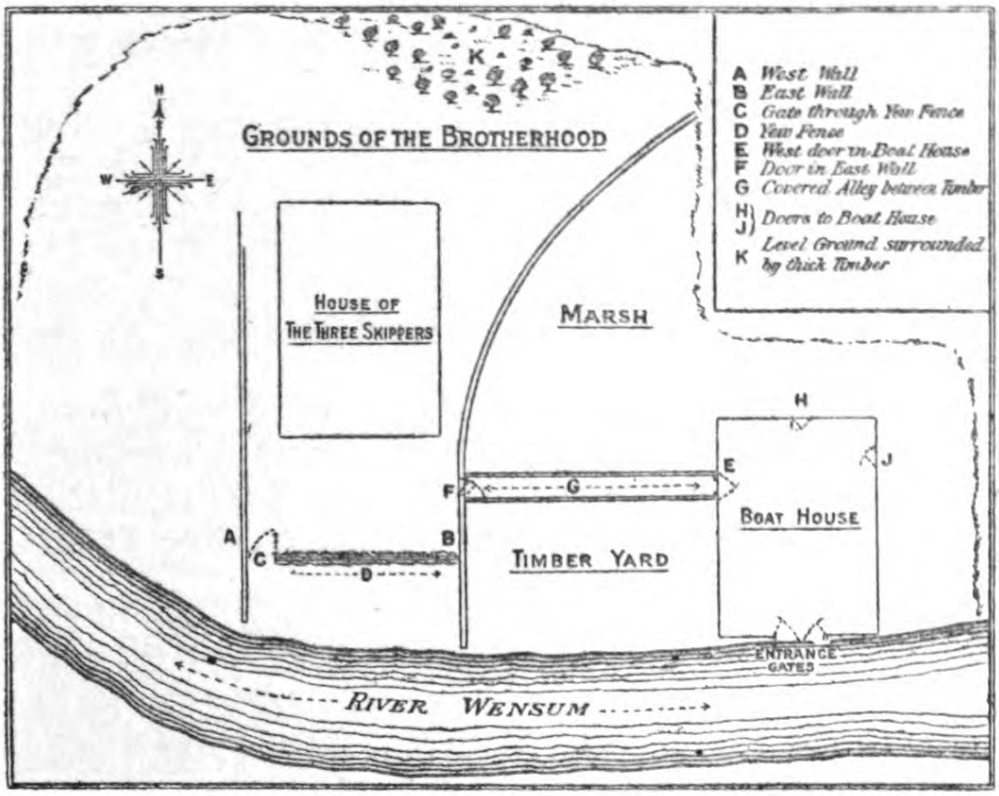
Save for the river frontage the walls round the garden of "The House of the Three Skippers" were very high. And although the actual river wall opposite the house to the south was free of bricks and mortar, yet the fact that there was a ten-foot high yew fence three hundred years old which ran midway across the garden between house and river caused the interior to be as much shut in from the south as from the east and west. There was a little gate at the western end of the yew fence which gave access past the hedge from the house to the river, but it was clear that no one passing from the front entrance of the house to the side door leading to the timber-yard through the east wall of the garden could be seen from the river or from any other point of vantage outside the walls and yew fence.*

The origin of the old house was lost in the traditional legends of centuries. The actual residence was probably chiefly Elizabethan, with a Jacobean addition here and there. But who built those mighty foundations, those flint walls ten feet thick on which the Elizabethan building was reared, no one knew. There was a glamour of awe about the

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* The reader will gain an idea of the general position of the house, walls, boathouse, by referring to the accompanying plan.—J. HAAKON.

house and premises, for three retired shipmasters had dwelt there for over forty years, men who were notorious as successful smugglers, if not something worse, and who were reputed to have lived such lives of wicked debauchery in their sinful seclusion that scarce a landsman for twelve miles round or a frequenter of the waters of the three rivers cared to pass their place after fall of dusk. Since the death of the



last of the old ruffians, at the age of 101, in the year 1887, the place had long remained unlet, forsaken, dreaded by all the neighbourhood, and when the Reedham Dock and Timber Company acquired it and added a considerable holding of hill marsh and upland to its precincts a year or two before the night when this story commences, there had been numberless prophecies of disaster to all connected with the new

concern, and " those who knew " avoided both the old premises and the newly acquired acres as though a pestilence hovered about them. The very men who worked in the timber-yard were shunned, at least those who were known to do so. I was pretty certain that no one outside the fraternity was aware that Fred Banham and Bob Baldry were connected with the modern venture, and my night's experiences taught me that the labourers who were known as working for the company were mere scapegoats, a kind of human scarecrow, to frighten off anyone who might be inconveniently inquisitive.

The skipper passed quickly along the alley between the heaped masses of timber till he came to the east wall of " The House of the Three Skippers." The way led to a small side gate through the old red brick wall, and this Ruth had left partly open for our passage after she herself had entered the curtilage of the house.

The skipper waited at the gate till I had passed through, and then closed it and locked it carefully. He touched a switch in the wall, and I guessed that the light that had illuminated our passage of the alley was now extinguished.

But for a feeble flicker of a lamp from one of the ground-floor rooms of the house there was no light between the yew fence and the building itself. But in the dim glimmer from the lamp I was unable to see Ruth awaiting us, and when the skipper and I advanced towards the worn steps leading to the front door she joined us.

" Perhaps," she said, " Mr. Haakon would like to rest in the house before we go——"

" He's as fresh as a daisy, are you not ? " said the skipper, turning to me. " The sooner we get to the bedrock of the business the better. I suppose that lamp can't be seen through the yew fence."

"Why, Ray!" cried Ruth, "you know it can't. What would it matter if it could? I am known to live here, and Mrs. Rivett. Any passing wherryman would only think that someone was ill."

To the town dweller all this fuss about a light may seem ridiculous. Those who are familiar with riverside village life will know that the mere fact of a light seen after ten o'clock at night is a cause for speculation.

Ruth gave a little laugh. "And even if no one were known to live here," she said, "it would be put down to ghosts, hob o' lanterns, or something which would prevent anyone from attempting to approach it."

The skipper hesitated but a moment. "Very well," he said. "I believe you know more about this place than I do. Come along, Mr. Haakon, you will remember your oath."

I turned on him with some anger. "I shall remember my words," I said, "and it is entirely unnecessary for you to keep reminding me of it."

I fancied Ruth gave a little nod of approval, but I could not be certain in that light. However, her brother was satisfied, for he led the way up the steps and entered the house.

As soon as he was within the front door he switched on an electric torch and passed swiftly along the stone-flagged hall. "Tell old June to extinguish the lamp and to come to headquarters," he said, brusquely, to Ruth.

The girl opened a door leading out of the hall, spoke a few words which I could not catch, and presently followed us, accompanied by a bent, shambling female figure which smurred into weird contours in the flickering shadows which shook the darkness in the wake of the skipper's electric torch. To my excited senses there seemed something sinister

about that indistinct and shambling figure, something abnormal. But then the circumstances were unusual.

After such tension as that to which my nerves had been subjected it was impossible for me to be entirely cool and unmoved by my surroundings.

The skipper led the way to a very old, iron-studded oaken door which he opened with a key, after some quaint movements which looked as though there was a combination lock to be dealt with.

"Mind how you come," he said to me, over his shoulder. "These steps are worn, and are none too wide, as well as being slippery in places."

Close on his heels, I ducked to pass through the door—for, like most of the early chancel doors of eleventh-century churches, the pointed portal was barely five feet in height—and found myself at the head of a steep stone stairway, evidently leading down a shaft to the old cellars which, if tradition did not lie, had been the stronghold of smugglers for centuries before the three skippers used them. Again I told myself that this would prove to be nothing but a modern smuggler's den. Yet, as I did so, I knew that I was wrong, that there must be something here more than the mere evasion of Customs. How far I was right and how far I was wrought upon by the uneasiness set up by the eeriness of the adventure I was soon to know. How the original intention of the skipper was fated to develop into something which might have changed the world's history, neither I nor anyone could have foreseen that night, although even then the influence was at work which was to change a private venture into a national peril.

I began to curse the skipper's thoughtlessness. He went ahead gaily, lighted by his electric torch and confident by reason of his familiarity with the

stairway. But, for my part, I was anything but easy. Even at the top the stone steps felt greasy to my tread, and the edges were so worn that I could feel the depression in the stone through my boot soles. "I say," I murmured, "I shall be on the top of you in a second. Can't we have a little more light?"

I heard a little laugh from behind me and I guessed that Ruth was following, though I had not caught the sound of her dainty feet.

"Sorry," said the skipper. "I forgot you were new to it. Oh, yes! It's safe enough to show light here." He seemed to reach back to the side of the shaft, I heard the click of a switch and the place was brilliant with electricity. "Switch off as you come, or you, June," the skipper cried over his shoulder.

"Right you be, master," croaked a horrible toneless rasp of voice. "I don't want no light. I hate it, I do. Hech! Hech! Hech! Such as me don't want none of your 'lectrics. Gi'e me the blur o' the black night or the mysteriousness atween the lights. Hech! Hech! Hech!"

"That will do, June," said Ruth's sweet accents. "Remember what I've told you."

"Ah, my dear," croaked the old woman, for I did not doubt that the rasping accents came from that weird, uncertain shape that had come out into the hall on the extinction of the lamp. "That's hard for us uns, hard it be! But I'll do as ye ax! You're the mistress. Hech! Hech! Hech!"

I saw the skipper make a gesture of impatience, and I caught a murmur of "mad old fool." But there was no more hesitation in our descent. Down we went, down the stone steps worn by the feet of more than a thousand years, and as we approached the bottom I was amazed to find that, instead of getting greener and moister, the steps became cleaner,

and no longer seemed to reek of the marsh damp. There was no turn in the stairway, and after we had gone down between thirty and forty steps the shaft opened out into a magnificent cellar, its roof supported by noble arches so that it looked like the crypt of some forgotten priory. As the switches were turned off behind us others ahead came into use, and when we reached the floor of the first cellar four lights lit the grey stone space so that I could see every chip on walls or moulded arches. All around were hollows let into the walls, spaces which had held hundreds of casks, ankers, or barrels in their time, but which were now empty. The skipper did not wait so long as I should have liked, and I scarce had time to fix the general idea of the cellar in my mind when he hurried me on to another small iron-studded oaken door placed behind the shaft down which we had come. He opened this, and again I found a narrow passage. But there was no more darkness, for as we advanced switches were turned on, only to be turned off by old June who hobbled in the rear.

I believed that I had successfully endeavoured to keep my bearings in my mind, and if I was right we were now heading beneath the high land which rose behind the rear wall of "The House of the Three Skippers." I was interested to see that the character of the building material had now altered. Instead of grey stone the walls were mostly of those hard, thin dark red bricks known as Roman bricks, and every now and again I caught sight of tesselated work on the flooring. We descended no lower, but kept straight ahead for some yards, apparently on a very gradual rise. The powerful electric lights were fixed into the walls at every twenty yards, and the passage, about eight feet in width and seven in height, was well lit. What chiefly surprised me was the

sweetness of the atmosphere. Although I knew we must be some feet below the level of the river there seemed to be no damp, and no lack of oxygen. It was an air which was as pleasant to the lungs as fresh air itself.

When we had progressed some eighty or a hundred yards the passage turned off sharply to the right, and no sooner did I follow my leader round the corner than I heard the hum of voices, and smelt a very inviting savour of cookery.

"We shall have enough light now," said the skipper, switching off the one lamp he had turned on since we changed our course.

He was right. Ahead of me there was a bright glow of white light, and as we advanced I could see a vast chamber opening out from the passage not ten yards ahead.

As I drew near the chamber the smell of cooking became more insistent, and the voices more distinct. There were both male and female voices, I thought, and among them one, a male's, stood out from the others by its richness and depth. There was a tone in it not unlike that in the skipper's, but there was also a vibrant timbre, forceful and impressive, but, to my ears, menacing and unpleasant. I felt myself at once attracted and repelled by its mellow accents, and quickened my pace so that I passed out of the passage into the chamber on the very heels of my leader.

Then indeed I stayed my steps and looked about me.

I found myself in a noble chamber, at least ninety feet long by fifty wide. The walls were mostly of the dark red thin brick associated with Roman buildings in that district. The supporting pillars were plain Doric, and not arched, but carrying beams from summit to summit. Of these columns

there were two rows, so that the whole room seemed divided into three naves. A huge electric cooking stove stood at the farther end of the centre nave and confronted a long table which ran three-quarters of the way down the central space. Here and there rich rugs covered the tesselated floor, which was undoubtedly Roman, and the space in the nave to the left was filled with luxurious chairs and divans, while that to the right was furnished with equal profusion, but with less elegance and luxury. Two doorways on either side seemed to lead to other apartments, and I learnt afterwards that two of these were the sleeping rooms of those of the brotherhood who did not occupy a bed in "The House of the Three Skippers," one for males and one for females.

About the stove a number of women were busying themselves, and silently!

At our entrance the hum of voices ceased for a few seconds. Then there was a hail of greeting for the skipper.

I caught the direction of the voice which had fascinated me while yet in the passage and looked for its owner.

There was no need for me to guess. Hardly had the skipper returned the greetings, and Ruth and the old hag made their way into the chamber, when the skipper cried, "Rex, come and be introduced to our new recruit, Mr. John Haakon, of the *Dabchick!*"

A slim, very elegant young man of four or five and twenty came out from the group of jersey-clad men with whom he had been talking. He was not unlike the skipper, but was slighter in every way, less tall, less broad and muscular, almost feminine in the delicacy of his limbs and the refinement of his features. His eyes were very large and dark, his

nose and chin more pointed and more "spiteful-looking" than the skipper's. He might have been a younger brother spoilt by a parent's indulgent favouritism.

"So you've persuaded him," said he, in the voice which had caught my attention. "Glad to meet you, Mr. Haakon, and to learn you've thrown in your lot with us."

I shook the hand he extended to me somewhat languidly. His grip was soft, there was no sincerity in it.

"I'm afraid," said I, "it is a little premature to go so far as to say that I have joined you."

Instantly there was a hum from the group of men, and I saw their eyes turned angrily on me.

"Oh, nonsense!" cried the skipper. "Of course you'll join us. It's all right, men," he cried. "Mr. Haakon has taken the oath of secrecy, and you'll find he will be one of us before the morning. Many of you know him, and that he is not a man to break his word."

"Tha'ss right enow, master," said a voice. I looked at the group and recognised three or four old river hands, two famous helmsmen of racing yachts, and two wherrymen, well known for their skill, their daring, and their strength. "He's the right sort," said another voice. "Yew don't want to be afeared o' Master Jack, bors."

Now I liked all this. It flattered me. In a few minutes I should have been ready to say I would join. But the slender man whom the skipper had called to me stood with a nasty jeering smile on his thin lips. "Ah, yes," he said. "No doubt he will join, *before he leaves us.*"

I saw the skipper frown, and at that point Ruth stepped forward. "You forgot to mention Rex's name, Ray," she said, and on her face there was

something very like a sneer. "Mr. Haakon, this is our cousin, Mr. Rex Stafford. An expert engineer."

I bowed again, but there was no more handclasping. Somehow from the moment I saw this fellow I disliked and distrusted him. I disliked the way in which he looked at Ruth, I resented that sneer of his when he hinted that I should be very glad to join the brotherhood before I left there, for I knew that he meant that if I did not join I should never leave there alive. I resented his manner to the skipper. But I was not fool enough to show my resentment, I must find out his position in this brotherhood, what power he had, and what he could do. If it came to a rough and tumble with him I did not doubt that I could break his back in two minutes. But he was not likely to fight with his fists. Indeed I could see the flat outlines of a Webley and Scott automatic in his hip pocket. What an ass I had been not to carry mine on my person. But who on earth would think that a man on his own yacht, preparing to turn-in peaceably in the River Wensum, a little below Reedham, would want an automatic pistol!

"Well, well," sneered Stafford, "it's not an appetising topic. We'll leave it till after supper, shall we?"

"We'll leave it till I say the word," said the skipper angrily. "I am the captain of this association. You understand me, Rex!"

Stafford flushed, and, I thought, turned for sympathy to a little cluster of men who stood apart from the four blue-jerseyed stalwarts I knew and their comrades. I guessed that there was some friction here. If there was, I knew on which side my hand would fight.

Ruth stepped forward between her brother and her cousin. "Have you succeeded, Rex?" she

said. And at once the cousin brightened, and began to whisper eagerly to her.

The skipper hesitated, but I think he saw his sister's intention. "Come on, Mr. Haakon," he said. "You'd like a wash before supper, I've no doubt."

A glance passed between brother and sister so swift that it did not interrupt the subdued conversation which had commenced between the girl and the cousin. As I swung round to accompany the skipper to one of the doors in the rear of the chamber, I caught sight of the old woman who had startled me by her eerie contours and her croaking voice.

I was not less startled now that I saw her in full light. Once she may have been a fine woman. Now she was bent into a half-hoop, so that her head was not three feet from the ground. Her face was practically featureless save for the nutcracker nose and chin, her eyes, cheeks, and mouth all being massed in one blur of wrinkles. Deep in their sockets, beneath the great grey bristles of her eyebrows, two luminous pin points gleamed with a saturnine humour. They were dark and brilliant, but it was impossible to define their colour. From her bowed shoulders her arms reached out till her gnarled talons of fingers clutched the knobbed head of a staff of some peeled wood. Her dress, so far as could be seen, was nothing but a great faded black shawl of spun silk, no doubt one of the old Norwich shawls, which covered her from the drooping curve of her shoulders to her feet. A mass of unconfined grey hair flowed round her horrible face past the fleshless scrag of her neck, which showed its articulation beneath the dried patchy skin, covered with long white bristles. Her body, supported on those gnarled hands clasped over the staff, shook as she crackled in dry laughter. She saw my eyes upon her. "Hech! hech, hech, Master

Jack," she croaked. " I knowed your faa'er, I knowed yar grandfaa'er, and I knowed yar gre't grandfaa'er. They was the right sort. Mind yew act accordin' ! Hech ! Hech ! Hech ! "

" Oh, come on, Haakon ! " urged the skipper, who evidently had little patience with the old hag.

I nodded to her. " I wish ye well, I wish ye well," said she.

"I wish ye well,
Nobody can tell
How much it spell,
For heaven or hell,
When old June wish ye well!
Hech ! Hech ! Hech ! "

As I followed the skipper I saw Ruth rest her hand kindly on the old woman's, as it trembled on the staff, and more, I saw the nutcracker nose and chin dive swiftly down, till it seemed as if the hag kissed the girl's soft fingers. I went after the skipper content.

CHAPTER VI.

THE NEW RECRUIT.

THE more I saw of the subterranean establishment the more I marvelled. I had a "wash and brush-up" in a lavatory that would have done credit to any Metropolitan railway station, and this was the more surprising because I knew that my dear marsh-land people, of whom the majority of the fraternity seemed to be composed, were no sticklers for personal ablution. When we returned to the main hall I found that the great table in the central nave had been laid for a meal. Although the covers were all set on the same table, it was evident that there was a division between two parties who would eat at it, for at the upper end there were laid four covers only, then there was a vacant space of three or four feet, and then forks and knives, spoons and glasses or mugs, were set for about another dozen people. And the majority of the preparations for the feasters was less dainty and choice than that for the minority of four at the head of the table.

In one of the basket lounge chairs so familiar to Cambridge undergraduates on the more luxurious side of the hall, Rex Stafford was seated. On the further side seven or eight men were standing talking together, most of them in blue jerseys. About the electric stove, and passing hither and

thither along the central nave, were three women, while old June Rivett hovered about the casseroles, pots, and pans which stood on the great cooking installation. Ruth was not visible.

"Have an *apératif*?" asked Pettingill, as though we were at the Café de la Paix, with the sounds of the opera carriages and motors hustling the night air, "I've got Pernod, or a really good dry vermouth."

"Try vermouth and a little *fine champagne* in equal parts, Mr. Haakon," said Stafford, rising lazily from his seat. "I recommend the blend. Hi!" he called. "'*Géne, deux apératifs*, or, hold on, you'll have one won't you, Raymond?" The skipper nodded.

I did not feel easy in the presence of this man Stafford. We sat down together near the head of the great hall, and there was an uncomfortable silence which was broken by the intervention of a man who must previously have been concealed from my eyes by the more bulky men in the blue jerseys. Otherwise I could not have failed to observe him. Not an inch over five feet in height, the little man was admirably shaped, and, for his size, a most stout specimen of the *genus homo*. His shoulders were square and broader than seemed in proportion to an Englishman's eye. But no sooner did I catch sight of his round, intelligent face, his broad cheeks, his short snub nose, his brilliant black eyes, his waxed moustache and Imperial, and above all the boundless energy of his movements, than I guessed that he was a Frenchman, certainly from the south-west, probably a Gascon, possibly a Girondin. Moreover, for the briefest of moments his eyes twinkled into mine with an assurance which could only mean that he was no stranger to me. The glance was so swift as to be almost imperceptible; no doubt it was entirely so to anyone other than its recipient.

But to me it seemed to say, "I'm your friend. Don't you remember?"

I was still puzzling my brain to recall when, how, and where I could have met the little fellow when he danced up to us with his country and province's vivacity. "*V'la Messieurs,*" said he, with a bow and a smile which were *apératif* in themselves. "Dese are de cocktails of de air."

Again he flung a look at me, and danced off. I loved the little man on sight. There is something so kind, so childishly sincere, so hearty in the hospitality of the *Bordelais*; and the welcome which the server of cocktails seemed to vent elevated him to the position of my host. I love the *Bordelais,* and I loved Eugéne Potin on sight.

But I saw Stafford scowl savagely as the Frenchman spoke the word "air." I did not understand what he meant by calling the drinks the cocktails of the air, and, but for Stafford's evident discomfort at the use of the expression, I should never have troubled myself to wonder what was implied. But naturally when I saw the man to whom I had felt a sense of repulsion from the first discomposed by the genial little Frenchman's expression, I was all agog to solve the riddle. Stafford himself helped me to do so.

"Good little chap," he said, contemptuously. "But a little—well, you know what I mean—leetle eccentric, extravagant. What? But a very clever engineer. He knows more about the Gnome engine—ah, here is Ruth!" He pulled himself up, and rose. If the girl had come to us it would have saved him from an awkward minute. But instead of playing into his hand and coming to us she made her way to the stove, without turning or even looking in our direction.

So, I told myself, the little Frenchman knows

more about the aeroplane engine than most people. He is wearing a different costume from that of the other hands. By Jove! Ruth had told me that Stafford was also a clever engineer. Could it be that besides a submarine the brotherhood, whose prisoner I was, also boasted of an aeroplane? If so, why were both these expensive and uncommon means of transit necessary—and why did Stafford wish to conceal from me that he and the Frenchman were aeroplane experts—if they were?

Despite myself my eyes followed the dancing figure of the Frenchman. I saw him mingle with the blue-jerseyed East Anglians and I saw him joke and chaff with the sons of the river and marsh who looked like giants beside him, and I knew that the little "furriner" had found the way to the honest hearts of my fellow countrymen, hard though that way is for anyone but a native of the country, and a "man," to find. It raised the little man in my estimation enormously. There is no keener judge of a man, no shrewder critic of a "gentleman" than the East Anglian, who has not been spoilt by the County Council schools. I also noticed that while the blue jerseys fraternised with him heartily, with great good humour even without condescension—an extraordinary tribute to the Frenchman's merit—more than one of them looked askance at Stafford now and then, and expressed his dislike in the manner most approved of his class.

What I am afraid of is that all these little matters may seem very insignificant. But, if they do, it is only because the readers do not know what is coming. I do, you see. A secret never before published is to be revealed as the events develop themselves, a secret which might have brought an Armageddon, and embroiled all Europe, the Balkan States, Turkey in Europe and Asia, India, and practically the world,

in one horrible war. And remember that it was only by an incident, of less importance on the surface than the brandy and vermouth cocktails, that this horror was averted so thoroughly that scarce a score of English people living then ever knew anything of it.

"Here's to the new recruit," said Stafford, with a smile with an edge to it, "which cut much like a sneer."

I almost choked at the pledge, for I was drinking the appetising mouthful as he spoke. "I'll trouble you to remember that I am not a re——" I began. But in the midst of my indignation Ruth came tripping past between me and the man who had offended me, and I saw that her eyes rested on me appealingly. I called myself a fool then for my indignation, for I knew that if she asked me to join the brotherhood utterly I should do so without a moment's hesitation. This being so, it was mere hypocrisy to affect anger at being called a recruit.

"The new recruit," said the skipper, bowing. "Here, Ruth, taste a glass of vermouth to the new recruit."

The Frenchman had left the bottles of spirit and wine on the table, and the skipper poured out a liqueur glass of the dry vermouth for his sister. For an instant, just for an instant, I thought she questioned me with her eyes. I could make no reply to her look but the one that was in my heart, that I was hers to live and die for, hers to serve with my heart's blood, or, a more difficult matter, in ignominy and shame.

"The new recruit," she said, and the words were so sweet upon her lips that I longed to go through any further ritual that was necessary to enrol me as a full member then and there. Again she let her eyes rest on mine, and now there was no

inquiry in them, but, I thought, a grateful satisfaction. Is it not strange that we two, who had, as yet, spoken no word to each other alone, no word other than the merest commonplaces, should yet feel ourselves apart from the rest of the society; that, loving sister as she was, Ruth should have felt a greater dependence upon me, and a greater anxiety for me than on and for her brother! There is no such mystery as love! Science may, perhaps, one day ascertain the origin of life, may be able to make protoplasm live. But science will never solve the riddle of the love of a man for a woman, and will certainly never be able to create it. If, as is certain, life is a puzzle, love is a harder one, and will take longer to solve.

But I must not make my love for Ruth a tedious puzzle.

"Hang it all!" I cried, in my frenzy, as I seized the vermouth and *fine champagne* and poured out another *petit verre* of the two mixed, "I'll pledge my new brothers, my fellow workers," though what the dickens we were to work at I did not know.

Pettingill leapt to his feet, his face aglow with pleasure. "You will?" he cried. "You will join us without further delay?"

"I'll join you and be faithful to you, and work for you!" I cried, still enthused with the passion for Ruth which had swept through my system. "I'm with you."

Pettingill grasped my hand. "Good man!" he cried. "Fred was right. You're a sportsman."

A bell rang through the room and the scent of the food became stronger. The three or four women were bearing smoking dishes to the table, hot plates, decanters and jugs, and bottles in wicker baskets.

"I think, dear," said Ruth to her brother, "supper is ready."

The skipper sat at the head of the table, with me on his right and Stafford on his left. To my intense delight Ruth took her seat next to me.

As we sat down there was a sound of footsteps at the entrance to the chamber from the passage, and Fred Banham and Bob Baldry came in hurriedly. They saluted Ruth and took their places at the table.

What surprised me even more than the excellence of the fare was the orderly and really admirable manner of those "below the salt," if I may use the expression. There was no grasping eagerness, no "piggishness" to be seen in any man or woman seated. Old June took her broth apart at a table in a corner, and mumbled the pottage. But the others, men and women, were as well behaved as ay, and better than any lot of diners at a middle-class restaurant in town. Eugéne sat at the lower end of the table, and even he, the vivacious little *Bordelais*, had subdued his table manners to the English standard to an extent which I could never have credited without having seen it. The impression I gathered was that all the members of the association were subdued by some personality so great that they had become *automata* in the things in which individuality was not needed. I looked at the skipper and saw his eyes sweeping from end to end of the table.

But I doubted if the excellence of the behaviour was due to him. I attributed it rather to the charm which Ruth seemed to exercise over all with whom she came in contact. I was pleased to persuade myself that the training I saw—for anyone who knew the marsh and river folk and their normal manners, and saw how the members of the blue-jerseyed gang held themselves at table in the subterranean chamber could not but admit that the training must have been difficult and prolonged—was the training of love and not of fear.

As for the meal, I will not make my readers' mouths water by a description of this first supper. Later, perhaps, I may detail the wonders of that kitchen and larder. Here I will content myself by saying that the cooking was worthy of the material, and to whisper that there was evidence that if the marsh-folks' manners were improved, their reluctance to abide by the close season laws remained unaltered. For I rarely tasted a better pheasant in my life than that from which came the leg for which I asked. And we were in May!

The wines were as good as the food, but I fancy my last glass of port must have been "doctored," for although I drank in great moderation I recollect nothing of that night, or morning, after I sipped half that last glass, and when I woke the next day there was a heaviness about me which was quite unusual.



CHAPTER VII.

PARTIAL REVELATIONS.

I WOKE with a start to find myself lying in a cosy hammock, with feather bed, blankets, and sheets, swinging from wall to wall of a square chamber which I guessed was one leading off the great hall. There were five or six more hammocks swung about me, but mine was the only one occupied. I was not surprised to find that the only light was that furnished by the electric globes hanging from the joists or rafters, for I woke in full possession of all my faculties, despite a little heaviness to which I have referred in the last chapter, and I remembered that I was in subterranean quarters. By my side stood the skipper, and I imagine that he had roused me by shaking me.

"Well," he said, with a laugh, "you've had a good sleep. Lunch is ready, and after that we'll talk business."

I looked at my watch, which had been fastened to the hammock, and saw that it was past noon. Then I remembered that last glass of port. "Hang it," I said, "I don't think you need have hocussed me."

"Hocussed you?" asked the skipper, with an air of surprise. "I don't know what you mean. But get up and come to lunch. You'll find a bath

through there." He pointed to a narrow opening at one corner of the chamber. "There is work for you to do."

He showed his tact by leaving me at this point. I was clad in my own pyjamas, doubtless brought from my yacht by Fred Banham or Bob Baldry, and saw my clothes lying on a wooden seat against one of the walls.

I slipped from the hammock, and all the time my memory was reminding me of what had taken place the night before.

I remembered everything, I realised that I had pledged myself to join this association whatever it was, I recollected Rex Stafford, and the genial little Frenchman, and above all I remembered Ruth. But for the last I might have made an effort to escape from my pledge to join the brotherhood. But the bondage in which the lovely girl had bound me on the previous night held me as thrall in the morning as when I had taken the pledge of fidelity for love of her.

A cold sponge and a shower bath (really, I thought, these subterranean dwellers saw to their comfort !) brisked me up so that I felt fit for anything. I was all aglow when I made my way into the great hall, and found a diminished company to bid me good morning.

Ruth was there, June Rivett, Fred Banham and Bob Baldry, and I saw the little Frenchman expatiating on some point of the *cuisine* to three or four women who were busied about the electric cooking-stove. But Rex Stafford and most of the blue jerseys were absent.

Ruth greeted me pleasantly, and, while her brother's attention was drawn off by Fred Banham, she whispered—"Don't be angry because you were drugged. There was a reason for it. It was for your sake."

Her superb eyes held mine, and I knew she was true. Lord! What it means to a man in my state to feel that the woman he loves cares for his welfare, that she desires to protect him!

A meal of fried eels, tench, roasted green plover, and red legs (alas, for the close season!) and two brace of the finest ringed wood-pigeons I ever saw on toast was served to us in the seats of the mighty; and although my head was still a little heavy from the soporific with which, I felt certain now, I had been dosed, I did full justice to the excellence of the fare. The pigeons especially, as I knew of old, had been fatted on the springing crowfoot of the marsh, and were exquisite, with just a squeeze of lemon and a dash of Nepaul pepper.

The coffee I was certain came from Holland, as well as the white curaçoa with which we put a proper finish to the *déjeuner*.

I thought that Ruth was a little distrait. After she had whispered to me she seemed to be frightened by her action. Yet I was encouraged by the sidelong shafts which her eyes shot at me now and then. I told myself that she was afraid to let her brother know that she was interested in me, but that she *was* interested in me none the less.

"I'll get some exceptional cigars, Haakon," said Pettingill, rising and going to a little side door in the wall close to that from which I had emerged from my sleeping chamber.

When he left me Ruth drew apart. I fancy she imagined that he quitted the great hall to see if she approached me. I was looking at her back, as she talked to Fred Banham a few yards away, when I started at a hoarse croaking wheeze close beside me, and turned to find old June Rivett cackling at my elbow.

"Hech! hech! hech!"

"You'll j'ine 'em now, Master Jack, and good luck to ye! But mind this! You may take yar oath and you may take yar oath to the men folk, the fool men folk. But you'll be har sarvant. Bind yarself to the men, but sarve the dear gal. Sarve her faithful and true."

"Sarve my darlin' well and true,
June shall kape an eye on you,
Sarve her, love her, win her trust,
June will guard ye both, or bust.
Danger hover close about,
Doan't ye let that put ye out.
Traitor plots as traitor will,
Let the warmin plot his fill—
June will save ye both from ill.
Traitor think the game is played,
Iggerant that he's betrayed.
Traitor's cruelty cause hate
As he'll l'arn when tha'ss too late.
Traitor's man ha' been desaved
He'll sune warn ye what's ta do.
Traitor's man may be belayved
Same as me and same as you.
Trust the Franchman when he spake
Spake he will and that right sune.
Trust that Fred and Bob's awake,
Trust Miss Ruth, and trust ole June.
June will help ye when 'tis time,
Time to love and time to act.
You alone can stay the crime,
You alone, and tha'ss a fact!"

"Hech! Hech! Hech! Lord! What a sight o' rubbish I ha' been a talkin', hain't I, Master Jack? But you want to pay regard to it all the same. There's love and trayson, hate and crime a workin'. Sune I'll know more and sing ye another song. Shall I, bor? Hech! Hech! Hech! Here come the guv'nor. Fare ye well, fare ye well." The old hag croaked and thrust her head up from her hands,

which were, as usual, folded on her staff, till her pin-point eyes glittered humorously at me. "Fare ye well, fare ye well," she whispered below her breath, "and send Rex Stafford quick to——"

"Try these," said the skipper, offering me a fifty box of Romeo and Juliets of the 1900 year. "That's all right, June," he added. "You can go."

"I thank ye kindly, master," said the old witch, grovelling with her chin replaced on her hands. "I wuz a havin' a word or two with our young master. I knowed his faa'er, his gran'faa'er, and his gre't gran'faa'er, and I fare as if I was bound to mardle a bit along o' him." The old woman "bopped" and sidled off with an appearance of the greatest humility. Yet as she hobbled along I thought I heard a faint "Hech! hech! hech!" as though in derision of the abrupt manner in which the skipper had dismissed her.

"Now," said the skipper, when we were both alight and again sipping at our coffee and liqueurs, "to business."

"Right," I said, bracing myself up to hear something terrible either to a patriot or a peaceful, law-abiding citizen.

"Of course," said the skipper, "you've spotted that it's smuggling on a large scale?"

"I suspected it," I said. "But, hang it, man, how can smuggling pay in these days? how can it pay for all this luxury, this number of hands, this wonderful retreat, the enormous dynamo which you must have working somewhere, the submarine, and a hundred other things? Why, the submarine would not hold enough tobacco and spirits to make its expenses for the trip."

The skipper laughed, as he knocked off the ash of his cigar. "Of course not," he said. "We

don't smuggle tobacco and spirits or wine for profit. That department is only for our own pleasure. Saccharine is the stuff; there's a duty of a sovereign a pound on it—and a pound can be packed very tight. We brought in twenty tons last night, and shall make over forty thousand on it, clear. Now," he added, as I showed signs of wishing to interrupt, "so far there has been little risk, either in bringing the stuff up or in distribution. We load the pleasure wherry from the *Otter*, and take cargoes here and there, unloading at some point on the rivers or broads where a road runs close to the water. There is Acle Bridge, St. Olave's, Cantley, oh! a dozen places. Here you could be of great assistance to us. You are known about the waters. Your cutter would never be suspected. You could take a couple of tons of the stuff up to one of our motor lorries or horse waggons and discharge without any fear of arousing suspicion. I tell you plainly, I have imagined that once or twice our wherry has been watched. And why? Because, although I am a member of the yacht club, I am not so well known about the waters as you are. There are one or two side shows—side methods of profit—which I will not trouble you with now. The first thing is to instruct you that your chief duty will be to carry cargo for us to a specified point on the waters. There you will be met by our road agents and will be spared all trouble in unloading. My men will see to that. All I want you to do at first is to sail your craft where I shall tell you to sail her. But, first, I suppose you had better sign the scroll, and enrol yourself formally as one of us. You said you were willing to do so last night."

Ruth was tripping daintily about the hall, and for a moment I let my eyes rest upon her. She

happened to look at me when I was watching her, and to my intense delight, I saw the skin of her neck flush to the backs of her ears.

Probably I should have enrolled myself without any difficulty even without that inducement; but with that flush setting my blood galloping, I cried, "I'm ready when you like! But you must not keep me for the velvet glove work only. You'll let me come aboard the *Otter* with you now and then?"

"Oh, Lord, yes, if you wish it!" said the skipper. "And, to be frank, I shall be glad of you. I am a native of the rivers and marshlands, but have spent my life at school, Cambridge and London, until recently, and have lost touch with the men; and, to be frank with you, I believe you'd have more control over my chief boatmen, Fred Banham and Bob Baldry, than I have myself. For a long time Fred has begged me to try to get you to join. He thinks a tremendous lot of you, my dear Haakon, and"—the skipper raised his liqueur glass with an "air,"—"I am sure that I am not surprised at it now that I have had the pleasure of making your acquaintance."

We were sitting in the more luxurious nave of the great hall, that to the left going from the entrance to the stove, the side on which were the doors leading to the superior sleeping quarters. And there was no one within hearing. But I saw the little Frenchman whom Stafford had called "'Géne," hovering about in the further "nave," and ever and anon throwing glances in my direction as if he wished to communicate with me.

I did not quite understand what he was doing in that galley.

"I suppose," I said to the skipper, as he spread

out a scroll of parchment before me, "that most of your men are natives of these parts, and the women, other, of course, than your sister, are their wives or sisters?"

"Yes," replied the skipper. "You see, it is essential for us that our men shall be thoroughly conversant with both the rivers and the roads. Fred Banham and Bob Baldry know the depth of every inch of the river at every hour of the tide between Yarmouth and Cantley. But for that it would be impossible to run the *Otter* with safety. They were essential, and I have found that your people won't work well with hands from other counties. You are a race-bound people here, if ever there was one."

I bowed. I took his complaint for a compliment. I like a man to be true to his blood.

"Then," I asked, innocently enough, as it seemed, "what is the Frenchman doing here?"

"Oh!" cried the skipper, a little uneasily, "he's not my man, you know. He's Stafford's. His branch of work is entirely distinct from mine, although sometimes he comes aboard the *Otter* with us." He hesitated for a moment. Then he said, "After all, I don't believe in trusting by halves. Have you signed?" He looked at the parchment scroll, and saw my name written there with the ink not yet dry. "And you took the oath of secrecy last night. Now you'd better take that of the brotherhood. It is all nonsense, of course, but I could not excuse myself to the others if I admitted you as a member without all formalities being observed. You know your own people better than I do, and you will understand that this is so."

I laughed. I did understand that any irregularity in my favour would be intensely resented by the

blue jerseys other than those who knew me well. A silly form of oath was recited to me, and I subscribed to it in written shape, and uttered the prescribed words.

"Stafford," said the skipper, when this was all finished, "is our aeroplane expert, and the Frenchman, Eugéne Potin, was engaged by me at Bordeaux to teach him all that he had learnt from the French airmen. He was an assistant of Védrine's in the great aeroplanist's early days, and, as a matter of fact, knows more about the thing than Stafford. But I had to have an Englishman as head of that department, and really Rex has come on wonderfully well."

It was as I had suspected, but I was more puzzled than ever. I could understand how the *Otter* managed to escape observation if she only came up the river at night time, and in the months when the cockneys and local yachtsmen are few, but how an aeroplane could disport itself without being seen, and where she could land near "The House of the Three Skippers" was a mystery to me. I wondered if the skipper would enable me to solve it. It seemed that he was a believer in the doctrine of "in for a penny, in for a pound," and that he did not sympathise with half confidences.

"I may as well explain more fully," said he. "When we acquired the house first we had no notion of making such a big thing of it as it has become. We meant to run our submarine and use the boathouse and the timber-yard as a feint. The cellars were of no use, for everyone knew of them. Then Ruth found old June half dead in a dilapidated cottage at the rear, on the top of the high land, you know, and brought her in and nursed her. The old girl, though she seems to hate most people,

took to Ruth, and she told her about the old Roman works at the back of the house underneath the hill, which she and her family seem to have kept a record of for unknown years. That gave me the idea of making a much bigger thing of it. I bought the hill at the back, and two or three hundred acres of land, as well as a couple of marshes. On the top of the hill there is a large clearing in the midst of a thick wood, a clearing of level grass which was easily converted into a smooth lawn. Here we have a hangar, and every convenience for the rise or descent of an aeroplane. You will understand that, although an aeroplane cannot carry sufficient weight to be of much use in the transport service, she is an excellent look-out, or spy. The *Otter* rarely risks a trip before the *Buzzard*, as Rex calls his plane, has had a look round. Potin is the inventor of a silencer for the exhaust of the engine, and at night the monoplane can fly without danger of being discovered. In the daytime it is equally safe for Rex to take his observations from her, for at a thousand feet up no one can identify him, and the *Buzzard* to look at is just like any other monoplane which comes about here. The very boldness of the thing is a safety. No one would think that a monoplane flying openly in the daytime could be about any illegal work. It is not as if they were uncommon now. That's the beauty of it. Rex crosses to Holland, looks about him there, comes back and watches carefully to see if any of the Navy submarines are near—you know that a submarine can be spotted from an aeroplane much more easily than from a ship—because it might be awkward to run up against one, and be forced to explain our *raison d'être*. He can take messages, too, and even, if necessary, can carry a hundredweight or so of contraband. Oh! the *Buzzard* is

well worth what she has cost. Rex is off, now, on our business. And when he returns I hope to hear of a venture which will prove extremely profitable."

Once more I hesitated. I had, it was true, taken two oaths, subscribed myself as a member of this association; but still, unless I were positively assured that this was merely a scheme to get the better of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and was not in any way connected with the designs of a certain foreign power and its shameful British agents, I was prepared to lose my life rather than be of any assistance. I knew that it would be easy enough to hoodwink Fred and Bob and their fellows. I determined that *I* would not be hoodwinked.

"See here, Mr. Pettingill," I said, putting the question for the last time, "will you give me your word of honour that you are not in any way associated with a foreign country to the injury of England?"

Pettingill looked me straight in the face, and I knew that the flush which rose to his face was the flush of indignation. "It is very difficult to prove to you," he said. Then he rose and went to one of the side rooms for an instant. When he came back he bore a slip of paper in his hands. It was a receipt from the Navy League for a sum which made me gasp. "Does that help?" he asked.

I shook his hand. I was satisfied that he was a true Englishman. "Right," I said, "I am with you then. A little wholesale smuggling appeals to me by the sport of it, especially if the profits are spent as shown by that receipt."

"You'll be no loser," laughed the skipper. "Your

cutter and yourself will be worth a couple of thousand a year to us. And probably your share will come to twice as much."

"The dickens it will!" I cried.

But, as I saw the uneasy glances of the little Frenchman, I said to myself that, although I was satisfied that the skipper and his men, bar one, were patriots for all their smuggling propensities, I would not trust Rex Stafford till I had seen more of him—and perhaps not then.

"Now," said the skipper, as he examined the scrolls to see if the ink were dry, and rolled them up on finding that it was; "what would you like to do? You are at liberty to go out on your own boat if you like. She has been brought up near our boathouse. Or you can see round the grounds, if Ruth can find time to take you. I must prepare my plans for distributing the saccharine we brought in last night."

My heart leapt up with delight. I never thought that I should have a chance of being with Ruth the greater part of the afternoon.

"If Miss Pettingill does not mind," I said, "I should much like to see over the premises. It must be most interesting."

"Oh, she'll be pleased, I know," said the skipper. "She—— But it would not be fair to say anything about that," he added with a grin. And I was left to wonder if perchance Ruth had expressed any opinion favourable upon me before my introduction to her in the boathouse; for that she knew me by sight previously I was convinced.

The skipper rose and approached his sister, and I was pleased to see that she flushed again as he spoke to her. Her eyes turned in my direction, fell

when they caught my own upon them, and again the flush rose and died.

"She will be pleased," said the skipper, returning.

Ruth looked acquiescence. Close behind her I saw Fred and the Frenchman hovering, whilst the old hag stood quivering on her staff, her head wobbling, but her eyes twinkling with encouragement.

"Will you come with me, Mr. Haakon?" asked my darling and my love.

"You know——" I began, with too intense fervour. I checked myself. "I shall be grateful for your kindness," I said.

We were moving towards the passage when Fred Banham ranged up alongside Ruth. "Arternune, Master Jack," said he, cavalierly, over his shoulder, to me. Then, addressing himself to Ruth, he said: "Might I come along o' ye if ye playse, Miss Ruth? There's raysons why I ax. Ye see I ha' knowed Master Jack since he was a boy. I tote him ta swim, row, haul halyard and sheet, and steer, and there's parties as don't altogether love him as a may say."

Ruth threw a quick look at me, and hushed my old friend. She began to whisper to him eagerly, and walked swiftly ahead of me. It was a sufficient hint that she did not desire my proximity just then.

I lagged behind and found Eugéne Potin hurrying up past me. "*Et moi aussi s'il vous plait, M'selle.*" he cried. "I take the great interest in the young English gentleman. You go to the hill, is it not? Hein? I tell heem what it is, and who? Hein?"

Fred was whispering eagerly, and I saw her face cloud with a stern gravity which was new to me.

"Of course," she said, "both you and Fred may come if my brother does not want you."

She withdrew to one of the side rooms, no doubt her private chamber.

Fred came close to me. "Ha'e ye j'ined, Master Jack?" he asked. "Reelly and truly and all proper?"

I nodded. "Thank God for that," said my old friend. "You're just the man I wanted. The guv'nor fare too sorft for some on us. And Miss Ruth want a man as well as a gennleman to look arter her. I'll tell ye more later." He fell back as Potin came dancing up again. The little Frenchman gave a melodramatic glance about him. "No one can 'ear," he whispered. "M'sieur? Do you love M. Stafford? It is not my desire to be what you call *curieux!* Hein? I think you do not love him. And he, he do not love you at all. But you love old England, and *l'entente cordiale!* Hein? You are a patriot. You laike beautiful France, is it not? And you love your *patrie.*"

"Yes," I replied, truly. "I have met with great kindness from Frenchmen, and I am fond of the lovely land. Certainly, too, I am no little Englander."

Eugéne lowered his voice and hissed out: "Then it is for you and me, and perhaps Fred, to watch this M. Stafford. This so brusque M. Stafford! Who speaks to me, to me, Eugéne Potin, the friend of Vedrines, as to a dog! Eef you sail again about your *marais,* your marshlands in your yacht, listen for voices of the throat. Do you comprehend *Allemand?* It is good if you do." I nodded. I was a fair German scholar and could understand it and speak it. "Ahi! It is well. Enough!" cried Potin.

The little man gave me a glance of such intensity

and intelligence that it was worthy of a Melville actor. He folded his arms, tossed and nodded his head three or four times, and strode off a few yards as Ruth reappeared now attired most daintily and becomingly in a yachting costume of navy blue with white piping and facings.

She led the way to the exit.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE FIRST FIGHT.

IMMEDIATELY we entered the passage I saw that we were not to go by the long way by which we had entered. A sharp turn to the left led, a few yards off the long subterranean passage, to another steep shaft in which was an iron staircase circling round the central support. Up this Ruth went, and, as she ascended, Fred and Potin both stayed behind and whispered to me. "You want ta keep yar eyes open, Master Jack." said Fred. "That Stafford chap he's arter Miss Ruth or I'm a blind old fool, and she oan't hev nothin' to say to him. I see him look somethin' wicious at you larse night and if he can get hold o' the gal and do you a mischief at the same time that would be as swate as honey to the man. And I doubt we shall find him where we're agoin'."

"*Monsieur*," urged Potin. "Fred speak true! Vary true. You must clean your eyes! Hein! We, Fred and me, we are gallant men, and would die for our young mistress. But you are the gentleman, and have a strong arm. Soon you will be a leader among us. You will help to protect her."

I seized Fred's brawny knuckles in one hand and the Frenchman's plump little fist in the other.

"I'm as ready to die for her as either of you," I said.

"I knowed ye was," cried Fred.

I was just in time to prevent Potin from leaping up and clasping his arms round my neck. "*M'sieur!*" he whispered, even in the bitterness of defeat, "*à la mort! Hein?*"

By this time Ruth had got some way ahead. The staircase was quite thirty feet in height and probably more, though I never measured it either then or thereafter. Anyway the sufficient fact was that she was at a considerable distance from us, her servants, who had just vowed ourselves as her protectors "*à la mort.*"

It came, I think, as a surprise to all of us when a beam of daylight illuminated the entire shaft. "Blarm!" cried Fred, "up you go! Gord save her till we git there!"

Little Potin had not waited to cry, but darted up the circular stairway with the agility of an anthropoid ape. I was after him as fast as I could go, and Fred brought up the rear. The old man had lost more of his agility than of his strength.

My long legs, taking two steps at a time even on the circle, caught up to Potin before he reached the top. I could not pass him. There was no room for two abreast. And, as I gave a cursory glance at the elaborate trap-door which shut the shaft off from the open air, my blood was set aflame to madness. "Ruth!" I heard a voice cry; "you have come to me then! Of course I hoped you would! You have come, and all my fears are baseless. Oh, my darling, if you knew how I have longed for this minute!"

I heard a scuffle, a stifled scream, a struggle of feet on the earth above the opening of the shaft from which I leapt to emerge. "Ah, dearest!" said the voice I knew and hated. "Don't be so prudish! I love you, and you love me or you would not have come to me now. You got my message, and came."

"I got no message," I heard a smothered voice declare. "You coward, let me go! Let me go! I hate you! Oh, how I hate you!"

"You'll soon love me," responded the hated voice with a chill callousness which struck the blood from my heart. "Come, come. Don't struggle. Can't you see it is useless. Besides, why did you come if you did not——"

I had managed to leap past Potin at the very mouth of the open trap-door. I saw Stafford with his arms round Ruth, bearing her away, lifting her from the ground and carrying her in the direction of a shed which looked like a hangar, and which would have surprised me at any other moment, situated as it was in the midst of a clearing in the centre of a well-timbered wood. I noted this more fully afterwards. At the time, I only saw Ruth struggling in this man's arms, a coat, which the scoundrel had evidently discarded, wrapped round her mouth to stifle her cries, her limbs writhing in his grasp. Even in the excitement of the moment I noticed that, though he was no giant, he could not but be a man with pith in his bones, for Ruth was no baby weight and he carried her without drag of shoulder or halt of leg.

I got my blue for the hundred yards at Cambridge, but I don't think I made such a pace in the inter-varsity sports as I did over the distance between the mouth of the shaft and the spot where I caught up with the villain. He heard the threat of my racing feet, and turned before I reached him, turned and dropped Ruth callously on the ground as though she had been a sack of ballast. His eyes flashed at me, and I still believe that there was a glint of humour in them. I have never denied Rex Stafford the gift of humour. I believe he had it in a high degree. I believe, too, that he overrated his un-

doubted athletic prowess and underrated mine. He knew, I learnt afterwards, that I was a running blue. He did not know that I had represented my university as a heavy-weight boxer, or that I rowed six in my college eight which won the Thames at Henley, being only beaten by Leander for the Grand. I was one of those men who never look so "beefy" as they are. I daresay Stafford did not give me more than eleven stone and a half. But I brought down the scales at thirteen in rowing costume.

I still feel hot when I remember our first encounter. I can use my fists, and stand up in fair fight to most amateurs. But I never learnt any of the tricks of scientific muscle exercise such as are known to the Japanese and the Icelanders. I ran on my enemy with a shout, and in an instant I found myself flying head over heels, and rolling over and over along the grass sward which stretched about me. But I had not lost my activity. I was on my feet again before Stafford could reach me. He had done the trick with a catch, a hold, and a heave, and he was mightily pleased with himself. He forgot that a strong man who has been caught once in this fashion is not likely to be caught again.

But for the ignominy of my defeat I might have consented to accept the assistance of Fred, who now came hurtling up. Potin held back, with a look of appeal at me. I understood the little fellow. Stafford was his real master, they two were the airmen of the society. Had it been a question of life or death, or of Ruth's honour or dishonour, I am confident that Eugéne would have attacked his superior readily. But he judged rightly that Fred and I were sufficient to master this villain, and he held aloof with the appeal in his eyes.

"Get back, Fred!" I cried savagely, as I prepared

to meet the onset of Stafford. "Get back. I can manage this swine without your help."

"Try," said Stafford, diving and endeavouring to catch one of my ankles in his grasp while he reached for a wrist with his other hand.

I leapt back, and, before he could rise again to an upright position, I had caught one of his wrists in mine and was twisting it with all my might. I heard him curse and groan, and I saw his right hand—it was his left I had succeeded in capturing—fly to his breast. Out flashed a knife, and I knew that I had to fight for my very life as well as for my honour. I did not believe that Ruth was any longer in danger. I was certain that old Fred would be a match for Stafford after I had done with him, or he with me. But I had my honour to recover. I had been flung into the air like a child of twelve, had made the most ridiculous appearance that ever a man did who was charging to rescue his lady and his love, and I burned to put myself right in Ruth's estimation and in my own.

The treacherous scoundrel stabbed at my throat with his knife—it was too long for a bowie, rather like a carving knife with a very broad and strong back, shaped like a bowie, but too narrow in proportion to its length for the beloved steel of the Californian pioneers. Whatever it was, it was a formidable weapon.

I screwed round his left wrist till I saw a bead of sweat come out on his forehead. He wrenched and wrenched in a desperate effort to free himself. Then he swung round so that the strain of my grip was less, although I still held him tight.

As swift as the dart of a heron's beak on an eel his right flashed down on me with the knife. I dodged as well as I could, but was unable to avoid the blow altogether. The edge of the blade caught my left

shoulder, but in the heat of the struggle, I did not even know that I was touched. I determined that the thing to do was to get to close quarters. With a sudden jerk upon his left arm I brought him floundering to me, and in an instant I had my arms round him, outside his own arms. I could feel the jab-jab with which he tried to injure me with his knife, but my blood was now so hot with the fight that I felt no pain, merely an irritation like that caused by the bites of a fly.

I saw and felt his feet kick out in jiu-jitsu strategy. But I was not again to be caught by that scientific system. I determined it should be might against might, manhood against manhood, apart from any fancy trickery such as, no doubt, appealed to men like Stafford.

Suddenly, I threw my weight forward while holding his arms and body so close to myself that he could not step back. Backwards and backwards I thrust his shoulders. He was a smaller, slighter man than I, shorter, and certainly two stone or more less in weight. Probably he did not weigh more than ten stone or so. At any other time I should have felt ashamed to exert myself against a man so much under my weight. But this was no hour for an excess of chivalry. I did not think of my life for a moment. I thought that Ruth had seen me discomfited by a man four stone less in weight than I, and I must show her that my discomfiture was the result of a trick, a trick such as a Norfolk gentleman would disdain to use.

Backwards and backwards I pressed him. I felt his right hand, with the knife in it, jerking, jerking, ever and ever more feebly. I saw his head, pressed against my chin, go back and back, and his face grow whiter and whiter till it was a bluish white. And still I pressed him back while I kept his legs forward.

There was only one end to it unless he surrendered —a broken back. Well, at that moment I would have broken his back and exulted to feel the crack of his spine.

Then I felt the knife drop. "Stop!" he gasped, with great difficulty. "Stop! I am beaten!"

"Pick up that knife!" I shouted to old Fred. I saw no reason why he should not do so much. After all, our fight of man to man had ended now. I had shown him that an athlete once bitten by the jiu-jitsu tricks, and therefore twice shy, could, if he were as agile as strong, get the better of a mere trickster.

With one effort I twisted the man round and lowered him to the ground on his face. I had his wrists in my hand now, and swung them together.

"Got a bit of line?" I cried out to Fred.

"Why, you know I allust carry a bit o' spunyarn in my parkut, Master Jack," said Fred, reproachfully. "But you ha'e wholly done him up, hain't ye, and praise Gord for it! The nasty wiper! Here ye be!"

He held out about a fathom of stout, sticky, sweet-smelling spunyarn—at least, it is always sweet-smelling to me—and I had this hitched and knotted round Stafford's wrists in less than thirty seconds.

Then, with a great heave of a sigh, I rose to my feet.

Ruth was standing a few yards apart, her eyes aglow with something which I was not sure how to interpret. Now that the fight was over I felt a bit of a fool. After all, what right had I to interfere? I was a novice, a new hand in this brotherhood, and I had just perpetrated a most violent assault on one of the leaders, on the man who was the chief aeroplanist of the association. I wondered what the skipper would say to that. Against that I had

the recollection of Ruth's struggle with the man's rudeness, and I knew in my heart that, whatever happened to me at the hands of my new comrades, I should always feel pleased that I had torn her from that embrace which befouled her.

I left Stafford lying on his face, with his nose in the dirt. I thought it might do him good, and bring home to him a sense of his own worth. Then I turned to Ruth, and my shoulders drooped. I felt shame-faced. After all, she had not actually appealed to me for help. It might be that her resistance was merely maiden modesty, and if so, what had I done? That old Fred was satisfied, indeed in a state of extreme delight, did not matter if I had offended Ruth. Stafford was a "furriner," so far as I knew, and old Fred would exult in the victory of a son of the marshes over any "blarmed furriner," irrespective of the reasons for the fight and the results of the issue of it.

I slouched towards Ruth, and I felt that I was slouching.

"I am awfully sorry to have shown such—such violence in your presence, Miss Pettingill," I said, very sheepishly.

For a moment Ruth said nothing. My heart went somewhere down to the soles of my yachting shoes. "I—I didn't think you wished him to—to carry you away like that," I urged. "I suppose I've made an ass of myself, and butted in where I wasn't wanted!"

Still the girl said no word, made no sign, but for that burning look of hers, that burning glow from her eyes which seemed to scorch me to the very soul.

I could not endure it until I knew what it meant. I turned and looked about me.

Fred had taken up the knife, and was standing over the prone man, chuckling gently, and very

genially, it seemed to me. Behind Stafford, out of his sight, little Potin was executing a dance of triumph, flinging his limbs about with the exuberance of a true son of the Garonne. He snapped his fingers and kept kissing his hand to me and then to Ruth. The little man seemed to have plenty of bonhomie, but devilish little discretion, I thought.

"I apologise most—most humbly," I said, again raising my eyes to that maddening glow from the girl's. "I hope you will forgive me one day. I—I will leave you now if you will order me where to go. I am yours, to do your bidding if you will permit me to make atonement in that way. I didn't understand." I was beginning to feel bitter. After all, I had fought at some risk to my life because I believed that Stafford was carrying Ruth away against her will.

I put it down to my disappointment at her attitude, that at this stage I began to feel faint, very weary, and tired of life.

"If you have no orders," I said, forcing myself to speak again, "I will go back to tell your brother all."

"What's that?" came the girl's voice like a flash of lightning. "What's that! Jack, oh, Jack! Are you hurt?"

"I can't do more than that," I continued, in a sleepy sort of way. I didn't know what the dickens had come over me. Perhaps I'd been drugged again at breakfast. Well, if I had been, I had done a pretty bit of work before the drug acted. "Fred will attend you, and you will set that man at liberty. Oh, I am sorry, sorry!"

And then, to my own intense surprise, I began to whimper like a silly brat of eight. I fell upon my knees and felt something tepid and sticky

smearing my arm and my body. "I'm awfully sorry!" I repeated.

"Fred!" cried Ruth, as she flung herself beside me. "He's hurt! Oh, be quick! Oh, Jack! Jack! My champion! How could you have mistaken my look! Only I could not talk just then. My heart was too full. I should have cried, have *howled* if I had tried to talk. Fred, are you never coming? He'll bleed to death. Oh, thank God, I know something of wounds."

She flung herself on me with an energy which might have alarmed me more than the menace of Stafford's strength. She tore off my coat, and opened my flannel shirt. I was a bit dazed, from loss of blood, I suppose; but I saw enough to know that it was not a pretty sight when she disclosed the sleeve and breast of my shirt through which Stafford's knife had twice found flesh, without my knowing it.

Up till then the flow of blood had not been very visible. It had trickled down my arm, and soaked my flannel shirt, but it had not shown much on my jacket. When Ruth laid open the latter and exposed the flannel to the air, the thing looked a great deal nastier than it really was.

I heard, dimly, Potin cry, "*Mon Dieu!* If he die, so shall——" I knew he had pulled himself up from motives of discipline. That was all. Already I would have trusted my life as readily to little Eugéne as to my dear old friend Fred.

"Kape yar eye on that warmin, Pottin," said Fred, hastening to me with long strides of his great wiry legs. "Lor Goramighty, Miss Ruth, he's a lettin' on it out, bain't he? Dee you go away a bit, me dear. I'll look arter him."

"No, no," urged Ruth. "I have taken lessons in dressing wounds. I'm a St. John's Ambulance

girl. Get some water and bring it me; then run down to the hall and ask June Rivett for her lotion. Have you any spirits with you, Fred?"

"I ha' got a drop o' rum," said Fred. But Eugéne was listening with his sharp ears. He cried out eagerly, "My chief Stafford, he is safe, is it not? I may come to you, M'selle! I have some *fine champagne!* Ah! Eet is better than the rhum for a wounded man!"

Fred ran over and stood guard over the vanquished while the Frenchman danced up to me and Ruth. I was now lying on the grass, very hazy as to what was happening. I must have lost a lot of blood before I or anyone knew that I was wounded.

Potin took a flask from his pocket and handed it to Ruth. She made me drink about a gill—nor did I require much persuasion. Then said Potin, "Pour some of the old cognac upon the wounds, *M'selle.* It is so all my people treat knife cuts. There will be no trouble to heal if you will do so."

I was placidly going off into a semi-consciousness when the old brandy came into the fresh-made wounds. That brought me to myself in a hurry. I gasped with the sting of it and sat up.

Ruth was dabbing my cuts with the spirit, and tears were running down her cheeks. Potin stood watching eagerly. "Ah!" he cried, as I sat up sharply, "He is all aright! *Hein?* You are all awake, is it not, *M'sieur* the *vainqueur!* Ha! Ha! Come, *M'selle,* Fred and I will carry him to the hall. Then may you use the preparation of old June if you will. But I say he will do well now. See! the cuts are clean flesh cuts!"

I was getting my senses fully back. The spirituous antiseptic had acted as an enlivener. I struggled to my knees.

"Mr. Haakon," said Ruth. "Wait! Oh, wait!"

Ah! I sat down again on my heels. My strength was again leaving me. "You called me Jack," I moaned. "You called me Jack!" Oh! Her face was never more lovely than when the blood flushed into it at my words. Her eyes grew tender, and the very touch of her restraining hand was like a caress. In my momentary weakness it seemed to me that she had accepted my devotion and admitted that she loved me. I was so happy, so happy then, in spite of the sting of the spirit against my cut flesh.

She seemed to think to herself for a moment. And then a tenderness yet more wonderful softened her lovely features. She stopped and put her mouth to my ear. "Dear," she said, "my rescuer, my hero! Come with me now and be cared for. Whatever happens in the future remember this." She looked about her, and I followed her eyes. Stafford was still lying with his nose in the mud, and had left off wriggling. Fred was standing on guard beside him, and Potin was a few feet distant, anxious to help, but restrained by his sense of tactful *camaraderie*. He knew I loved Ruth—I had said so. What, then, was he doing in that galley so near to the beloved woman in the presence of the man who loved her? He first interpreted the message of Ruth's eyes. So delicate in thought was this little *Bordelais* that he did not even give a glance of intelligence. He turned and went to Fred, and in a moment the two men had hoisted Stafford upon his feet and were leading him off to the shed which I had considered to be like a hangar. Potin hurried, and was obviously anxious to keep the attention of Fred fixed on the prisoner. As for Stafford, the little Frenchman saw to it that he could not turn his head.

I did not understand then why Ruth blushed even more brilliantly than she had done before. She——

but I must not anticipate. All I know is, or rather all I then knew was that, no sooner were we entirely alone than she bent her sweet face to me. "Jack," she murmured. "Oh, Jack! You have shed your blood for me, dear. God knows what our lives will be; God knows if ever I shall be permitted to repay you for your gallant fight. But, oh Jack! remember this, and do not think me light because of it."

She bowed her dear fragrant head till her lips rested on mine, for just the flutter of a butterfly's wing. "Dear!" she murmured.

"But, Ruth," I cried, my blood aflame for all my loss of ounces of it. "You'll let me speak to your brother; you'll tell him we love each other? Oh, sweetheart, how did you come to love me?"

"Ah!" she sighed. "Perhaps one day I will tell you. But now, dear, we must speak together as lovers for the last time, perhaps, in our lives. It may be I shall be able to speak differently one day—perhaps before long. But now, now, oh, my Jack! we must go down to the hall and pretend we are no more than friends. Your and my quarrel with my cousin must be patched up; *must!* We cannot do without him! And he knows it! Also he knows that if my brother heard of his violence towards me this morning, his life would not be worth a moment's purchase. And I dare not trust him if Ray offends him, or if he loses all hope of gaining me over. God knows what is coming to us. But Jack, my Jack, you will be my friend, my faithful friend, even if it may be nothing dearer, will you not?"

My strength had come back fast. The magic of her one dainty caress brought my heart's pulsation to its full strength and regularity so that, but for a little unimportant weakness, I was myself again.

"I will work for you like a friend, my sweet,"

I said, "and think of you, pray for you, serve you, like a lover. To all but you, and Fred, and perhaps Eugéne—for they are not fools, dear, they both understand I love you, they told me so while we were coming up the spiral staircase—but they did not know my happiness, they did not know that insignificant Jack Haakon was beloved by a queen like you! They will help me to guard you, for they know my love, and are not against it. To others, dear one, I will be as a friend alone. And oh! sometimes, if you can, you will give me a minute's realism—a relief from all this difficult acting—if you love me. Do you love me? Can you love me, dear? A radiant girl like you? Ruth! oh, Ruth! I thank God that I have been let blood, for without it I might not have learnt your generous heart, my sweet dear! Oh, my dear!"

Fred and Potin had not yet returned into view after they had accompanied their captive to the hangar. I looked towards the shed. And, seeing no man, with an intolerable yearning in my heart, I ventured to let my lips approach my darling's. Once again she vouchsafed me the delight of the touch of her soft lips upon mine. Then she rose, and held out her hand with a smile. "Shall I help you up, dear—dear, for the last time till I don't know when?" she said.

I scrambled to my feet. There was not yet enough vigour in me to enable me to spring to them. "Only the word will be wanting, sweet," I said. "Oh! tell me you mean only the word will be wanting. Shall I not be dear even if you do not call me so? God knows that you will always be dear to me! And, oh! that I could let you know how dear!"

"Jack, you know!" she protested. "Why will you pain me? We must not be known as lovers.

It seems impossible to me that we should ever be lovers in the eyes of the world. Oh, you do not know the difficulties! I wish—but I could not bear never to speak to you. There, there, Jack, you must be content for the present. If ever I can say more, I will, if—if you wish me to."

It was hard luck that Fred and Potin were now approaching us, as we made our way to the entrance to the shaft. But the mischievous challenge in Ruth's eyes partly repaid me. I could not believe that she could look like that if she really loved me, and if she thought that there was no chance of our ever coming together. And—idiotic, fatuous, as it may appear—I did believe that she loved me. For, as I have written before, the wonder of the gift of love is beyond all comprehension. I loved her at sight. I thanked God humbly and devoutly that I had reason to believe that she had also become thrall to the bitter sweet deity as swiftly and as unreasonably as I.

"What have you done with him, Fred?" asked Ruth, as my old friend and the gesticulating Frenchman reached us.

"Potin untied him, to show his friendly feelin's. Ho! Ho!" chuckled Fred. "And I give him one under the chin to keep him quiet while we come out, and I reckon he'll be off o' his aeroplanery come nightfall. He! He! He! You done him proper, Master Jack! Will ye tell the guv'nor, Miss Ruth?"

"Not a word," cried the girl. "You know he is useful. No one must know but just ourselves here. You will keep secret, won't you? He, Rex Stafford, will say nothing. He is too vain to tell the tale But he will do us an injury if he can."

Old Fred dug me in the ribs. He was so delighted at the way things were going that he forgot I had a couple of scarcely staunched wounds, one

in the arm, and one in the upper part of my chest, fortunately smack in the major pectoral muscles, and neither serious. I jumped and smothered a curse as the old boy's elbow stung me.

"Tha'ss a going all right, master," he rumbled hoarsely in my ear. "He! Ha! Ha! You mark me! This is only the fust rumble kum stumble. He ha' missed ye with steel. Look ye out for lead! Kape yar eye open! Me and Pottin will help ye. And mind what Pottin tode ye. You and me'll be a goin' of a cruise in the *Dabchick*. And mind ye this, bor, you're a fightin' for your life, your sweetheart, and your counterry. Here I be, miss," he cried, as Ruth called him. "Tha'ss right. I'll see he do." She had urged him to carry me down the stairway on his shoulder. But I managed to prove that I was able to walk down and should be the better for it.

Presently we reached the underground hall again.

I think we were all glad to find that the skipper had gone out by the main passage to "The House of the Three Skippers."

CHAPTER IX.

A WISE WOMAN'S TREATMENT.

FRED attended me to my hammock, where, presently, after I had got rid of my blood-stained shirt and put on another from my portmanteau, which had been brought from the *Dabchick*, old June Rivett came tottering and mumbling in.

In her pocket she carried a silver flask of great antiquity. From some other recess in her weird clothing she produced an exquisite cup which was hollowed out of crystal.

"Hech! Hech! Hech!" she cackled, as she touched me. "Now be off wi' all you men fules. I'll ha' none here but old June. No, you can't come in nayther, miss, me dear," she gurgled, as Ruth appeared at the doorway when Fred and Potin went out "with their tails between their legs"—for they were both mortal afraid of old June. "Let the ole woman see the wownds on ye, master," she croaked, hobbling towards my hammock wherein Fred had insisted on laying me. "Lor a massy me, I can't rayche up tee ye. I'll git me a chair."

She lugged out a Windsor chair from the corner, and placed it against the head of my hammock. Then she hoisted her bowed figure onto it, holding

on to the back with one hand, while she clasped the flask and cup close to her bosom with the other. She tottered without her staff, which she had been compelled to leave on the ground when she climbed into the chair,

"Hold my hand, me dear," she chuckled. "Lordy! Miss Ruth doan't mind! You won't get lawed for makin' love to an ole woman like me, pratty dear though I be. Hech! Hech! Hech! Now then!"

At once her seamed face ceased its wreathing mobility and set into a firm intensity. With a touch which was wonderfully deft and gentle from such tremulous talons as were her fingers, she laid my two wounds bare. She placed the crystal cup in my hand, and, shaking so that I feared lest she might not only let fall the flask, but might fall herself from the chair, she managed to pour a small quantity of a green viscid fluid from the silver into the crystal.

Then she produced a bundle of down feathers—at least that was what they looked like; like a couple of score of the soft under plumage from a wild fowl's breast—dipped this in the fluid, and painted the cuts with it. The gluey stuff seemed to "set" on the wounds like collodion, but also to soak in with a soothing, comforting action.

When she had done her work on both, she said, "Lay ye still as ye can till to-morrer. You don't want ta git up afore mornin' time. The guv'nor oan't be back afore then. Then you can do as you blame well playse. Till then, lay ye still. I'll see these lazy warmin, Fred or Pottin, bring ye wittles and drink, though you'll hev narthen stronger than French wine. Red French wine will do ye good. Lave it to ole June. The guv'nor won't ax for ye

to-night. He o'ant be here. Lave it to ole June. Hech ! Hech ! Hech ! "

" When old June ha' mind ta cure
Lay you still and do her hest.
Wensum, Waveney, and Bure
None on 'em you may be sure
As can better old June's best.
Nayther river broad nor deek
Far and wide howe'er ye seek,
Nayther sun nor stars nor mune
Hold a healer like old June.
June ha' said she wish ye well
What that mean you soon can tell.
Lay and rest ye. Fare ye well."

The old hag's ridiculous doggerel seemed to act on me with a soporific effect. I saw her climb down from the chair as though I were in a dream ; and, as though in a dream, I fancied I felt her dry, scaly lips press my hand, which was lying over one side of the hammock. As in a dream I heard her, or thought I heard her mumble, " He saved my wench ; he saved my darlin' wench ! Gord bless him and help old June ta guard him."

Whatever means were taken to ensure my freedom from disturbance, they were sufficiently effectual. Soon after June had left me, Eugéne Potin brought me a bowl of exquisite clear soup. It may be that once again I was drugged. If so, on this second occasion the drug was altogether remedial and beneficial. I woke the next morning fresh and hearty. There was no pain, no soreness even, in my cuts. I looked about me and saw that the skipper did not seem to have occupied his hammock during the night. Nor had Rex Stafford slept in this cabin or chamber. I had had it to myself. So much the better. What was the time ? My watch told me it was past eight. I felt hungry, and as fit as

ever in my life. In less than ten minutes I had bathed, dressed, and made my way into the great hall.

"Morning, Haakon," said the skipper, who was seated in the left-hand nave, busy with a mass of papers. "I have just got back. I hope you are feeling fit, for I have work for you to do to-day."

He seemed to know nothing of the fracas of the previous day, or if he had heard anything of it, he preferred to ignore it. In my then mood I was not sorry to hear that he had work for me. I wondered if he would permit Fred to accompany me.

"You'll have to take the *Dabchick* out to-day," said he. "Fred Banham goes with you."

CHAPTER X.

JUNE'S SPELL.

WITHIN a few minutes of my appearance in the great hall, a couple of the women who always seemed to be busy about the electric stove, served breakfast. There was no one present but the skipper, Potin, two other blue jerseys who were unknown to me, Ruth, old June, and the three or four women who were usually to be seen hovering about the hall.

"Stafford is away on business," said the skipper, as we took our places at table. "He is off with the *Buzzard*, and I am not sure when he will be back."

I did not reply. I was busy watching Ruth, and delighting in the pink flush which tinted her exquisite complexion when she took my hand and met my eyes at the morning greeting. I should have liked to express my gratitude to old June for the efficacy of her treatment. But I understood clearly enough that it would be unadvisable to let the skipper know anything about the fight and the results of it just yet. When Ruth thought that he should be told, she would tell him. I was content enough to enjoy the admirable fish and fowl which smoked before us, for since I dozed after Potin's

soup on the previous morning, I had tasted nothing except the empty food of sleep.

I wondered for a moment if it was unwise of me to eat freely of solids, and I looked inquiringly at old June as I helped myself to a noble pigeon pie. The old girl seemed to understand, for she nodded her head and mumbled at her end of the table, and when I started to consume that delicious plateful, she chuckled and crowed like a child, so that Ruth looked at her and shook her head in warning.

"About a ton of the stuff has been put aboard the *Dabchick*," said the skipper. "You'll land some of it at St. Olave's, and some at Acle. Fred has all particulars. But I want you aboard to give colour to the yacht. Of course we shall soon have to cease active business for the summer. It would be impossible to bring up the *Otter* in the season, and we have to be careful even with the *Buzzard*. So we shall not have many more ventures with the *Otter* till October. But we have a lot of stuff to be distributed. We shall be able to keep you busy. And of course you will always be welcome here whenever you like to come back to headquarters. That you will have to come back every now and again, and at frequent intervals, you will understand, for otherwise you could not take up your cargoes for distribution. Then there's the stuff which Stafford will try to bring over in the *Buzzard*, and probably two more submarine cargoes. That will keep us going. Don't think you won't be useful right through the summer. Ha! Ha! You shall know all our methods before long!"

I felt a little annoyed at the freedom with which he gave me my orders. I had, it was true, taken the oath of allegiance to this strange brotherhood, but I wasnot going to be treated like an underling.

However, nothing he said at the moment gave me a reasonable chance for complaint. Moreover, I did not much care how the brother spoke to or treated me so long as the sister loved me, and that she did so I had her own word. As for the difficulties in the way of the fruition of our love, those naturally only made me the more eager to encounter and defeat them. I guessed that one of them was Rex Stafford. I did *not* guess then that Ruth thought that by marrying me she would soil me by association with a child of crime, for I did not know how far the brotherhood had gone, and were prepared to go, in defence of their liberty and the retention of their secrets.

"Do you say you'll only run the *Otter* once or twice again this season?" I asked. "I don't believe there'll be many boats about till the end of June. If we get a cold snap at the end of the month you'll be as safe then as at any time in the year."

"Well, well," said the skipper, "we'll see; we'll see what Stafford says when he gets back with the *Buzzard*. If he finds things all right on the other side, I daresay we may make another try for it. In the meantime, you may as well keep your ears open—no one will suspect you. You may hear if there is any talk of smuggling among the revenue people or the coastguard. Ha! ha! You see, I know you are a *persona grata* among all that lot. I was no fool when I agreed to gratify Fred and Bob by kidnapping you. See?"

So I was to act as a spy for the brotherhood. Had it not been for Ruth I would have seen the skipper and most of his gang sunk in the *Otter* before consenting to such dirty work. Now, however, I was ready to sacrifice all, fortune, honour, and life, for the chance to win the lady of my love. And

to do that it was absolutely necessary that I should seem to fall in with the skipper's views.

"I'll do what I can, of course," I said. "When do you want us to start?"

"This morning," replied the smuggler. "Fred and Bob are already seeing to the loading of your yacht. She can take an extra ton as ballast easily. Fred has all particulars as to the places where you will discharge cargo. Then, as I wish you to make inquiry if there is any suspicion concerning us, you had better call in at one or two riverside inns. But I leave that to your discretion. Will Fred be enough for you? You can have Bob as well if you wish."

I said that I should prefer to have only Fred with me. "Very well then," said the skipper, rising. "I will go and see to the final arrangements. Fred is ready when you are. My sister will show you the way through the passage before twelve o'clock."

He nodded to me, spoke a word or two apart with Ruth, and left the great hall.

Now, I thought to myself, is he purposely throwing me in the way of Ruth in order to bind me to him? If so, it is the worst thing I have learnt of him. I suppose that few young men regard a skilful and sportsmanlike smuggler as a criminal. Certainly, I did not, and I had been impressed by the wonderful organisation, the marvel of this excavated Roman relic, the daring of the submarine idea and of the aeroplane, and the geniality which pervaded the atmosphere of the smugglers' headquarters in the absence of Rex Stafford. That I should have to fight this man Stafford again and again until one of us were placed *hors de combat,* I did not doubt. But, to my mind, he was apart from the brotherhood. I daresay I regarded him as alien to most of the members of the society, because I desired to

do so. At all events it was an error which came near to forfeiting my life, and still nearer to causing my lifelong misery.

Hardly had the skipper disappeared from sight when Ruth dismissed all the others of the gang present except Eugéne Potin and old June Rivett. No one made any difficulty in obeying her orders. It was easy to see that, in the absence of the skipper, Ruth was the predominant partner. When the last of the women and men had left by the passage (though whether they made their way to "The House of the Three Skippers" or up the nearer shaft to the hill on which were the wood and the secluded hangar, I do not know), Potin stole on tiptoe to the exit, and listened with his hand to his ear, dramatically as only a Frenchman could have posed.

He came back with his usual dancing gait. "Eet ees all a right!" he said. "No one leestens!"

Ruth approached me, and I had no reason to complain of the tenderness upon her dear face.

"Jack," she said, "I daresay you will laugh at all this as superstition. But you do not know what old June can do, you have not seen what I have——"

"Dat is vary true, *en effet c'est épatant!*" cried Potin.

"*Epotin!* you mean!" said I, with a word of excuse.

"Ahi!" cried the delighted Frenchman. "*Le joli calembourg!* But *attendez*, wait, *M'sieur*. Eef you believe or eef you do not, do as *M'selle* and as *la vieille*, ze old woman, desire. Eet can do you no *tort*, no harm, and one does not know how it may bring good. *Hein?*"

"Dear Ruth," I said, with a glance of assent to Potin, "I'll do whatever you like, I am no hard and fast sceptic. I, too, have seen strange things on

the marshlands, things which I could not explain in any way."

"Hech! Hech! Hech!" cackled old June, toddling forward. "Gi'e ole June yar head and yar hand, tha'ss all she want. Hech! Hech! Hech!"

"*Pardon!*" cried Potin. "*M'sieur* has not seen the power so wonderful of the old. Take from me first! *Hein?*"

"As ye will, as ye will," cackled June.

She placed on the table the same crystal cup as that into which she had poured her green viscid lotion. Beside it she lay a pair of scissors, a narrow-bladed, very sharp-pointed knife, and two small bags which looked as though they were fish bladders. Potin had evidently seen the ceremony before. He held out his hand. First June pricked him on one side of the nail of his left forefinger, and caught the drops of blood that oozed in the crystal cup. Then she sliced off a diaphanous shred of skin from the same finger, and a tiny paring of nail. Both these were placed in the blood now in the cup. With the scissors she now cut a few hairs from the Frenchman's head, and these followed the bits of skin and nail.

She waved all of us back from her, as she stood and mumbled some incantation over this weird mixture. Finally she took from her bosom a pair of forceps or tweezers which appeared to be made of gold. With these she lifted the hair and other blood-stained particles from the cup, and placed them in one of the transparent bladder-like bags. The mouth of this she sealed with a waxy substance.

She then cleaned the crystal cup carefully, and beckoned to me.

With me she went through the same performance as with Potin. When she had finished and again cleansed the cup she removed all signs of her work

save only the two bags, now filled, one with the particles from Potin, the other with those from me.

For, it may be, five minutes she stood in silence before these weird, and as I then thought foolish, bags of mystery. Then, with sudden vivacity, and with an extraordinary virility which seemed to straighten her bowed back and plump out her dried and shrivelled cheeks, she turned and called to us. "Come for'ard," she said. "Come for'ard, you two brothers of the blood. Come for'ard and join right hand in right."

There was no laughter on my face or in my heart when I obeyed her. Potin was, I fancied, a little paler than his wont, and it may be that my recent loss of blood—of course, it could be from no other cause, made me a trifle less rosy-cheeked than usual.

The feel of the little Frenchman's hand was encouraging. It was so hearty a grip, so full of sincerity, and the dark Bordelais eyes sought and held mine with a world of loyalty in them.

Old June waved back Ruth, who had come forward a step or two when I and Eugéne had advanced.

Then the quaint old woman began to croak :—

"Skin and blood and nail and hair
Speed the thought from here to there.
Nail and hair and blood and skin
Send the message back agin.
Struggle free from flesh control
Heart to heart and soul to soul.
Parts o' man that come and go,
Fade and flourish, die and grow—
Knit these twain though far apart,
Soul to soul and heart to heart!"

"Brothers o' the blood far or near each shall be able to speak each to the other heart to heart, shall be able

to send a message hither and thither and recall it with the reply. Use the power for the safety of our mistress and of yourselves, of the honour of the brotherhood and your country! Hech! Hech! Hech! Rum words from ole June, bain't they? But it may be ole June know a bit more than some on 'em think. It may be old June can talk as she like! Remember, if either of ye wish to warn the other, ye have only to press the spell bag to your forehead and will the words to go. Take this, newcomer but true sarvant." She handed me the bag in which were Potin's hair, etc. "And you this," she said to Eugéne, handing him the ingredients derived from me. "And now God be with ye, for let folk say what they will old June have naught to do with the Black Man."

Swiftly the old hag bent and kissed Ruth's hand, and ere she raised her head again she made a dive at my hand and brushed it with her dry, scaly lips. Then, before we were, any of us, entirely free from the spell of silence which she seemed to have put upon us, she disappeared through one of the doors at the back of the hall.

At last I summoned up an uneasy laugh, and that brought both Ruth and Potin down upon me at once.

"Don't disbelieve her," said Ruth.

"*Ma foi!*" cried the Frenchman, "at ze least you can trry! Leesten! I have a warning to send! I do as she says! You weel get it! I know! How? Because I have seen before! You answer me that you have got it so that we here may be easy! You hold ze bag to ze *front*, ze forehead, and wish ze words to go to me! And——" he drew me apart from Ruth a little, and whispered, "Zere will be somesings to send you. I know. It may be somesings of your *patrie*, it may be

somesings of your lofe! Remember also ze voices in ze troat! *Ze Allemand! M'sieur* Stafford ees not 'ere! *'E* may fly over ze marrsh! Leesten!"

Unwilling to spoil the dramatic curtain, Potin bowed, made a dash at me, flung his arms round my neck, and kissed me on both cheeks, before I knew what he was up to. Then he darted away through the passage, no doubt to relieve his feelings at the hangar since he was Stafford's right hand man, and a pupil and friend of Vedrines'.

Only Ruth was left with me now. I advanced to her, hoping that she might relax something of the austerity she had shown me since that adventure on the hill within sight of the hangar. But she held out her hand to me, not in greeting but in opposition. "No, Jack," she said (and I was pleased that she called me Jack, anyway), "I will not let you compromise yourself more! You do not know all yet! If, when you know all, and this horrible thing is over and done with, if then you wish for my love it will be yours, dear! Ah, Jack, dear! It will always be yours. Don't think I don't love you, Jack, but to let you treat me as your future wife now would not be fair either to you or to my brother. He has trusted me to you and you to me. Come, dear. Take what you want from the sleeping saloon and come to your boat. Oh, you will be safer there than here, thank God! But if you do not come back, Jack, I shall have known you, shall I not? I shall have had your love for a little time, and oh! that is more than ever I dared hope for?"

This was naturally too much for me. It would have been too much for any lover worthy of the name of lover. I ran to her and enfolded her in my embrace very tenderly and delicately, mind you.

I was not rough or passionate with this sweet, pure soul. I kissed her softly, fervently, with long tender kisses that were free of the fire of passion and only betrayed the deep reverence of my devotion. And Ruth understood and was glad, for she permitted me to kiss her in that way of intense respect without struggling, and, at the last, when she withdrew from my arms, pressed her lips to mine in just such a kiss as those which I had been placing on her sweet mouth.

"Now come, dear," she said. "We shall neither of us forget this morning! For I know now that you love me as I would be loved, and not merely that I have taken your fancy for a week or a month! Dear, I am proud of you and your love! God send us a happy ending."

I made a rapid search in the chamber where the hammocks were slung, but found that most of my baggage had been removed, doubtless to the *Dabchick*. The few things which were left were of no use to me aboard the yacht. I left them there, and was ready to accompany Ruth in two minutes.

She came with me as far as the side gate through the east wall of the garden of "The House of the Three Skippers," and there she left me. "You will find the gate open into the boathouse," she said, "and Ray and most of the men are there."

I dared not kiss her again. I took her hand in mine, and bent and pressed it to my lips. She tore it from me and carried my kiss to her mouth, and then, with a wave, she thrust me through the gate. I heard the lock click behind me, and I hastened along the passage through the great blocks of piled-up timber till I came to the gate into the boathouse. The skipper opened it to me. "I've got your

dinghey here," he said. "You can take her out through the gates, and you'll find Fred aboard the cutter. She lies where the wherry lay. I shall probably sail to-day or to-morrow. We may see each other on the waters. Till then or till you come back, good-bye. And remember what has happened, *all* that has happened." I knew that he referred to my two oaths, the first of secrecy and the second of fidelity, and I nodded.

I found the boathouse full of men, working about the wherry. The dome of the *Otter* was just above the surface, but most of her was under water. To see her brought the reality of the whole thing back to me. My last few days had passed in such a whirl of mystery that I had been in danger of forgetting the actuality of the wonderful conspiracy! But here was the *Otter*, visible by daylight, now penetrating through a small gate in the great doors which was partly open to admit the passage of my dinghey. I noticed that the submarine could not be seen from the river even when this small gate was quite open, for the wherry now lay between her and the tideway.

I looked about me and observed as much as I could. But the skipper seemed anxious to see my back, and very soon I was paddling the dinghey out into the river. To the right lay my cutter, and all above me was the blue sky and sun of a bright May day. But for the short time I had spent on the hill my hours had been passed in electric light since last I was in the covered harbour.

The reality of the thing struck me more and more.

"Come you aboard, Master Jack!" cried Fred, leaning over the cutter's counter to catch my painter and hold the little boat while I sprang on deck.

And again the reality of the adventure struck me.

For when last I had sprang upon the *Dabchick's* deck there was no Fred to welcome me.

But for my memory of Ruth (and throughout my whole curious experience, *she* never seemed like a phantom to me), I might have said to myself, "What am I doing in this galley?"

I was to become more and more hazardously involved before twenty-four hours had passed.

CHAPTER XI.

THE VOICES ON THE MARSH.

THE first thing that struck me when I went down into my little cabin was that a couple of Mauser rifles were slung against the bulkheads. A note lying on the table, unsigned, but no doubt written by the skipper, informed me that I should find a pair of Mauser pistols and their wooden holsters in the flag locker, and a supply of ammunition both for the rifles and the powerful pistols. Already I was armed with a Webley and Scott automatic ·320, a pistol which is to my mind the perfection of a pocket weapon, for it is accurate, with extraordinary muzzle velocity, handy, well balanced, and dependable up to 200 yards, a distance which was surely enough for the protection of any ordinary frequenter of the waters, even in these days of motor-launch cockneys and trade ruffians who play the Bonnot about our beautiful rivers and broads in the summer months. The Mauser pistol, which is sighted to 1,000 yards, and which can be fitted to its wooden holster as to a stock, is an arm rather of offence than defence, it seemed to me, and when it came to the rifles, with their 2,000 yards range, I wondered why on earth the skipper should have thought it necessary to place them aboard. It was

not encouraging to meet with these the first thing on my return to my boat.

I heard Fred hoisting the mains'l, and ran on deck to find the boom still hung up by the topping lift, while Fred was straining at the peak halyard to get a good set. I helped him to tighten the throat halyard, he belayed this and the peak, let loose the topping lift, and leapt ashore to bring aboard the one fluked anchor which was stamped down into the rond. The tide was flowing, but there was a steady westerly breeze so that we could sail the cut to St. Olave's if that was where we were bound.

As soon as we had got the jib set Fred let her fill and pay off, for of course she had swung round against the tide to face the wind as soon as the mains'l was hoisted, till we headed for the cut.

"Look here, Fred," I said, when we were sailing free, with my old friend steadying the tiller with his thigh, his right hand holding the main sheet and the bellying jib made fast with one hitch which could be released with a snatch; "what is the meaning of this armament? And I'll tell you what, old boy! You've got to tell me the whole shoot! The skipper has kept me in the dark more than the light. You'll have to clear up things."

"Now doan't ye go ta ax me that, Master Jack," said Fred, with a grin. "I'll see ye doan't run into no more danger than can be helped. But you can't ax me to tell you my guv'nor's business. Trust to me, and I'll help ye all I can. But don't ax me about the guv'nor's business if he ha' kept it dark. 'Tain't fair, and you know it."

It was true. It would not be fair to attempt to influence the old fellow by his former intimacy with me, by the long and almost affectionate friendship which had existed between us, to betray matters

which his present guv'nor desired to keep to himself. Doubtless, when the skipper thought fit, he would take me entirely into his confidence. Until then it would not be playing the game to attempt to get details from one of his brotherhood.

"All right," I said, a little sulkily. "Well, where are we bound for now?"

"I thote," said Fred, "as you might like ta hev a look in at the 'Old Bell' at St. Olave's. You're sartain to find some 'un you know there, and you may l'arn summat. Then between the lights there'll come a cart to the Norfolk side of the bridge, and we'll get shut of some of our cargoo. To-morrow we can make for Acle. You'll enjoy a sail over Breydon if the wind hold."

I grunted. I was not altogether satisfied. But I saw that it would be of no use to try to get anything more from Fred. From what he and the skipper had hinted, it seemed as if there was some question of suspicion attaching to the smugglers. It was a cute move on Pettingill's part to get me as an ally, for he was certainly right in believing that I should hear if any revenue officers were about, or if there was any rumour of a band of smugglers. The marshmen, watermen, and peasants would give me the information with delight—for the old smuggler's blood is still strong among them, and the authorities would be equally ready to give me information and to ask me if I had seen anything suspicious during my cruises about the local waters. I felt a little sore at the position into which I had been thrust. And then the thought of Ruth rose up in my mind and I blessed my stars that I had been kidnapped from the *Dabchick* and introduced into the den of lawless revenue cheaters!

I learnt nothing at the "Old Bell." There had been a change of tenancy lately, and the new people had

not yet won the confidence of the neighbourhood. I landed and tried the "Queen's Head" at Haddiscoe, and there Dick informed me that he had heard a wherryman telling another that a hearty-looking fellow who had entered the taproom was "one of them blarmed gaugers." Whether the gauger had obtained any information, Dick could not tell me.

I returned to the cutter a little uneasy in my mind. If there were to be an open encounter between the forces of law and order and my new comrades of the brotherhood, my position would be very unpleasant. But for Ruth—ah! But Ruth was a delightful reality, and my love for her outweighed any thoughts of loyalty to the government, especially to the government then in power.

I found that the yacht had been splendidly stocked with delicacies as well as with more solid food and drinks. My own simple little preparations had been set aside as of no account. I could have given a dinner aboard the *Dabchick* worthy of a gourmet especially with such a cook as Fred on board.

As the cart was expected about eight o'clock or a little after, we dined early, and got the mast down ready to push through the bridge as soon as we had landed our cargo on the wharf to the south of the bridge.

I did not know exactly what to expect in the way of a vehicle. My silly imagination inclined me to look for some elaborate motor, some out-of-the-way conveyance—as if that would not be the very thing to draw attention to our work. Soon after eight an ordinary farmer's tumbril came rumbling over the bridge, swung to the left and halted against the upper end of the wharf. The driver leisurely blew out his light, and lit it again.

"Thassee," said Fred. He proceeded to get out what looked like a number of pigs of lead, just the

sort of ballast as my yacht would have in the ordinary way. "Ye see, Master Jack," whispered Fred, "they're painted up. These here are boxes o' the sweet stuff, but nobody 'ud know it by the look of them."

It took us less than half an hour to deliver the number of cases due to the tumbril. The local policeman strolled up during the operation, and recognised me. "Wonderful dry for the time of year," he said.

It was P.C. Noggin's usual style of greeting. Also, as usual, something passed from my hand to his, and he slipped off round to the back of the "Old Bell," removing his arm badge as he did so.

"There now," chuckled Fred, "that show how mighty clever the guv'nor be. Noggin wouldn't ha' goned off so aisy for anyone else on the waters! I reckon you'll be a sight o' use to us uns, Master Jack."

I reckoned I should, but I took no pride in the thought. Hang it all! here I was an accomplice in rather a mean kind of illegality! And with no way of escaping from my serfdom!

By the time we had pushed under the bridge, got our mast up again and made sail, it was dark. The night was moonless. "I'll take her down as far as Clinker's Rond," said Fred, who knew every reach of the three rivers and their navigable tributaries like the palm of his hand, "and then I reckon we'd best lay up for the night."

I was ready, and said so. I started to light the cabin lamp, but Fred called to me. "I wouldn't light no lamp, Master Jack," he said. "Theer's raysons. And that bain't altogether chance as we be a goin' ta lay up against Clinker's Rond to-night, although the guv'nor don't know nothin' about it. It's some'at as that Franchman, Pottin, axed me."

"Oh, all right!" I replied, a little pettishly. I was weary of all this mystery. What wonderful reason could there be why we should lie up at the most desolate spot in all the triangle between the cut, the Waveney and the Wensum or Yare? In the fowling season I could have understood it. But now in May? It seemed silly to me when we might have stayed at St. Olave's and had a cosy night in the bar of the "Old Bell," yarning with the marshmen and possibly learning something more of this gauger whom Dick of the "Queen's Head" had mentioned.

When we trod in the anchor fluke on the wide rond known as "Clinker's," the night was not only dark but "sheer," that is to say, the sky was clear but moonless, and it is a curious fact that on these clear sky nights it is impossible to see any object in the air so well as on a cloudy night.

A few waterhens cried and rustled in the reeds. But the hornpie and red legs were silent on their marshland nests.

I was a little sulky, but when Fred had come below, and, after covering the skylight with a tarpaulin and closing the cabin doors so that not a gleam of light could escape into the darkness outside, brewed a mighty jorum of punch, I cheered up.

"Doan't spake too loud," said Fred, "and doan't open the door without puttin' the lamp out whatever ye dew. It's for your sake, if ye love Miss Ruth, and the sake of Engerland! I won't say no more, no, I won't. You must wait and see."

It was past twelve when Fred doused the light, and very stealthily opened the cabin door. "Come on deck," he whispered, "but doan't ye make a deen."

I had my yachting shoes on, noiseless and soft. I crept up behind Fred, who was in his stockings.

There is no lonelier place along the coast than the point where we lay. But for a solitary marshman's house a couple of miles distant there was nothing but water, air, and marsh. Away seawards, Belton and Fritton Commons rolled their deserts. A crow flying from the sea would scarce see a light ashore between beach and Clinker's Rond.

Suddenly I pricked my ears, so to speak. There was a murmurous hum in the air for which I could not account. I had heard the clamour of aeroplanes, and the greater noise of dirigible air craft. This sounded like a hushed, muted reverberation of some engine like the "gnome." And after a second or two's vibration to the hum, the night air was silent again, only to be set athrob anew in a few minutes.

I strained my eyes into the night, and there, over the marsh, hovering between my line of sight and a star so that now the star was occulted and now clear, I fancied I saw a mighty mass floating.

I pointed it out to Fred without speaking. I knew that his eyes had the power often given to marsh-land flight fowlers, of seeing in very near total darkness. I heard him hiss his breath in on a curse. "Pottin's right," he murmured. "Can ye land and get near 'em, Master Jack?"

Now, though Fred could, to use a vulgarism, "sail my head off," I flattered myself that when it came to stalking on the marshes, creeping along the dykes unseen, I was far more than his equal, despite my recent wounds. I had stalked too many golden plover and grey lag and bean geese not to be an adept at the game. Then I looked about me. I had thought of my mast, sticking its head up in the night. I had no wish that my craft should be located, for a great dread was upon me, or perhaps it would be fairer to my courage to say a great

anxiety lest I should be interrupted in my expedition in quest of intelligence.

To my satisfaction I found that Fred had, without asking me, lowered the mast which swung easily like that of a wherry, as many of the more modern yachts' masts do. It was mere chance that I did not strike it on emerging from the cabin.

I rested my hand upon it and wondered how it was I had not noticed it as I came out under it into the stern sheets.

"Be yew careful," whispered Fred. "And hold yew on. Take this."

He leapt down, noiselessly, and presently returned with a Mauser pistol fully loaded, in one hand; in the other he carried the two rifles, "I'll keep these handy, in case," he said. "And oh, Master Jack, there's one o' them new-fangled things on the end so as you can't hear when it goes off!"

There was indeed a Maxim silencer on the muzzle of the pistol as well as on the ends of the rifles.

There was no doubt that, whatever might be the truth of the matter, Fred regarded my enterprise as hazardous.

"Wait," I whispered. "It's not cold, and I shall have to go in the dykes. I'll go nude, hanged if I won't! I'll plaster myself with mud. But for the Lord's sake, Fred, have some water boiling when I get back if you can manage it without showing light. And take this," I added, handing him back the pistol. "It will be of no use to me. I shall be in water more than on dry land."

I guessed what Potin expected me to find, and I wondered if, besides the great dirigible which hung motionless over the marsh, I should also find an aeroplane named the *Buzzard*.

Swiftly stripping my flannels off me, and forgetting my wounds and recent loss of blood in the excite-

ment of the moment, I slipped into the river. Landing on the muddy bank soon plastered me with black mud. It would be a sharp eye that discovered me as I dodged along the dykes I knew so well.

The nastiest part was getting over the river wall. Luckily the grass was not yet cut, and stood long and thick. I shuddered as I remembered the number of thistles that I might expect to encounter on the top of the wall. However, it was the only safe way to reconnoitre. In for a ducking, in for a few scratches.

I writhed along the rond, hurting my feet a bit with the dead end of rushes, although I had kept on my shoes and socks. Then, with all the skill which was in me, I wriggled over the wall on my stomach, heading down to the marsh dyke on the other side without an instant's pause on the top. My cuts from Stafford's knife had healed miraculously, but they pained me sharply at this stage. I reached the dyke leading into the marsh where the dirigible hung poised, satisfied that I was unobserved, and at once I immerged myself in the dyke and crept along its banks towards my destination.

I daresay it only took me ten or fifteen minutes to do the distance, but it seemed hours. The water was colder than I had thought, and the feel of the greasy mud, full of countless water animalcules, diatoms, as well as insects, was anything but agreeable. I remembered then, too, that some of these dykes were full of horse leeches! And my wounds pained me again and again.

At length I came within hearing, or so it seemed, for a guttural voice was audible to me, speaking from the flat of the marsh.

It was impossible to see the speaker, even if I dared to raise my head above the level of the dyke wall. But I could sit still and listen.

The stranger was speaking in German.

"Then," he said, "when the time comes you will undertake to seize the submarine for us, and let our men work her as they choose."

The "ja!" that came in response was in the voice of a man I knew. I knew now what Potin had meant by his hints about my patriotism, *l'entente cordiale*, and Stafford's mystery. The infernal traitor!

"I promise you that," said the German again. "We will seize the lady when you arrange it, and carry her and you to the fatherland. But you must wait till we are ready. You know of the great strike that we are financing. We have the leaders in our pay. It will take place this summer. When the country is helpless by the impossibility of mobilisation without railways we shall land. Your submarine will ensure us safety. Ten thousand sterling! Yes. Not yet. You must wait till we are ready, till the strike has disorganised the railways, till our transports and fleet are prepared. I do not know when. I should not tell you if I did. Oh, yes, it may be all bluff, as you say. But if you do as we order, and when we order, you shall have the money, the girl, and a safe passage across. No. We pay you more than we pay any strike leader, except one. Oh! Of course the strike funds receive more, that is a matter of hundreds of thousands. You ought to be satisfied. Ach! You think we are not prepared for that, for you to play traitor to both sides! Bah! No one would believe you. You were trying me! Yes. Very well. I believe you. You will receive a message by the usual means when we wish to meet you here again. Remember, that we have thousands here in England. Be faithful to us and you will prosper. Try to betray us and one day your body will lie in one of these so

dark dykes! Ho! Ho! Ho! Of course, I know you are faithful. Of course. Is it not to your interest to be so? And without us you would not gain the lady! No! Good night."

The conversation sounded like that at one end of a telephone wire, for after the first few words I could not hear what Stafford said. Either he was too alarmed to speak up or he was more prudent than the German. Whatever the reason, he seemed rather to whisper than to speak. Except that first "Ja!" I did not hear a word from him distinctly. But I had heard enough from the German in all conscience. And I was chilled to the bone as well, and feeling very weak and ill.

I did not know, that night, by what means the German regained the dirigible. But presently I saw her rise, heard that murmurous humming again, suspected that Zeppelin had discovered a silencer for the great exhaust, and watched the mighty bulk swing round in the starlit sky and hum off to the East, her mission no doubt accomplished without any one in authority in England being aware that a German dirigible had crossed the North Sea that night. From what I have learnt since, I have reason to believe that it was a common thing for the Zeppelins to cross over on dark nights at lonely spots of our east coast. At Harwich or Sheerness there would be searchlights if one were heard. But here! What chance was there of her being seen even if she were heard, and goodness knew that there was little enough chance of her being heard in a district where the few inhabitants there were, were in bed and asleep by ten o'clock and earlier.

I should have liked to wait longer, to see if Stafford got off with his aeroplane, or if he had ferried across to the triangle and walked over the

marsh. But I was now so chilled, shivering, and weak, that I made the best of my way back to the yacht, was hauled in half dead by old Fred, and only when I had had a hot sluice, a rub down, and a jorum of hot punch was I able to tell my old friend the first word of my experiences.

"It's treason, Fred," I said, "that is what it is; and it rests upon us, upon you and me, to save England from invasion, and, I believe, Miss Ruth, from kidnapping and outrage."

CHAPTER XII.

RETURN TO HEADQUARTERS.

FOR some time after my return aboard the *Dabchick*, Fred was very anxious concerning me. He said he did not like "the feel of my flesh"; that he'd "knowed many a man go off wi' the aager" after being "all guseflesh," as I was.

Indeed, the experiment of crawling naked through the rond, over the wall, and along the oozy marsh dykes had all but proved too much for me, enfeebled as I was by my recent loss of blood. It is impossible to explain the horror that came over me during my return crawl, the shrinking sense of revulsion which almost stilled my heart when I felt an eel or some slimy tench move beneath my feet or brush against my bare legs. In the darkness and those eerie surroundings, I dreaded the unseen, the inaudible, all about me—for although I knew the marshes like any marshman born, I am always cognisant of the awe, the mystery, which hangs about them, the something supernormal, weird, phantasmal, which haunts those lonely, fascinating regions of water, bog, grazing land, and ooze. Fred heated blankets and covered me with them, rubbing the wool, scorching hot, upon my

skin. But what, I believe, brought my circulation up as much as anything was the sound of the exhaust of an aeroplane. It was evident that Stafford had not yet perfected his silencer to such a pitch as Zeppelin. It was less clamorous than the frightful clatter of the ordinary bi- or mono-plane. But it was audible enough to me in the cabin of the *Dabchick* when he must have been rising from the marsh. I admit that it was only audible for a second or two, but that was enough to inform me that the traitor had flown down to the marsh and landed with the *Buzzard*, and there awaited the coming of the dirigible. The recollection of his infamy, his plot to kidnap Ruth—for I did not doubt the identity of "the lady"—and the whole of his vile plot surged through my veins and set my blood a-tingling till I began to feel warmth again creeping over me.

On the following day Fred insisted that I must keep between the blankets while he sailed the cutter over Burgh Flats, across Breydon, and up the Bure to Acle. Here he permitted me to go ashore at the inn by the bridge, for it was necessary that I should try to learn if any word had got about up this way of the saccharine smugglers. I could not doubt in view of my (and Fred's) instructions, that the skipper had reason to believe that there were "hawks abroad," and that it behoved him to be careful of his next run. It was important that the *Otter* should put in at least one more run before the season filled the waters with trippers and hired tubs, or the stock at "The House of the Three Skippers" might run low, and that would harm the connection which the smugglers supplied.

I and my little cutter were known all over the three rivers and the broads as well as any boat upon the waters. The landlord greeted me heartily, and

produced some very fine old rum, with a wink. It was real "ship's rum," and had never paid duty. No doubt it had been brought ashore by some wily handyman who asked a good price, and, I hope, got it.

"I brought ye into the private bar, sir," he said, with a jerk of the thumb towards the taproom, "'cos there's a wery agreeable party there who fare wonnerful curious. He seem a seafarin' sort o' chap, hearty enow, and wery friendly. Too friendly. He axed me if I could manage to supply him with a bit o' smuggled ship's bacca. I'd never heerd o' such stuff. I thote all that sort o' thing was dead and gone years ago. Howsomedever he keep a comin' in and a axin' o' all sorts o' questions now o' me, now of anyone who happen in and who look as if he worn't too pertickler how he got his drop o' sperrits or his pipeful o' bacca so long as he got it, and good luck to him, I say? Dee you go out and hev a hearin' along o' him, Master Jack! And tall me arterwards if you doan't reckon as he's some'at ta dew wi' government. I bain't no scholard, and you be."

In those days, of the summer of 1911, government was more of a bogey to the peasantry than ever in my recollection before. It is true that it has become even more feared since. But even then the suspicion of being "someat ta do wi' government" was nearly enough to cause a stranger to experience an unwilling bath in a horse-pond or the river.

Old Fred kept aboard, fidgeting about the mast and rigging. I entered the taproom and had a talk.

I left the inn convinced that the landlord was in the right of it: that this stranger was an emissary of the revenue, and I did not believe that he was on the look-out for spirits or tobacco either,

Everyone knows that it no longer pays to run spirits and tobacco. It is only smuggling on the grand scale, such as the skipper had arranged, which could be made profitable. It is impossible to load up such a bulk of spirits and tobacco on the other side of the water as would make a "run" worth while without having a warning cabled across to the coastguard and preventive service here. But saccharine is another matter.

"Well, master," asked Fred, "is there aught in it?"

"I fancy there is, Fred," I said. "But I don't think they know where to look or that they have any idea of a submarine. We shall be safe enough for another run or two. As for this boat—why, nobody would think of suspecting me—worse luck," I added, dolefully. For it seemed to me a little cowardly to hide behind my respectability.

"Ah!" said Fred. "Well, we'll ha'e to see what we can do!"

Later in the day a cart came over the bridge and picked up the rest of the *Dabchick's* cargo under the very nose of the garrulous stranger in the inn.

It was not till the following day that we got back to Reedham and brought-to a little below the covered-in harbour, as I call the great boat-house belonging to the association. It was after dusk, and after a look round with his cat's eyes, Fred made no bother about taking the dinghey to the great gates, and opening the small door with the key which he carried about him.

To our surprise there was no light, nor any sign of any of the brotherhood in the boathouse. The wherry lay there, although the skipper had led me to believe that he was about to take a cruise in her. The *Otter* was sunk to her periscope.

"Tha'ss a rum un," said Fred. "I wonner wha'ss

up. Howsomedever come yew on. I ha' got the passes everywhere."

He had switched on but one light, and when we had made fast the dinghey, he opened the door at the rear of the building to the west, and switched it off again. The covered way between the blocks of timber was all dark. It seemed as though there was something wrong.

I heard Fred cursing under his breath, and I guessed that there might be more cause for uneasiness than I knew of. "The House of the Three Skippers" was dark, and we had no electric torch. Fred led the way down into the cellars, and along the underground passage, I holding him by the coat-tail. All was dark.

As we neared the great Roman hall we heard the sound of voices in the distance, and I caught a hearty "Thank God!" from Fred. We pushed on rapidly, and presently emerged into the full light of the hall.

Here there were gathered together at least a score of men, and the usual four or five women whom I had seen before. I saw nothing on our first entrance of Ruth, old June Rivett, or the skipper, but I saw Rex Stafford seated at the head of the table, talking eagerly, fiercely, with three or four ruffianly-looking fellows with whom I had as yet had no association. Spirits were standing about, and there was a lack of discipline and restraint which made me very anxious. I was glad to see Bob Baldry and the three or four other marshland and river hands known to me in the hall clustered together by themselves. There would be, if there was any fighting, a nucleus of a party on my side if, as I suspected, the skipper were either absent or incapacitated and Stafford had temporarily seized on the reins of government.

No sooner did we make our appearance in the hall than there came a yell from the men about Stafford.

"Take them and bind them, men," cried Stafford. "We can have no spies and traitors with us."

For just one foolish moment I thought to fling his words back in his teeth and cry out to all the company in the hall what I had heard and seen on the marsh behind Clinker's rond. But I realised the folly of it. If the skipper were degraded from his leadership, the less Stafford knew about my adventure on the marsh the better. The men in his pay would not listen to me, and, on the surface, at the moment, they seemed to form the majority.

But when two or three of them advanced on me to confine me, I drew my Webley and Scott (the Mausers we had taken into the boathouse, and left there). "Let no one touch me," I said. "Where is the guv'nor; where is skipper Pettingill?"

"Never you mind," said one of the ruffians, advancing on me.

But the few seconds delay I had gained by the flourish of my pistol sufficed for a party of seven or eight to detach themselves and to gather round me. There were Fred and Bob, two of the most powerful and most prominent members of the association, and there were other stalwart men, known to me for years, who would vouch for my truth and lealty. "Lave him alone!" cried Bob. "No one can't give him orders 'thout it be the guv'nor. Who be you, Master Stafford? You kape to your flyin' machine. You hain't got nothin' to do with us watermen."

There was a buzz of approval at this, and another four or five blue jerseys came round me. I was then able to see poor little Eugéne Potin close by my

enemy. The little fellow made despairing motions to me, rolling his eyes like a duck in a thunderstorm, and I understood that he wished me to know that he would have come to my side in a moment, but that Stafford was his immediate superior, that he was the lieutenant aeroplanist as Stafford was the captain, although, to speak truth, Potin had forgotten more about aeroplanes and their uses than Stafford ever learnt. I understood the little man, and nodded to him that I understood. His face smoothed at once, and he looked happier, though still very anxious. Then I remembered my bag of magic. I had forgotten it when I stripped and went overboard to spy upon the marshes. I felt in my breast pocket. It was there; and, curiously enough, I found some comfort in its discovery safe upon my person.

"What's all this?" I asked. "How dares this man act as captain?"

"Because I am senior officer," cried Stafford; "and you can't get out of that, anyhow."

"But where is the skipper?" I asked.

"Half killed by that swine," cried Bob, pointing to Stafford. There was an angry snarl from both parties, and I thought that we should have had a rough and tumble then and there.

But before the first blow was struck, the door into the chamber where I had slept was opened, and Ruth and old June came out.

"What is this noise?" asked the girl. "Don't you know that the chief requires rest. Ah, Mr. Haakon, you are back. I am glad. Will you please come in and speak to my brother?"

Stafford rose from his seat with an oath.

"No!" he cried. "By God, he shan't! I am denied entry. He shall not go in."

June came hobbling forward and fixed her eyes

on the flying man. "Ye fule," she said, in a very low but penetrating voice. "Be you the master? The guv'nor will fare right enow to-morrow or nexter day arter. Do ye want me to put the black spell of the worm of the marsh upon ye! Wery well then. 'By the ripple and gurgle o' water, the suck o' the ooze.' 'By the——'"

Three or four of the adherents of Stafford pressed upon him, urging him strenuously. I saw their affrighted eyes turn on June. Not one among them but who believed her to be a witch, with power to bind and unloose, and they would sooner have dared the guns of the Germans than the curse of the nonagenarian. Even Stafford turned paler as he heard her begin her incantation.

"Very well," he said, "have it as you will. Only remember that this man comes with us on the *Otter* to-morrow. We must sail to-morrow as your brother knows, Ruth——"

"Miss Pettingill, please, sir," said Ruth, and I guessed that relations had been strained between these two since I had sailed on the *Dabchick*.

"Oh, Lord!" cried the man impatiently. "As you like. I mean that this man must come with us or the men won't sail. He is suspected of betraying us to the revenue people. He must come with us or he'll be lynched."

I laughed at this. "Keep this bombast till I have seen your master," said I, somewhat provocatively, I admit. "As for sailing with you, I am ready *if* as many of my friends come aboard as of yours. Indeed, I mean to, for the safety of all of us. As for betraying you, Fred has been with me all the time. Ask *him*. I am ready, Miss Pettingill," I said, bowing over Ruth's hand, so that Stafford cursed again, and his eyes flared like hot coals.

"Oh, Jack!" cried my darling, as I passed by her side into the sleeping chamber of the hammocks, "I am so glad you are back. Here is Mr. Haakon, dear," she said aloud.

I saw the skipper lying on a hammock, his head swathed in bandages, very pale.

"How did it happen?" I asked.

"Raymond was near the hangar, watching the *Buzzard* come down last night," said the girl. "Somehow she swerved and a piece of her propeller hit him on the head. Fortunately it was only the extreme end and it did not catch him fully. But it has made a nasty wound. He will not let me send for a doctor."

"Darctor, wha'ss the good of a darctor!" cackled old June, who had come in behind us. "I'll heal him quicker'n any darctor. You don't want to be afeared. T'ree days' rest and he'll be all right if he fare careful for a bit. But two or t'ree days' rest he must hev."

"There you are, Haakon," said the skipper, wearily, "and the *Otter* must go to-morrow. I hear there is some trouble with the men; they look on you as a mascot, and want you to go, too."

So, I thought, that was the tale Ruth had told him. I gave her a grateful and understanding glance. It was the best explanation she could have made to the injured man.

"Oh, I'll go!" I said cheerily. "Of course, Fred and Bob will go too?"

"Yes, yes, you must have them. They are the only men who can be depended on to bring her up under water if it is necessary to do so without light. Then you don't mind. Did you manage everything all right?"

I saw it was no time to worry him with any stories

of gaugers, or of the German dirigible. When I returned on the *Otter* I would tell him all. In the meantime I would endeavour to arrange that I should have as many partisans aboard the submarine as Stafford.

"Quite all right," I said cheerfully. "But I'm awfully sorry about you."

"Now you don't want to worrit yarself," protested June. "He'll be all the better for a little blood lettin'."

She came close to me and muttered in my ear, "What ha'e ye done wi' the spell? If you'd ha' had it on ye as you should yisterday, you'd ha' had Géne's message! Ye fule! You don't reckon as ole June can do what she say. You'll ha' ta be larn't different, and should ha' been afore now but for Miss Ruth, who love ye like the simpleton she be——"

I flared up at this, and the old woman could see how annoyed I was by my eyes. She nodded approvingly. "Tha'ss right," she said. "Don't you allow nobardy to miscall my bird, my sweet wench, Miss Ruth. Now will ye obey me?"

"Yes," I said testily, "I'll do what you ask. But for heaven's sake make haste, unless you wish the chief to ask what you are talking about."

I could see that Ruth was talking in an undertone to her brother, and endeavouring to distract his attention from June and me. I could also see that he looked nervously round now and again and was certainly wondering what the old woman had to say to me so confidentially.

June hauled out a queer-looking cord or string from some recess in her extraordinary apparel. "Gi'e me the bag," she said. "This here is the skin of the worm of the ooze, a virgin male silverbelly

cotched and killed in brackish water at the full of the moon and at slack water."

She snatched the bag from me, bit a tiny hole in it, and passed the eel skin through the hole. "You'll ha'e ta bend yar proud head," she said, with a chuckle. "Old June can't rayche up to a May-pole sich as Master Jack Haakon! Hech! Hech! Hech!" I bowed my head and pretended to tie up my shoe lace so that the chief should not wonder what the dickens I was up to. June slipped the skin round my head, twiddled its ends, bit the knot, and thrust the bag under the breast of my flannel shirt. "Theer ye be," she said. "Day and night, wet or fine, hot or frost, kape that where it lay. When ye need to send your message that'll rayche to your forehead. Now try to believe as there may be old folk who know more 'an you will ever know."

"What's that, June?" asked the chief, in a voice that sounded strangely weak for his usual vibrant and penetrating tones.

"I'm on'y a feelin'," the old woman gasped, "a feelin' if his heart beat true," she said. "If he be to go under water 'thout you, master, ta won't do for him to be frighted. Hech! Hech! Hech!"

The skipper was evidently in no case to examine too closely into the truth of any statement. He leant back on the pillows of his hammock again and closed his eyes. June looked up at him with an expression like that of a dog who has been caught stealing. "I'll see you again when you come to sleep, Haakon," said the skipper, again opening his eyes. "I should like you to occupy the hammock beside me."

Ruth started and flushed a little. I understood that it would be inconvenient for her if I were to

take my night's rest beside her brother. She could hardly continue her sisterly ministrations with me sleeping in the same recess.

But it was no time to contradict the skipper. Ruth motioned with her dear head, and I withdrew June from the chamber. "You may strike me for an ole fule," said the witch, penitentially. "I was just a goin' ta say as I was a feelin' o' yar wownds, and he don't know nothin' on 'em. Howsomedever all's well as ends well, and playse Gord this 'ill end well if you mind and trust old June and don't let that spell go off o' yar body no more. Keep it by ye night and day. You can't never tell when 'Géne may send ye a message, for you'll be afloat, unner water, and he'll ha'e ta stop here ta tend the *Buzzard*."

I would do anything to stop the old woman's tongue. I promised her what she wished, and she stole off to her own quarters at the further end of the hall.

Stafford, and most of his crew, had left the great hall by this time. Fred, Bob, and the others of my friends were still there, apparently, discussing a matter of moment with some heat.

"I tall ye," said Fred, "if he go he go at the risk of his life."

"And I tall ye," replied Bob, "that if he don't go he'll never see daylight agin. He must go, but you and me are goin' with him, as well as Dick Seago, George Smith, Sam Durrant, and tothers. He must go. The skipper wants him to go. I doubt he hev his doubts o' that Stafford ariddy. Here he be. You ax him. You'll find he won't be stopped o' goin'. Here he be. You ax him."

The upshot of it was that Fred, Bob, and two more of their mates, and I, had a long consultation. It was settled that we would endeavour to form a

stronger party on the *Otter* than that in the interests of Stafford. And with that we separated, with our programme fully arranged and understood between us.

I was a little tired, and sank down into one of the luxurious easy-chairs in the nave running alongside the better-class sleeping recesses or side chambers. To me presently came Eugéne Potin.

"You did not get my message," he cried eagerly. "You did not carry the bag night and day. But you will do so now! Oh, *M'sieur*! Tell me, did you 'ear any voices on the marsh? 'E, zis great Mistaire Stafford, 'e 'as been more miles wi' ze *Buzzard* zan 'e tells. I know ze quantity of petrol 'e 'as used! *Ah!* 'ave you 'eard voices on ze marsh?"

Well, if I were going to leave on the submarine to-morrow, it might be useful to have an ally here who could watch over Ruth. I did not know how much truth there was in the statements of the German that a national strike, comprising the railway men, was being engineered and financed by his countrymen. But I did see the possibilities of the idea. Also, I hardly thought a Teuton would have stated so openly that strike leaders had been bought, and vast sums been paid in to the strike and Trades Union funds, unless there were some basis for the story. I could see nothing which could be gained by spreading such a yarn if it were a falsehood. If it were true then, indeed, it might be serviceable to impress Stafford with the probabilities of the success of the proposed German invasion. No patriotic man, and whatever complaints we may have to make against the Germans, we cannot accuse them of a lack of patriotism, would trust a traitor. The only way to bind a traitor is by appealing to his self-interest, and to assure the co-operation of Stafford, the German may have thought it advisable

to prove to him that England was bound to lose the game about to be opened. My readers must remember that just at that time, the spring and early summer of 1911, there was a great deal of distrust in England of our Government, of the administrators of our Navy. The average man in the street believed that Churchill was as deplorable as McKenna, and that McKenna had the longest finger in the pie. The true story of those critical days, when the railway strike had come to a climax, and troops were massed at many of the principal stations, is not yet known to the public. Possibly it may be my privilege to let a little light into that dark time. I write it frankly. I am a Conservative of Conservatives. But I am proud and pleased to offer here my tribute of admiration and faith for, and to, Mr. Winston Churchill, Sir Edward Grey, and Lord Kitchener for their great work at the time when the invasion of England was only a matter of hours. They themselves did not, nay, do not know, that but for a certain incident that took place off the coast of Suffolk, even their splendid strategy might not have saved us from the ignominy of a landing, of the insult of our shores trodden by the army boots of the enemy. That what happened to the *Otter* and her chieftain would not have sufficed to stave off the invasion without the superb strategy, diplomacy, and firmness of the three men I have named is entirely certain. It is not so certain that those patriotic efforts of people in high places would have succeeded without the story I have to unfold, a story which has never been whispered of, even in the most energetic and best informed journal, to this day—a story of which the knowledge has hitherto been confined to three living people.

I looked about me and saw that no one but

Potin was within hearing. Then I told the Frenchman briefly what I had heard and seen upon the marsh.

"You will remain here," I said to him at the end of my yarn; "I don't suppose the enemy will act for some time. The strike has not even commenced yet. But one must be on guard. I shall be away for at least two days from to-morrow. You will watch things here. And, oh! my friend, you will watch Miss Ruth. If there is any truth in this magic of June's, use it. If I am on the other side of the North Sea when your message comes I'll hasten to you as swift as the swiftest means will bring me. I care nothing for the brotherhood, nothing for the smuggling plan, in comparison with Miss Ruth. As for the threatened invasion, I daresay that is more in the clouds than anywhere else. But keep your eyes open. We cannot afford to be careless."

"You are right, a sousand times right, my friend," said Potin. "And listen; I am not altogezzer what you sink. I am known to ze secret service of my country. We 'ave 'eard rumours of zis infamy. We are your friends—France and England will fight togezzer if war comes. You may trust me even more zan you sought. As for Mistaire Stafforrd, pah! I can stop 'is flying when I choose. And, my friend, ze *Buzzard* carries one passenger wiz ease. Should I ask you to fly wiz me, you will come! *Hein?*"

"Of course," I said.

"Good!"

Our conversation was interrupted by the women, who began to prepare supper. During that meal I did not sit in the seats of the mighty. Stafford had not returned. Ruth remained by her brother's hammock. I preferred to sit with Fred and Bob,

Eugéne and my other friends, to eating my meal in solitary state "above the salt."

I had no opportunity to speak alone with Ruth before I retired to my hammock. When I entered the sleeping chamber my darling girl bade her brother and me good night and surrendered the care of the former to old June. "Lor!" said June, as I looked askance at her before preparing to slip into my hammock. "You don't want to be afeared of an old woman like me! But there, bor! I'll go out for ten minutes if that'll suit ye! Mind you cover up yar narvous head when I come in agin for fear ole June should kiss ye! Hech! Hech! Hech! And mind you doan't take off the spell. Whatever ye do, doan't ye never take that off."

The skipper was dozing, or pretending to do so. I had just a word with June before I slept, and she told me that his injury was much more serious than my trifling wounds, and that it was of vital importance that he should not be excited or worried. I sank off to sleep without seeing the chief's eyes open.

But before I slept I heard a good deal of shouting and laughter—riotous, and probably drunken—from the great hall. I recognised Stafford's voice, and guessed that he and his party had waited till I had retired and my friends had supped before they reappeared. Now they were conducting themselves in a way that proved that they had little concern for their chief's welfare. I saw old June look angrily at the door as Stafford's voice rose higher and higher, and I saw her go staggering out of the sleeping chamber. Presently she returned with a satanic smile on her face. She looked at me to see if I slept, and caught my eyes upon her. She nodded and winked. "I ha' put 'em to sleep," she

cackled. "You won't hear 'em much longer." And truly enough within five minutes the shouting and loud voices died away. There were some heavy groans and snores, and then all was silence. My last waking view that night was the old hag, bent double, her head resting against the lower netting of the chief's hammock, her fingers crooking and waving in strange gestures and curves. Then I fell off to sleep.

CHAPTER XIII.

LEFT FOR DEAD.

THE next day the skipper was no better. It was clear to me that I should have to set out on the submarine without having been able to communicate to him what I had learnt from the voices upon the marsh. June looked uneasy, and muttered to me that, although she had no doubt that the chief would soon be well, he must not be troubled to-day. As soon as I woke I was made to rise and leave the sleeping chamber, nor was I permitted to enter it again before I left on my way to go aboard the *Otter*.

The day was a dull and unpleasant one for me. Stafford kept Potin at work at the hangar on the hill the whole of the day; Fred and Bob were busy preparing the submarine, and the chief engineer, who was going over his engines, was one of my friends also, so that I was left alone with little companionship. Stafford bore himself in a rude and overbearing manner, but I submitted to it without taking offence. I should be shut up with this man in the narrow quarters of a submarine for probably forty-eight hours, and it would be an impossible situation if we were to have a quarrel, a greater

quarrel, that is, than had already taken place, before we sailed.

Stafford made some difficulty as to the composition of the crew to sail with us. But here Fred and Bob stood firm. They would not go unless the chief engineer went, and his chief assistant, both of whom were partisans of mine. We could not take more than six or seven all told without discomfort—for not only was the *Otter* smaller than the Navy craft, but a great space of her must be reserved for our cargo—so that I had the pleasure of knowing my party would be in the majority aboard.

Stafford was sulky when we made our way through the passage as soon as dusk fell on the evening of the day following my return to headquarters. I saw him take Potin aside and give him certain directions, and I saw Potin's eyes seek mine, and knew that if those directions were inimicable to my interests or to Ruth's, they stood no chance of being carried out. But I had no opportunity myself of a word aside with Potin. Just before we left the great hall Ruth came out and shook hands with me, allowing me to hold her dear fingers "just so very little longer" than etiquette demanded. June nodded and winked, but evidently considered that she had told me all that was necessary. In the circumstances I was not sorry to leave the somewhat gloomy atmosphere of the great hall, and to find my way to my good friends, Fred and Bob. It was exciting, too, to realise that for the first time in my life I was about to venture in a submarine at sea. The short passage between my capture and our bringing-to in the boathouse had not been a practical experience of submarine travel. Now we were, so far as I could judge, bound, if not for the other side of the North Sea, at any rate half way

across. And I could not doubt that much of the voyage would have to be made submerged.

I had my Webley and Scott ·320 Automatic in my hip-pocket, and my magic bag suspended round my neck on an eel skin. Truly I was armed against all manner of evil!

Descriptions of submarine travel have now become so common that it would only be tedious to narrate the passage to the east. We ran down the river and nearly to the railway bridge over Breydon on the surface, for our look-outs on the hill reported that there was neither trading wherry nor yacht to be feared. Then we sank, and, with Fred at the helm, went very carefully, fully submerged, periscope and all, down the winding harbour till we ran out past Gorleston Pier Heads. I was amazed to see that Fred steered without any light being projected ahead. It would, I suppose, have been dangerous to turn on the great projectors with which the *Otter* was furnished, and might, nay, almost certainly would, have drawn attention to our passage below, for the light must have been seen moving down the outlet of the rivers had any loitering riverside hand or fisherman chanced to look into the water as we passed. But for any man to follow the winding turnings, and remember the ever-varying depths as Fred did, was an extraordinary *tour de force*. When we were at sea, and had run, submerged, through the Corton Gat, Bob took the helm as we rose our dome to the surface, and Fred sat down beside me.

Stafford had seated himself in a corner of the saloon, in company of his three friends who had come aboard with him. He scowled at me once or twice, but otherwise did not appear to concern himself with my doings. He and his companions

were smoking and drinking, and the gush of fresh air as our dome rose immediately we came to the surface was intensely sweet.

I expressed my admiration for Fred's feat of helmsmanship. "Ye see, Master Jack," he said, "ten year ago it wouldn't ha' been possible. But they ha' dredged and dredged to get deep water for the large timber craft till you can get thirty feet up to Reedham Ferry on the top o' the tide, and this here little craft bain't more than eighteen feet from dome to keelson, if so much. As for the reaches, I know 'em by heart."

It was a beautiful calm evening at sea. We went slowly along, our dome open, our railed-in deck just awash, and I chose to spend an hour or two in the sweet sea air, with Fred and one of his mates to talk to. Bob remained at the wheel, and I could not but think how fortunate it was for me that the only really skilful mariners and engineers belonged to what I think I am justified in calling "the honest party." But for that Stafford might have pressed a majority of his men aboard, and then we should have been more or less at their mercy if it came to a hand-to-hand turn up, though unless the majority against us were fully two to one I believed I and my friends could have given a good account of ourselves. Now, however, it did not seem as if we had anything to fear. I did not believe that the possible suspicions of the revenue people had got near the truth. Interference from them was the last thing in my mind. I gave myself up to the enjoyment of that trip in the North Sea. I had sailed the sea time and time again. But here, on the railed-in deck of the submarine I was almost at sea level and there was something quite new in watching the waves rock and ripple from their level. We passed

a few dandies and steam drifters out for the spring herring or "razor backs," saw the smoke of four or five collier tramps, the lights of a couple of Scotch passenger steamers, but did not have to sink once till Fred spotted the signal of our Dutch galliot which had put out with our contraband saccharine.

It would not be safe to return to Reedham till the following night and throughout the day we lay in mid North Sea, rarely troubling to shift our position or to sink, simply letting the *Otter* drift with the tide, and amusing ourselves with yarning, eating, and drinking—for the submarine was splendidly found in stores, both solid and liquid —smoking and watching the beautiful changes of the sea.

I remember that Fred made for a "knoll" or sand bank, and we fished for a few hours, and caught some flat fish, but none of any size. About three in the afternoon we began to move slowly homewards, one of my friends seated or standing on the dome, and giving warning if we seemed likely to approach too near any craft which could by any chance suspect us. In nine cases out of ten we might pass within ten yards of a steamer. The coasters would think we were a government ship. It was only when a torpedo boat destroyer, or a scout, or even another submarine, appeared, that we sank and made ourselves invisible, even to our very periscope.

We entered Gorleston Pier Heads about midnight, and went slowly up to Breydon without any adventure or mishap.

A little past the half-mile point, when above the bridge, Stafford asked Fred if there was any objection to rising. "This rubber-tasting air always upsets me," he said. "I should like to

get to the surface and open the dome as soon as possible."

Throughout our trip Stafford had behaved himself in a manner void of all active offence. He had even once or twice appeared to endeavour to make himself agreeable. But I noticed that he was never far from the little squad of men who belonged to his party, and that when he forgot himself his eyes darted out side-long looks at me of extreme viciousness and animus.

I shall never know if what happened on Breydon was due to any treachery of Stafford's or not. On the whole, I do not think that he had anything to do with it. Had the attack been successful it would have destroyed the greater ambition which he had —that to be won by the help of the Germans. But it may be that he expected to escape and to rid himself at one stroke both of suspicious revenue officers and of me and some of my friends.

We were running with our railed-in deck flush with the water on the top of a strong flood. There was about an hour or an hour and a half's tide to run, and we spun up fast with very little assistance from our screw. Indeed, the engineer only kept enough power going to give us steering way.

But there was a hiss at our bows. Unless our cigar-shaped craft moved swiftly through the water she soon lost the prompt obedience to her helm which is so essential in a vessel of her kind, and when making her way in a narrow channel dredged deep between fathomless mud banks.

We were nearly abreast of Mr. Arthur Patterson's houseboat on Banham's rond when, from out of the darkness of the night, a rowing boat, lustily

pulled, sheered out close ahead of us. "Launch ahoy!" cried a rugged, manly voice. "Heave to in the King's name!"

So there *was* something in the skipper's notion that smuggling was suspected, was my immediate thought.

I heard Fred curse under his breath, and shout down the speaking-tube running down the dome into the belly of the craft, and at the same moment I heard steps racing up the gangway ladder to the deck.

The submarine kept on her way, but did not sink.

"Heave to!" roared the voice again. "Catch on to 'em, Bill."

A boathook shot its "crome" end from the rowing-boat and caught on to the railings round our deck. "My God!" I heard the voice say, "it's a submarine. Give the word, you fools!" cried the stranger's voice.

So, I thought, the Navy have some password known to the revenue. I had never suspected that. In the meantime the *Otter* surged ahead, her pace increasing swiftly, and the rowing boat swung round to tow side by side with us.

Stafford was now on deck beside me, and two of his intimates.

"Sheer off, you lubbers!" he yelled. "What the devil do you mean by interfering with us?"

"Heave to, I tell you again," roared the voice, and I could now see a man in the costume of a naval lieutenant in the stern of the boat. This made three men altogether in her.

"You be damned!" cried Stafford. "Here," he said, "come aboard us at your peril!"

"Board 'em, my men!" cried the officer. "Make fast first."

The rowing boat was hitched to our rail in a

second, and the three men came leaping aboard us, only to be met with Stafford's pistol in their faces. Before I could interfere he had fired once, twice, and two of the men had fallen on our decks. He had levelled his weapon at the officer when I flung myself upon him. I had never bargained for wholesale murder of our preventive or naval men. "Stop it!" I shouted. "Stop it, I tell you!"

"You fool!" cried Stafford, struggling with me. "Didn't you hear them? They know it's a submarine. There's only one way out." He pulled the trigger of his automatic again, but I wrenched his arm at the moment, and the nickel bullet flew wide.

I saw myself surrounded by Stafford's friends. Fred was hovering round me, uneasy, uncertain what to do. Bob came rushing up, having, I supposed, even in that fraction of a second, handed the helm to someone else.

"Damn you!" cried Stafford. "Come, my men, he must go!"

As he spoke he struck at my head with the butt of his pistol. I was unprepared for the blow, and it caught me full on the forehead, luckily for me just escaping my temple, but knocking me senseless. I did not feel the hands that seized me and cast me overboard. But dimly, in after days, I remembered the sensation of flying through the air, and, I always say, and believe, though I am assured that it is impossible, I heard a shout of protest from two voices, and the plunge of two bodies after me.

This was all I remember of that night; all I was to know of the passing of events for some weeks. My last recollection was a fairly definite one of being knocked senseless, and of being hove over-

board into the swiftly-flowing tide. I sank into the sleep of death. I told myself, in my last second of consciousness, that it was all over with me. I was a dead man. God help my Ruth, and God preserve my country!



CHAPTER XIV.

I COME TO MYSELF AGAIN.

WHEN next I opened my eyes to the knowledge of my surroundings, I found myself lying in a sunlit little camp-bed beneath the shelf of a diamond-paned, lead-framed window. I was too weak, and far too uninterested in life, to take much notice of my surroundings. I saw dimly that my counterpane and sheets were very clean, that the furniture of the little garret was plain, antique, and scanty. The roof came down in an angle of forty-five from the centre of the ceiling till it was scarce five feet from the floor against the bottle glass panes. One of the partitions of the leaded window was open, about eighteen inches square, I thought, and was held open by an iron rod, curved like the top of an Adam stove. Through the open space I could see the roof of a haystack, and, at a distance, a rise of dense woods, glowing purple in the falling twilight.

I tried to move my hand, my legs. But to my intense surprise I found myself unable to do so. I looked at my wrists to see if they were bound. Then I realised it was sheer weakness which held me motionless.

At first I had no recollection of my struggle on the submarine, of the knock-out blow, and my being flung to the Breydon fishes. It was too much trouble to think how I got where I was. I sniffed in the delicious marsh summer air. And the inhalations brought me strength and partial recollection.

I tried to cry aloud. But my throat uttered such a foolish, faint, wheezy whine that I was ashamed to repeat the attempt. I could see that my fingers were fleshless, that my forearms were almost those of a skeleton.

Then, when I found that I could neither move nor shout, I began to cry feebly, shamefully, sobbing and whimpering like a child of three.

I heard a light step come springing up the stairway, as I guessed it to be, and presently a very lovely girl of not more than seventeen or eighteen at the utmost came hastily into the garret.

She clasped her hands at sight of me. "Oh!" she cried. "Thank God! Thank God! Oh!" she added, coming close to me, and taking one of my phantom hands with ineffable tenderness and gentleness. "Don't cry. Oh, don't cry, please! I can't bear it." And with that she, too, fell a-sobbing as though her heart would break.

She was dressed in a simple and well-worn and washed print dress of white, spotted with faded pink, the dress of a kitchenmaid, I thought at first. She wore no artificial aids to improve her form or face. They did not need them. Her lovely *svelte* figure was naturally slim-waisted. Even I could tell she was unconfined by steel or whalebone. But the lithe, natural lines of her bust and hips made her waist seem in perfect artistic proportion. She was of about the middle height of woman, perhaps a little over. Her face was oval, her

features straight, small, and in exquisite symmetry. Her complexion might, perhaps, have been called coarse by the Pall Mall critic, for it was round and rosy, full of health and the flush of pure blood. Her eyes were huge, and of forget-me-not blue, her hair, lashes, and brows of a red wheat gold, which flashed and burned in the sun rays as they poured through the window. Her mouth was the true Cupid bow shape, but a little large, her ears were small, transparent, and dainty. Her teeth even and deliciously white, her lips full, and of *live* vermilion, if my readers know what I mean. Rarely had I seen so fair a maiden of Nature. When I looked at her hands I saw that they were rough-skinned and red, that her wrists were thick-boned and her forearms coarsened and reddened with work. Her face was the face of beauty of all times. Her hands and wrists showed that she belonged to the working or lower farming classes. Her voice was soft and musical, but her accent was the broad vernacular of the Norfolk marshlands. Her soul, her heart, I was to learn, were noble, pure, and unselfish.

I flattered myself I knew every marsh house between the Wensum, the cut and the Waveney, but I had never seen this maiden before. I could not have forgotten her if I had. Do not think that I was stirred by any feeling towards her such as had smitten me to the midriff on my first sight of Ruth. There was no sense of attraction towards her in my heart or thoughts. Yet certainly she was a most fair vision to greet the eyes of a man fresh returned from the confines of death, who now knew that he had been unconscious for a problematical time. Who was she? Why did she cry to see my tears? And where was I?

She patted my hands and petted me as a mother might her sick child, till I ceased my shameful

whimpering. "There, there," she soothed me. "You will soon be well. I will nurse you. I promise you I will. No one shall hurt you any more."

I choked out thanks to her, petulant, ungrateful thanks, with which only a sick man could insult such a girl.

She smiled sadly at me and nodded her head encouragingly. Then she rose from my bedside and went to the door of the garret.

"Granny, granny!" she called out. "Master Jack ha' come to hisself. Do pray come up and see if you can do aught for him. He fare right sensible again."

"Master Jack." So she knew me, though I did not know her. I heard a querulous but strident ancient voice call out something from below, and then the girl came back to me. "You don't know me," she said gaily. "But I remember you."

I shook my head. I certainly had no recollection of this radiant vision.

"Don't you remember," she said, "when you risked your life on the ice for a little fool of a girl who had fell through? You swam under the ice in the river and fetched her out, though she didn't desarve it? That was six years ago, and that was me."

I remembered fishing a little brat out from the river on which she had ventured rashly one winter. But she was a most uninteresting child, I thought. Surely she could not have developed into this rustic beauty!

"Where am I?" I asked. "Is this George Prettyman's house then? But you can't be——" My voice trailed off into inaudibility. I was still very weak. I could not talk.

The girl stamped her foot. "Fool! Little beast that I am!" she cried. "As if granny had not told

me that you were not to try to talk or do anything but lie still and grow strong as soon as you come to yourself! Oh, granny, make haste!"

My lapse into silence had frightened her. It pained me to see her alarm. I tried to speak, to calm her, to show her that I was all right. And then a hale, old crone, very different from June Rivett, came striding into the garret. Ninety-one the old girl was, but she walked upright, had all her teeth, her hearing, and her sight and more wisdom than could have been accumulated from others within a radius of five miles. I may have forgotten the girl, but I remembered old mother Prettyman.

"Why, it's you, mother!" I managed to wheeze out.

"Now, Rose, what ha' you been a doin' on," said the old woman in tones as strident and powerful as though she carried no more than forty years on her shoulders. "Din't I tell you he worn't to spake or worrit hisself about nothin'? Dee you be a goin', if you can't behave better 'an that you shan't come in no more till he can jump over the bed."

Rose burst into tears, and with a look of infinite pleading at me left the little attic.

"Now you lay still, my maan," said the old woman. "You know ole granny Prettyman and how she can do ye a sight more good than any darctor so long as she only hev wounds and brook heads to cure. I can't mix ye bartles o' pink medsuns, nor I wouldn't if I could. Lay you there and don't you fret yar head 'bout nothin'. I'll bring ye up a basin o' broth in half a min't, and then you'll hev another sleep. Arter that p'raps I'll tall ye a bit o' what ha' happened. But I'll tell ye this now. Fred Banham he was here yisterday arter dark and

he tode me to tell you when you come round as all was well and there worn't no hurry."

The message at once agonised and relieved me. It brought back all the dangers of the brotherhood to my recollection. But it relieved my fears lest anything had happened to Ruth since I was disabled. For I had no notion of the length of time I had lain senseless. I only guessed from the sight of my hands and wrists that it must have been many days.

"Rose," the old woman called outside the door, not raising her voice to a shriek, but making it round and full and musically vibrant. "Rose, bring up a basin full o' the broth in the 'arthen cook pot. Master Jack want it."

"No," said the old dame, shaking her head at me with a grim smile, so that I saw her bristly white moustache gleaming as the sun's rays caught its ends, "you bain't to ax no questions or to speak a word till you ha' had yar broth and another sleep. Then we'll see about it."

I heard light steps flying up the stairs, and Rose, shame-faced because of her scolding, came timidly forward, holding a bowl of old Lowestoft china on a plate of the same clay and pattern, and with a spoon in it.

"Lor, and if you hain't give him yar christenin' spune what the squire's lady give ye," said granny, and Rose blushed damask. The old lady seemed to think she had relaxed too much to her great grandchild. "And so you ought," she added. "He saved yar worthless life. So you ought to."

Rose fled from the room with one more appealing and apologetic glance at me. I should have liked to remonstrate with the old woman for her treatment of my kind nurse. But I guessed that any word of mine of that kind might do more harm than good,

and would either give rise to some horrible banter or to some entirely unjust suspicions.

The old woman held the basin before me, checked my hand, which I vainly tried to move towards the spoon, and fed me mouthful by mouthful.

I did not know the month, but I felt pretty certain it was not later than August, and, from the look of the sky, I doubted if it were later than July! My God! I thought! July! Two months deleted from my life. But that was not the point. The point is, that although we were certainly still in summer I tasted marvellous twangs of pheasant, partridge, hare, and wild fowl in that broth. It was clear, but as soon as a drop cooled, it congealed on my lips or my spoon like glue. There was the flavour of thyme, mint, onion or leeks, sage, carrot, turnip, marshmallow, and many other herbs of which I did not know the identity. It was the most appetising and strengthening liquid food that had ever passed my lips, I sucked it down spoonful by spoonful. Before I had finished granny called again. "Rose," she called. "Come you here. I can't allust leave the dairy to feed our gennleman. You come and watch me do it so as you can help him next time."

Rose entered with dancing eyes. "Let me try now, granny," she urged. And the old lady let her.

She sat on my bedside and seemed to take it as a favour whenever I swallowed a spoonful of the exquisite brewage. Her eyes danced radiantly. Her lips seemed to move in appreciation of my condescension. She seemed upraised with pleasure and delight in ministering to me. Fortunately I was as weak as a kitten, and, when I came to gather strength, I was protected from villainy by a pure love for a noble girl. But, ah! Rose was sweet, so sweet! I never—but I must not anticipate.

Before I had finished the bowl I felt aweary. When I had swallowed the last spoonful at Rose's pressing request, I felt sleepy. With scarce a word of thanks—convalescents are nearly always ungrateful brutes—I fell asleep with the taste of the broth in my mouth. I heard the girl say "Hush!" to her grandmother, and the old woman stride out. But I felt that Rose spread soft coverings over my shoulders, and seated herself beside me; and I took comfort in the thought.

CHAPTER XV.

FRED NARRATES.

I THINK that old granny must have mixed a little juice of her white poppies, which I soon saw growing in the marsh garden, with my broth, for I slept nearly twenty-four hours and when I woke I felt a beginning of the return of strength rather than an actual consciousness of its return. I had gone to sleep with my eyes on the fair face of Rose, and when I woke I found her eyes gazing into mine.

They were lovely eyes, demure, intensely happy at the moment, but a little bovine. They had not the bright intelligence of other eyes I had known and adored. Yet no man could lie, weak and helpless, and suffer the gentle ministrations of that devoted and pure-souled girl without feeling a constriction of the heart, a grateful reverence, which, if no other image had encased the heart in proof armour, must turn to love in time.

And at that date I do not fancy that Rose had ever heard of Ruth. I learnt afterwards that she had always looked up to me as a Paladin, a kind of Prince Charming, who had vouchsafed to save her life at risk to my own. That she had lurked behind hedges to get a glimpse of me, and that as she grew to ripe maidenhood her feeling for me became warmer till she cried herself to sleep with hopeless longing

that one day I might stoop to accept her passionate worship.

She had never thought of the practicability of the thing. Romantic naturally, without having had her natural purity spoilt by the perusal of the penny novelettes which ruin the characters of so many young girls, she had taught herself to imagine the possibility of being my lifelong servant. At no time, I fancy, had she thought of me as a husband or even as a lover. I was too far above her for that. Poor child, so sweet and so devoted! And I, I watched her services, her solicitous ministrations day by day, and I could not help showing my gratitude. I saw a light of wonderful hope springing in her look, and, shameful that I was, I did not dare to speak to her as I should have spoken, but let her dream herself into a paradise of absurdity, of a phantasmal happiness with me. Granny, of three generations back, a child of the feudal system, born in days when the *droits de signeurie* existed in fact, if not in law, never even thought that her granddaughter could entertain such dreams.

My strength grew rapidly. I knew that I was in old Prettyman's marsh farm and before long the old boy, granny's son and Rose's grandfather, came up to "have a mardle" with me, and later, his stalwart sons and grandsons came up and talked of the last year's flight shooting and of the strange fowl that one of them had killed in the river.

Rose seemed jealous of these interviews, and used to "whoosh" out the visitors, telling them that they had tired me, and the jolly giants would slink out apologetically. Not one of them but did me justice in knowing that I would never wrong their roof. Not one of them but was as blind as I was to the possibility that I might leave wretchedness behind me if I did not leave shame.

It must have been fully ten days after I first came to my senses that Rose came up, looking a little sullen. "There's a man as want to see ye, Master Jack," she said. "It's that old Fred Banham. I told him you worn't well enow to see him yet. He say he'll come again twalve o'clock noon time day arter to-morrow."

I was about to rebuke the girl for putting my old friend off. But I saw her expression, and my heart told me that I might at least be courteous and kind to her if I could be nothing more.

Up till then I had asked in vain for the day of the week and the month. "Never you mind how long you ha' been here," Rose and Granny would say. "You may be sure you're heartily welcome however long it be and twiced as long and all."

But when I heard that Fred had been to see me I began to insist on learning the duration of my illness.

Rose was hurt by my pertinacity and let me see it. "My dear girl," I said, "I know how kind you all are. But I must know what the date is. I cannot tell you why, but it is of awful importance that I should know how long I have been unconscious, and what has been happening in the world. Do you know if there has been any railway strike yet?"

Rose looked at me wonderingly. "Why, Master Jack," said she, "how should I know? Since you come I hain't set to market with Tom or old Granny. I hain't heard nothin' in the mash farm! That wouldn't interfere along o' us uns, ye know, railway or no railway. I hate the beastly things!"

Her sweet eyes filled with tears and her hand went out and stroked the coverlet of my bed with pitiable tenderness.

"You know what month this is, at all events,"

I said, coaxingly. "Do tell me Rose, there's a dear girl."

Her faced flamed as I called her that. She shook in every limb, and oh! her eyes questioned mine with such earnestness that I cursed myself for an unfeeling brute. For now I remembered everything. I remembered the brotherhood and Ruth and the voices on the marsh, the fight on Breydon, and Stafford's treachery. What puzzled me was how I came to be in Prettyman's marsh farmhouse. I was stunned and flung overboard from the submarine. How on earth was I saved?

"How did I come here?" I asked.

"That Fred Banham and Bob Baldry carried ye here one night; well, if ye must know ye must, that was six weeks ago and more. They carried ye in at dead of night and said they'd brought ye from the Berney Arms where you'd been took in not knowin' yourself or anyone else, and they axed granfaa'er if ye might stay here—as if they wanted ta ax! As if everyone on us wouldn't lay down our lives for ye, Master Jack, who never did a bad action in all the willage since you was a boy, and who everyone ha' knowed kindness from. We wanted to let 'em know at the hall, so as your old housekeeper could send ye the things ye might want which we couldn't give ye in this pore place. But Fred and Bob said as it was more 'an yar life was wuth to let anybardy know where ye were. So Granny went to the hall and only said as yar wished Mrs. Hallam to know as yew was 'goin' foreign for a month or so, and could not give no address. So here yew ha' laid, and us a prayin' for your life, and outside the farm house nobardy 'ceptin only old Fred and Bob know where ye be! They said as even the folk at the Berney Arms worn't to be told, or that 'ud be the wuss for you! You hain't been

doin' nothin' wrong hev ye, Master Jack! Do you hev, us uns 'ill see nobardy doan't interfare along o' you. You can see anyone a comin' for miles round, and if the p'leece come arter ye there's a dozen hidin' places gran'faaer and the boys know where you could be hid! And I could bring ye wittles and drink."

The loyal little darling! I believe nothing would have delighted her more than to hear I was in peril of persecution by the law, so that she and her leal relations might protect me. And how sensible to allay my housekeeper's fears, and prevent her from "making a song" of my disappearance. They had to say I had "cleared out" from all correspondence before Mrs. Hallam would be quite satisfied.

"No, child," I said, "I don't think the danger comes from there. But I know what they mean. And listen, child! I must see Fred the moment he comes again. If I knew where he was I'd send for him."

"He and Bob are a hidin' at Spider Jinnis's house," whispered Rose, with a knowing nod of her head and wide, wondering eyes. "That's why I thought you must ha' been up to some'at with 'em."

I reassured her, but warned her that it might mean death to me and Fred and Bob if our whereabouts were made known to the public at large. Indeed, I realised that Fred meant that I was in peril from Stafford. I shuddered as that awful night on Breydon came back to my memory, as I saw again the relentless manner in which Stafford had shot down the two preventive men and aimed at the officer. I did not doubt that that poor fellow had suffered the fate of his subordinates. But I longed for such further particulars as I hoped Fred or Bob would be able to give me.

How was it, too, that Fred and Bob were not at headquarters; how was it they were in hiding, and what sort of hiding could it be that permitted them to call at Prettyman's in daylight? Here I was foolish. I might have remembered that on that lonely triangular island no man could be spied upon without seeing that he was observed. Fred owned a fine pair of binoculars, as did Spider Jinnis, presented to him by an enthusiastic fowler to whom he had shown some sport, and which he used chiefly for looking for parcels of wild fowl in hard weather, so that, if Fred were without his, he could use Spider's. No, Fred and Bob were safe enough so long as they kept to the island and only showed themselves to men of the blood like all these marsh farmers.

But what about the railway strike? What about the proposed invasion by Germany? I *must* learn what was happening in the world!

"Rose," I said, "could ye send a message to ask Fred or Bob to come round to-night?"

She flushed, and looked hurt. "If Granny say you fare strong enow," she said, reluctantly, "I reckon I am bound to do your biddin'."

She rose from her seat beside my couch of sweet hay and rugs, now laid so that I could look down on the river through the window and see the cockneys passing in their hired tubs, and on which I could rest, now that I was gaining strength and ease, by rising from bed.

"I'll do as you ax," she said again. She almost ran from my garret, and my heart was wrung to see that her shoulders heaved as she went out, and that she caught her apron to her eyes.

Granny was feeding me up now. And never have I lived on such game out of season, such exquisitely cooked fresh-water fish—perch and eels, tench and lamprey—for Granny knew the value of the lamprey

that is usually cut up for bait—such tit-bits of beef and mutton, such broth, smuggled rum, home-brewed strong ale, as I enjoyed at Prettyman's farm. I knew the farmer's ordinary fare was cold pork or bacon, with home-made bread, curd cheese pressed in a "box," and pig's fry and sheep's pluck. All very good things, but different from the delicacies which were heaped upon my plate day after day. I would requite these good people when I came into my own again. It would be difficult, for they would take no money. But first I must find out how the land lay. And then, for the first time, I felt at my throat. The magic bag, fastened to the eel skin, was still there. I wondered if Rose or Granny had been puzzled by it. Probably the latter knew that it was some mystic talisman, and had taken it as a matter of course. I hoped so.

Dusk had fallen, and the peaceful hour "between the lights" had come. The red legs and their young, now flying strongly, had ceased to whirl and whistle over marsh and river. The hornpie had schooled their broods, to follow them to salter waters or to the turnip fields, by this time. Six weeks and more since I had been brought to the marsh farm! Good God! what a slice out of a man's life, and how thankful I ought to be that I had come to myself at the end of it.

I heard a soft step on the river wall, and then Fred's voice below stairs. Soon the dear old fellow was up in my garret, Rose preceding him with a candle.

Fred was all but in tears as he gripped my hand. "Thank Gord, Master Jack," he said. "Tha'ss as true as Gord Bob and me never thought to hear ye speak again when we carried ye to the Berney Arms, and that's a fact."

I, too, felt emotion at the meeting. I wrung the gnarled, honest hand as hard as my strength would

permit. "My dear old boy," I said, "sit down beside me and tell me all that happened that night. I remember nothing after I had the crack on the head from that swine Stafford. Tell me all you know, and if things are going on all right with the brotherhood."

"I'll tell you what I know," said Fred gravely, "and then you'll be the better judge of us two to say what shall be done."

"First," I interrupted him, "is there a railway strike now?"

"Not yet," said Fred. "But I see in last Sunday's *People* that there's talk of it, so you want to get well and strong as quick as ye can, Master Jack, for there's only you as know the whool on it."

"Thank God there's time!" I said, intensely relieved. I did not think that Ruth had been kidnapped. I felt pretty certain that the kidnapping and the betrayal of the *Otter* to the Germans were to be simultaneous, or practically so. Both my love and my patriotism could wait for my strength to grow greater. Thank God, indeed!

"Now tell me how I was saved," I begged.

Fred began to hum and haw, and I to suspect the truth. "Come," I said, "out with it. I'll bet you saved me!"

Fred became the colour of a damask dahlia. "Well, that was like this here, Master Jack," he said. "Me and Bob had just come up agin when we see Stafford shoot them two gaugers who fell on deck, and you go for him. I see him strike you, and fling ye overboard, and then I see him shoot down the orficer, and drag his body aboard, as it nigh went over. He worn't a goin' to let none o' *them* bodies drift in the tide you may be sure, nor yet set their boat adrift. What he done with 'em I don't rightly know. But I'll make a bet they lie buried or burnt

in the grounds of the brotherhood somewheres, and the boat is brook up and used for firewood. He din't lose his head, Master Rex Stafford. Not him. And he thote he'd got you out of the way and hadn't no objections to your body bein' found drowned, ye see! Well, me and Bob see ye go over like a dead man, but I reckoned yar head was hard enow to stand wuss than what he give ye, for I see the pistol butt glanced off a trifle, or that would ha' smashed in your skull bone, and it hadn't done that by the sound on it. So I hadn't no wish to stay aboard with them mudderous willains, nor yet hadn't Bob. So we thought as we should do better overboard tew, and oover we jumped afore Stafford nootussed us. Whether he think we're drownded or what he think I don't rightly know, for he can lie like old Isaac Barnacle o' Mereby Hall. Howsomedever, when Bob and me found ourselves a swimmin' up tide with the flood strong unner us, we thote as we might as well have a look round for yew. And sure enow we found ye floatin' on the top. Bein' onconscious like, ye see ye hadn't swallered a barrel full o' water, and accordinlie youd kep' afloot. So Bob and me we jest steadied ye, sort o' steered ye in the wake o' the *Otter*, and she went ahead some fast arter we left yew may deepend. Slow and sure we took ye up, one on each side on ye, till the tide swep' us agin the stairs o' the Berney Arms staithe. We h'isted ye out and I went in fust ta see who was theer. Theer worn't noobardy but the landlord and his missus, and they worn't any too sharp-sighted at that time o' night. So we carried ye up there and pored a drop o' tew o' sperrits down yar t'root, and rubbed ye with rum till I felt yar heart start a beatin' a bit strongerer and more strongerer. So I says to Bob, 'Tha'ss no good us lavin' on him here. Theer oan't be no one to look

arter him. Le'ss you and me ferry him acrost and take him to Prettyman's. I know ole Prettyman think a sight on him. So we fixed up a kind o' hand barrer, and shoved some dry hay on it, pushed acrost the river in the ferry boat, and brote ye here, and right glad they wuz to hev ye, and right glad am I to hear ye and see ye speakin' and actin' like yarself agin! Praise Gord Almighty, Master Jack! For to tall ye the honest truth I didn't never 'spect ye to come to yar right mind agin! But that there old granny—lor! she know more 'an any darctor, and I ha' see that gal Rose tew, she's a good un! Lor', bor, she ha' looked arter ye like a hen arter her first spring brood o' chicks! A right good gal she be! And the old man, he fare as playsed as Punch, and right proud for hevin' a gennleman o' the rale gentry nussed back in his house. Gie's yar hand agin, bor! Lord, Master Jack, I fare fit ta jump outer my skin, I dew!"

I gripped the old fellow's hand again, and now I saw the tears rolling down his cheeks. He wiped them off with his wrist, openly, not ashamed. His face was aglow with pleasure.

"I might have guessed I owed you my life, old friend," I said. "And now, Fred, what of headquarters? What of Miss Ruth, and the skipper?"

"He! He! He!" laughed Fred, a little hysterically, for he was all agog with joy and emotional tenderness. "The skipper he ha' made a rare to-do. He don't know nothin' about ye. He on'y know as yew and me and Bob ha' all disappeared. He ha' been axin' rum funny questions o' Stafford, and I dew hear as he fare to keep an eye on him, and to be a bit careful how he trust him now."

"But Miss Ruth?" I asked again.

Fred leant forward. "She and old June know. I managed to get word to Pottin through Spider's

darter, who took some chickens and ducks to 'The House o' the Three Skippers,' all innocent like; but with a noot for the Franchman, and they know most o' what happened, though not all, and the rum thing is as Pottin swear he knowed all about it afore he was tode, and that ole June's magic told him all about it so as he hadn't been fearin' you was dead. But they ha' all been wery anshus 'cos ye kep' senseless so long, and I get a word or two now and then, ye don't want to ax how or t'rough whom, and then I shan't ha'e ta lie, and they say as Miss Ruth ha' been pinin' and peakin' a bit. But I'll manage to let her know as yew ha' come round, and then she'll soon get back har looks and ate har wittles like a healthy wench as she be."

"Did she seem sorry for me, Fred?" I asked, like any silly ass of a calf lover of nineteen.

"I did hear as she shet herself up along o' ole June, and the ole woman played all kinds o' hanky panky, and when it was over they fared a bit more cheerful, but oncommon anshus like. Howsomdever, they don't know where me and Bob is hid, for Stafford tode the skipper a heap o' lies and as we'd betrayed him and fought agin' him and runned away from the *Otter* when we see as the rewenue chaps was gettin' the wust on it. Sune as yew fare fit enow to go, we'll let the skipper know the truth. But granny say that oan't be jest yit. Yew doan't want to run no risks for—Ha! Ha!—for Miss Ruth's sake."

I began to say "Shut up, you old fool!" but I was interrupted by a wailing sigh, and the sound of a falling body outside my door. "Tha'ss Rose, by Gord it is!" cried Fred. "The silly little mawther ha' been a clappin' her ear to the door, pore little thing! I don't blame yew, Master Jack. Ta bain't your fault. It's gals, a pack o' fules!

Fancy a restin' her heart on a man as didn't know he was alive. Yet I tell ye that gal ha' worrited over ye as if she was yar murrer. But it worn't like a murrer she looked at ye. Pore little wench! I reckon she ha' swownded and rolled down the stairs. I doan't like ta distarb her!"

I struggled to get up, so much was I moved by this unhappy contretemps. But I found that I was still too weak for any exertion. Fred thrust me back with a good-humoured push. "She's best left aloan, Master Jack," he said. "That'll shame her cruel if I go and find her layin' theer."

I saw that he was right, and on his assuring me that the stairs wound, and were low, and that no one could hurt themselves by rolling down them, I agreed to his proposed *laissez faire* treatment. And presently I heard a subdued sound of sobbing, quickly checked, then the opening of the door into the kitchen, into which the staircase ran.

"The suner ye get out o' here the better, Master Jack," urged Fred solemnly. "She's as pratty as a picter, and she ha' set her heart on ye. Ta bain't fair to her nor to yew! I know yew wouldn't do no harm. But men are men and gals is gals, and mostly fools, and if the gal—— But there, I don't want ye to do someat as yew'd regret all your life!"

He blew his nose, and I assured him that there was no danger of my giving way to that temptation. But I agreed that the sooner I could be moved the better. "And bring Bob to-morrow," I said. "I want to send a message to headquarters if it can be sent, and three heads are better than two. Good night, old friend, and—well, you know. I can't thank you for saving my life. But you know what I feel!"

We gripped hands again, and he left me with much to think about.

Rose came up as soon as he had departed.

She was very pale and trembling, but she had hidden all marks of her weeping. I pretended that I guessed nothing. She at once grew reproachful. "You ha' talked and talked and now you look right ill," she said. "Granny said you worn't to tire yourself. How can you be so onkind to us!" Tears filled her eyes again, and her dear little body began to shake and tremble.

"There, dear," I said, soothingly, and not intending to call her dear. "I am sorry, but we had so much to say."

"Granny ha' made ye some'at extra strong to bring back the strength yew ha' lost a mardlin'," sobbed Rose. "May I go and get it if ye playse?"

She threw such a pitiful look at me out of her lovely eyes. My heart, now beating stronger and with redder blood, began to throb.

"Hang it!" I said, "this won't do. God grant me strength to act honourably to this child. I should deserve to be hanged if I took advantage of her innocent folly."

CHAPTER XVI.

ROSE'S OFFER.

FOR some days after my interview with Fred I waited patiently for further news of him and of Ruth. I hoped that he might have been able to get into communication with headquarters, and bring me a message straight from her dear lips. Days passed without my hearing or seeing anything more of him. I began to blame myself for a thousand things. Why had I not inquired more particularly concerning the conditions which obtained at headquarters? Surely "The House of the Three Skippers" was conducted like an ordinary gentleman's house, and tradespeople, butchers, etc., etc., called at the street door at the back, and took orders and left goods. To keep the place shut up like a hermitage, when it was known to be occupied, would only be to draw the local attention to it, the last thing to be desired from the point of view of the brotherhood. I ought to have asked Fred about this point, and what had become of the *Dabchick*.

As the days passed and I got no fresh intelligence I began to grow fretful. I lost the appetite which had grown so eager, and consequently I lost some of my regained strength. Old Granny worried about me, putting innumerable questions and forcing broth after broth, herb tonic after herb tonic upon me. But I noticed that Rose never took part in these

inquisitions, or in the old woman's endeavours to force me to swallow some fresh concoction. I also noticed that if I was suffering from a relapse, Rose was by no means herself. Her face was losing its healthy colour, she was becoming languid, her eyes wider and darker, there was rarely a smile upon her pretty mouth, and never now did I hear her voice singing old country ballads, ballads which had delighted me as soon as I was considered to be well enough to " stand the n'ise on 'em."

Time and time again I caught the girl with an expression upon her face as though she longed to say something to me, but dared not. I remembered the time when I had heard that pathetic wail outside my door, when Fred was talking of Ruth, but I could not attribute the change in the girl to that. And it may be that I felt guilty because of her altered looks and manner. God knows that I had done nothing to encourage the love which I feared she had conceived for me. But I might have been rougher with her, sharper, less kindly, and by my brusque ingratitude have weaned her heart from the place where I now feared it was set.

This thought helped to keep back my recovery. Old Granny began to fuss about me as she had done during the first days of my consciousness. The farmer himself came up more frequently and tried to cheer me up with his drily humorous accounts of the events of the marshlands or of Yarmouth market, always fruitful sources for humorous narratives.

The day came when I heard the old hale grandmother complaining on the stairs. " Drat both on 'em," I heard her say in which she fondly believed to be an inaudible whisper. " The gal must ha' got the flutterin' spasms, and as for Master Jack, I reckon he ha' got the green sickness."

What special disease was expressed by "the green sickness" I did not know, but I guessed that it was one liable to bring its sufferer into ridicule or contempt, and I flushed at the old woman's tone.

A morning came when I could hardly endure to remain at the marsh farm longer. I tossed and grumbled, grumbled and tossed, rose from my bed and, being dressed, essayed to walk boldly across the garret two or three times. Alas! I had scarcely crossed the tiny floor once when I found my legs giving way beneath me. "I *must* get out," I told myself. "I shall never pick up strength here. I must get out into the fresh air!" and this with my window wide open beside me and the delightful air of marshland streaming in and brushing my forehead with its message of patience. Far away across the levels I could hear a hay clipper at work, and I thought of the rabbits and landrails which were falling to the old muzzle-loaders of the marshmen, and longed to be there.

I ought to have known better, but I suppose my illness had made me a fretful child. At all events, when Rose came up with a steaming "earthenware cook bowl"—not unlike a French "casserole," with a brace of landrails perfectly cooked therein, together with a "flapper" killed in its innocent youth, I turned pettishly from the food.

"I don't want it," I said. "I am not hungry."

For a moment the girl stood silent. I looked up at her, my conscience reproaching me for my boorishness, and I saw that she was all a-tremble, that her eyes stared wide and pitiful upon me, and that there were now dark rims round them which had not been there when first I saw her face by my bedside.

"What is it, child?" I asked, in a little more gentlemanly manner. "It is not your fault. I

am worried, that is all. One can't help being worried, you know."

I tried to smile at her, and she at me, and if my attempt was no better than hers, I am not surprised that presently she put down the tray with plate and cook-pot on the broad window-seat and burst into hiccoughing sobs which rent my very heart.

"Rose, Rose!" I cried, rising painfully and going to her. "What is it, child? Can I help? You used to be so bright and happy, too. What is it?"

Surely if ever a man made an ass of himself, I did by speaking in that manner! The last thing I should have done was to compare her present sadness with the bright vivacity of her first period.

She sobbed without reply for a few seconds. Then she seized my hand and looked at me with her lovely eyes suffused with tears. "Tell me true, Master Jack," she begged; "tell me true! Does that gal mean so much to you? Does she mean so much? Do you love her so dear! Oh, tell me true! I heard what old Fred was a sayin'. Oh, do you love her so dear? Is that what's a making you go without your victuals, and look and act as if you didn't care to live no more? Oh! I hain't said a word not to nobody! Old granny she's a puzzlin' her dear old brains sorft to find some fresh herb to do ye good. But I know no herb won't help ye! You tell me true, Master Jack, if ye think you owe me aught—oh! what hev I said! O' course you don't owe me nothin'. But I mean if you have a kindly thought o' pore Rose, tell me true if you love her so dear as you'll die if you don't win her?"

This was coming to the point with a vengeance. But I could not take offence. The girl was so obviously sincere, so feverishly anxious to know the truth. I never thought that my confession of love for Ruth would do more than enable Rose to stifle

her love for me and me to escape from a temptation which grew greater every day. But then, until I knew the truth, I had never met so noble a girl as Rose, so noble, that is, in her first self-sacrifice and her superb devotion to a hopeless passion.

"Thank you, dear child," I said, "for saying nothing of what you heard. You ask for the truth. I should be a villain not to tell it to you. I owe you too much to lie to you, little girl. I do love Ruth Pettingill with all my heart, and I love my country, too, child. And both my love and my country may be in danger if I cannot get news. Why does not Fred Banham come again? Oh why doesn't he?"

Rose made no reply to my question, but seated herself hurriedly in an armchair. She clasped her poor red, rough hands together, and I could see her fingers working each against the other. Her lips trembled and her eyelids quivered.

"I—I knowed ye did," she said, with a sigh.

"I reckon what you want," she said, in a minute or two, "is a sight of her! Tha'ss a pity she can't come to ye! She'd be welcome, you know that."

"I know you are all that is good and kind," I said, taking her hand and kissing it. She withdrew it sharply and shuddered all over her dear self.

"Then I'll fetch her for ye," said Rose. "I reckon from what I ha' heared as anyone can call at the back door o' 'The House o' the Three Skippers'—oh! I know where she live, I shouldn't be a woman if I didn't—and ax for Miss Pettingill! Wery well then. I'll take the dinghey this arternune and a couple o' my best fat pullets. And I'll ax for the lady herself when the sarvants say as my price is too high. Then if once I can see her I'll tell her she can come here. Why don't she take your cutter that's a layin' agin the boathouse there? I seed

it when I was over at Reedham night afore larse. Why can't she come in yar cutter? Ain't she able to sail her? If not, onless I'm mistook, there's a planty as is able and willin' to come with her."

"But not who may know where I am, child," I said, all afire nevertheless with the splendour of her proposal. I thought for an instant. Could there possibly be anything in old June's promise that with the aid of the magic bags Potin and I could communicate with each other at a distance? Now that I was apart from the old witch's influence, and was moreover recovering from a serious illness, and had passed through long lonely periods of thought, it was hard for me to remember, with patience, the farcical ritual of those magic bags, let alone credulity. Still I was on the marsh, and the atmosphere of the marshland was all about me. "Rose," I asked, "did you ever hear of June Rivett, a woman even older than your great grandmother?"

The girl's face turned white. "Old June!" she gasped! "Surely, Master Jack, everyone ha' heared o' ole June! She hev more power than any other woman or man in these parts. But I hain't heared of her for over a twalvemonth! Old June! Lord, Master Jack, doan't ye go agin her! I ha' heared, ay! and seed things as you wouldn't believe! She's not nateral, she fare more than mortal, that old woman. Doan't ye go agin ole June!"

So the witch's name was notorious! How came it that I had never so much as heard of her before? A moment's thought told me that as I was "gentry," I should be considered as incapable of appreciating old June's points. There is nothing the marshland peasant resents more than the assumption of superior knowledge which the educated classes flaunt in the faces of the illiterate when the latter

are endeavouring to persuade the former for their own good.

Son of the marshlands as I was I belonged to the hall and not to the cottage. I had heard of reputed witches. But I had never heard of old June. I understood that certain old hags were called witches for sport. Of those I might hear. But of a case of genuine witchcraft, according to the faith of the people, I should be kept uninformed, both for my own sake and because, presumably, I should scoff at any evidence offered me.

"I don't wish to," I said. "But she gave me a charm. Do you believe it could be of any use?"

Rose grew so excited that, for the moment, I think she forgot her love tragedy. "Charm!" she cried. "Give you a friendly charm! Lor, Master Jack, you fare in luck! Use? Of course 'twill be of use! If ever you want it, try it. If that doan't work that'll be a masterpiece to me!"

So here again was fathomless trust in the powers of old June. Well, it could do no harm. On the off chance I would put the magic bag to the proof that very night. And to-morrow I would answer Rose's request that she might attempt to see Ruth at the back door of "The House of the Three Skippers."

"Thank you," I said, wearily, for I was beginning to feel tired. The interview had been exciting to me. I sank back and closed my eyes. I daresay my pallor increased.

In an instant I felt Rose's hand brushing my hair from my forehead, felt the fling of some home-made lavender water, and the cool waft of the girl's milk-like breath sending delicious waves of soothing peace from skin to brain.

And, as I breathed in the fragrance from a hollowed hand which was thrust beneath my nostrils I felt

the suggestion of a kiss on my forehead from those sweet lips rather than a kiss itself! Ah! How infinitely sad it was! And how splendid was the offer of this unfortunate marshland beauty.

I could not let her brush my face with her lips again. I opened my eyes, and caught hers yearning over me with a passion as much maternal as erotic, the passion, in fact, of a good, pure woman for the man she loves with reverent worship.

"Dear Rose," I said, "I don't know how to thank you for your thought. But wait till to-morrow. I—I hate to let you go there! I hate to think of your coming near the place."

And I did. It seemed repulsive to me that a girl like this marshland wild blossom should soil herself by contact with certain members of the brotherhood. Suppose that villain Stafford, or one of his vile myrmidons, set eyes on her, what might not be the outcome of it? Please God, oh, please God! the hospitality and generous kindness shown me by these simple farmhouse folk should not be met with a return of shame and wrong.

"If it's good enow for the girl you love it's good enow for me," said Rose, with pitiless logic.

I could not explain to her that Ruth might have personal defences—defences of education, pride, and intense courage—which might keep her safe in those surroundings, but which would be insufficient to protect a simple child of the marsh like Rose. Moreover, Ruth had her brother, a man skilled in stealthy plotting, a man of intense personal power, to act as her guardian. I think, also, it revolted me that this child, who had been so devoted to me, should rend her heart by acting as intermediary between the girl I worshipped and myself. It seemed a refinement of cruelty to accept the sacrifice which she herself offered.

"It's different, different," I said. But I fancied that Rose's cheeks were brighter, and that her eyes shone with a proud brilliancy. "Forgive me now, child; I am tired. To-morrow I'll ask you and myself if it is right that you should do this for me!"

"And you won't fret any more, not any more," pleaded Rose. "If you are goin' to fret all night and to refuse your victuals I'll go to-night, I will! I will, so there! Promise you'll be happy as can be, and eat what I bring ye and I'll wait. But if ye fret and fidget and moan again through the night"—how on earth did the child know that for the last two or three nights I had been unable to restrain a moan or two of despair and anxiety?—"I'll get afloat in the dinghey at once, I will, and I'll bring the gal back or know the rayson why, and that's a fact!"

She rose from her chair with a fervour of determination. She would be as good as her word. I knew it. I must make the promise she demanded. And it was the easier, because Rose's splendid courage and firm decision had brought back hope to me, had restored to me something of the manliness which I had lost. And then the thought struck me: Would Ruth have done so much for me as Rose offered to do were their positions reversed? But that way lay more fretting and fidgeting, which I had promised to avoid. I looked in Rose's face and sucked in courage and endurance from it.

"I'll promise whatever you wish," I said.

"Then I'll go and hot this up agin," said Rose briskly. "Now, mind you keep your word! I shall know if you ha' been a worritin yourself when I come back, and I shan't be long."

The dear girl whipped up the tray, and was off down the winding little stairway.

I lay back and pondered. And, as I rested myself

against the pillow I felt a tingling warmth upon my chest. What could it be? It tickled, then stung, and then seemed to writhe in stinging contortions. I tore aside my clothes and placed my hand to the point of irritation.

My God! It was old June's mystic bag! And, as my hand touched it, it seemed to leap in response. I laid my hand upon it, and for a moment all was dark to me. Then I heard a voice, the voice of Potin, speaking to me in words as plainly audible as though he were by my side.

I remembered directions, and at once raised the bag to my forehead so that I could reply to any message I might receive. "M'sieur Jaques, M'sieur Jaques!" called the Frenchman's voice. "Do you 'ear? Do you 'ear? Eet is me! Eugéne Potin, wiz ze leetle *bourse*, zee leetle bag, in my 'and!"

I pressed my bag to my brow and spoke. "Yes, I hear! Oh, Potin, I have much to tell you."

"And I also 'ave moch to tell you," said the reply.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE MESSAGE AND REPLY.

It was an extraordinary experience, to hear the Frenchman's voice so clearly, and to look round and see nothing of him. I found, however, that I heard more distinctly when I shut my eyes. So I closed them, and with the mystic bag still pressed against my forehead, I continued to listen and to speak.

"Is all well with you?" I asked, anxiously. "Does Stafford suspect that I am living?"

"All goes well at present. I do not think 'e suspect. But 'e is oneasy; 'e is not comfortable. Twice or sree times 'e 'ave taken ze *Buzzard* more distant than 'e say to ze master. Miss Rut', she goes well. She knows you live. She tell me some 'ow ze old Fred 'e let 'er know. But not 'ow you are first losed and then live."

"Never mind that," I murmured. "That can wait. I can hear no news here. Is there a railway strike yet? Have you heard anything from your own people, from your own secret service? Lord, man, here am I helpless, with all my knowledge to madden me, and unable to do anything to help. If only the strike and the attempt at invasion can be postponed for a month I can foil them. For God's sake tell me all you know!"

"Zere is a strike, but not yet severe, on ze railway. Soon it appears as if it will be serious. It is not yet bad enough for ze attempt. My friend, keep ze bag always with you. If I learn more, if sings become—become what you call urgent, I will send ze magic message."

"I wish I could see you and Miss Ruth," I said. "Listen! A girl here, a girl who is devoted to me and to Miss Ruth" (I thought I had better tell this lie for the sake of Rose. I did not wish anyone, not even my friend the Frenchman, to guess the reason of Rose's willingness to take a message to Ruth. It would not only shame the girl, but make me look a deplorable ass if I were to let out the secret that whatever Rose did she did for love of me)—"A pretty, auburn-haired girl who will go to the back of 'The House of the Three Skippers' with chickens to sell, and who will ask for Miss Ruth. If she is asked her name she will say 'Rose.' You may believe all she says and send any message by her. Please tell Miss Ruth of this. Oh, I wish you and she could find some way of coming to see me without the knowledge of our enemies! There is the *Dabchick*. Is it impossible for you and her to go for a sail on the cutter and come where Rose tells you to come? There are so many boats about the waters at this time of year that it ought to be easy. Surely 'The House of the Three Skippers' is carried on like any other house so far as the public knows."

"*Ahi!*" cried little Potin's voice. "It is an idea. I sink it may be. I veell try. Ze skipper 'e does not know yet zat you live. It may be we shall tell 'im. Sings are getting difficult 'ere. Someone 'ave told ze capitaine of ze murders on ze *Ottair*. 'E is furious! 'E say little, but 'e brood moch."

For a few minutes I got no further word by this mysterious wireless system of transmitting speech. Then I heard a low mutter, as though Potin felt that he must warn me of something, but dared not speak aloud. "'E come," came the murmur. "I dare no more now. Remember ze bag."

I held the spell to my forehead for some moments longer, and sent word message after word message to the Frenchman, but I heard nothing more. And then, now that the whole thing was over, and I was at liberty to ponder on the marvel of this magic, I fell back exhausted as much by blind surprise as by the excitement and the exertion attendant upon it.

I lay with my eyes closed till I heard a gentle knock at my garret door, and looking in that direction, I saw Rose returning with the hot food. "Now," she said, "you must keep your word and eat; eat! oh, lots and lots!"

"Rose," I said, taking her hand in mine, "I have thought. You may go to-morrow if you will. They will ask your name; say 'Rose,' and then, if you ask for Miss Pettingill she will see you if she can."

I could not beg her to arrange so that Ruth should go for a cruise on the *Dabchick* and come round over Burgh Flats into the Waveney to the rond opposite the Prettyman farm. I felt a skunk for letting the girl go to "The House of the Three Skippers." I soothed my conscience by assuring myself again and again that it was for the sake of my country as much as for my love that I desired to get into direct communication with "the honest party" of the brotherhood. It had never occurred to me previously to wonder how the skipper had managed to secure the necessary funds for his stupendous

undertaking. The name was a good old Norfolk name. But I did not know it as belonging to any one of means. And no one without large means could have obtained the submarine, the aeroplane, and incurred the vast expense of opening up the Roman chamber, installing the electric dynamos and fittings, buying the hilly upland and the riverside wharf for the timber yard, and enclosing all so secretly and so effectually and commodiously. Could it be that not only Stafford, but the skipper was paid by Teutonic gold? I did not believe it! I could not believe that the skipper was a man prepared to sell his country for lucre. And then a bright thought came to me. It might, I thought, be a fact that someone had offered to back the skipper under certain conditions, that someone had found the cash for the submarine and the aeroplane and the other arrangements of the brotherhood on an understanding which at the time seemed innocent enough to the skipper, but which would prove before the end, to incur gross treason to England. Everyone knows that there are city financiers who are bound by their interests to foreign powers, who finance wars and strikes to the detriment of our empire, but who succeed in keeping out of the limelight. I say everyone knows that scoundrels like these exist. Could it be that Pettingill was the unconscious victim of such a man, and that the time might come when he would be called upon to surrender the *Otter* to the man who had backed him so that Stafford might be able to carry through the enterprise sketched roughly by that guttural voice beneath the great dirigible upon the marsh? The thought sent me into a fever again. Of one thing I was confident, that whatever national treason might be devised, the skipper would never consent to a betrayal of his sister. And I had heard enough

to convince me that the two went together in the designs of Rex Stafford, that his prime motive was the winning of Ruth, and that it was to that end that he was prepared to sacrifice everything—honour, country, and safety.

I still held Rose's hand. I could feel it twitching in my grasp. My groping after possibilities was interrupted by the short sighing sobs which were becoming so horribly painful to me.

"Rose, Rose," I cried, "I won't have it! You shan't go. You shan't!"

The girl slipped her hand out of mine, and stood beside me at her full height. "Yes, Master Jack, I shall," she said. "I can't abear to see you lay here day arter day a eatin' your pore heart out. God knows I unnerstan' how ye feel." For a few moments her speech was again broken by those short, sighing sobs,which seemed to voice the anguish of a tortured soul. "God knows I unnerstan' it," she said again. "Now dee you keep your word, Master Jack, and eat your victuals. I'll go to-morrow, and please Gord I shall bring back some good news for ye, news as will make ye glad and well make ye want to sing and eat and drink till you fare strong and your old self agin. Good-night tee ye, Master Jack. Ye oan't mind if granny come up the last thing. I'm so tired to-night! So tired!"

With that the girl fled out of the room, and I was left feeling more of a brute than ever.

I think that granny knew on what errand Rose was bound on the following day, for I fancy that again my last meal of the day was fixed with some of the white poppy juice. Certainly I slept long and heavily that night, and the sun was well past its noon height when I woke to find the old woman by my bedside.

"She ha' gorn, Master Jack," said granny, "and I wish to thank ye for bein' so frank and truthful to the pore gal. You must ha' seed how ta be with her, and there's many and many a gennleman as would call himself so as would not ha' acted so fair and honourable as you ha' done. But you ha' shown yarself to be a man, as allust. And you shan't lose nothin' by it. Now see ye here, Master Jack; us folk o' the mash we hear and see a sight more 'an we tell of in gin'ral. Old Fred ha' tode me some'at, 'coz he knows I'm one to be trusted. Well, you may believe me. You don't want to worrit. Our Tom he once went over to Hamburg to l'arn the Jarmans how ta make harrin' nets, and he picked up a bit o' the lingo. He wuz out on the mash arter what doan't consarn anyone but hisself t'ree nights ago, and he sees a gre't ole balloon, and one o' them flyin' tea-tables, if a may call 'em so. He stalked 'em, and you know he can stalk the eggs from unner a hen pheasant 'thout her a knowin' on it. Well, he got right close and harkened. And the long and the short on it wuz that there could be nothin' done for a week or a fortnight, but that then the man with the flyin' tea-table wuz ta hev all ready or look out for hisself. Then the balloon went off a rum un, the man with the flyin' tea-table he cussed a bit, and then off he went a snortin'. So you ha' got to be well afore then, and so you shall be."

A week or a fortnight! Yes; that ought to give me time to frustrate the villains. If only I could see the skipper and let him know the danger. And then again I hesitated. Could I be sure that the skipper was innocent? How could Stafford hope to hand over the *Otter* without the skipper's knowledge and consent? He might mean to murder him, and all the honest party. Apart from that I

did not understand how he could be sure of his ground. Oh! if only I could have half an hour face to face with Ruth and Potin!

"You don't know how I thank you, granny," I said. "As for Rose, she'll soon get over her folly, and I shall have the pleasure of giving her a wedding portion on her marriage with some jolly marshman."

"Don't you make no mistake about that, Master Jack," said the old lady. "Folly or not folly, and I doan't see as the poor gal fare a fule for takin' a faancy to you, she oan't hear the name of any man but you for years and years. You don't want to upset her; I know that. For God's sake don't you say to her what you ha' said to me, or she may go and hull herself in the river as like as not."

I nodded. "I feel an awful brute, granny," I said.

"Then it's you're the fule," said the old woman kindly. "Ta bain't yar fault. Lord bless ye, Master Jack, ye needn't think I hain't watched ye. I ha' seed a deal o' young men, and I misdoubted ye at fust when I see how her fancy turned. But you acted like a gennleman, and none of us oan't forgit it. Now you can leave it ta me how ta bring yar young lady up tee ye, for you'll find she'll be a comin' as quick as yar little boat and her sails will bring her the first fine day as she can find a 'scuse, to get away. Now then, tha'ss time you filled your innards. You ha' had a long sleep, as I meant ye to. And Rose will be back in half an hour or an hour. So eat your brekkust and then get up and see if you can't find your way down into the kitchen. I fancy you'll fare a sight stronger this mornin'. I gi'e ye a some'at larse night as I dussen't gi'e ye afore, and I ha' seed that bring

back a man's strength wonnerful many and many a time. Tha'ss one o' my secrets. Even old June don't know on it. And all I'll tell anyone is that there's lamprey and eel, tench, marshmallow, and mountain ash, 'ile o' sweet briar, and wintergeen for the fever, and a few hunnerd other things. Ho! Ho! Ho! And o' that you had a pinch and a drop in your supper larse night. Come, tell me, sit up and take your brekkust. Don't ye fare a bit better?"

I sat up, and, by Jove! now that I began to move out I did indeed feel a difference in my physical powers since the day before. So far as witchcraft is concerned, I will offer no opinion, though, as my readers will understand, I have seen and heard things which are hard to explain by ordinary standards. But that many of the old women of the uplands and marshland have legendary herbal secrets which are more powerful when used properly than all the British Pharmacopœia, I am positive. If the marshfolk are more potent herbalists than the upland people, it is because there is a wider variety of herbs and roots to be found on the lonely levels. But throughout the wilder villages of Norfolk and Suffolk there still exist "wise women" who can produce ointments and herbal drinks which can cure certain ills when the medical faculty has failed. I do not mean that they can cure advanced tuberculosis, but that they can bring a smooth skin where hospitals have failed to get rid of the dermatitis, and heal a wound quicker than any recognised unguent or lotion, or orthodox antiseptic dressing. That the wise women's remedies are themselves antiseptic, I do not doubt. But the ingredients of these recipes are jealously guarded from generation to generation, and even the incitement of a patent remedy promoter cannot induce the old folk to betray their composition.

I felt my strength flowing back through my veins. I looked at my nonagenarian physicianess.

"Granny," I said, "you're a wonder!"

The old woman smiled a little bitterly. "Well, Master Jack," said she, "considerin' how pore Rose ha' give herself away I reckon as you're another, so there's a pair on us. But hark! Here she come. Here come Rose. Now dee you eat up your brekkust, for as true as Gord she shan't come up tee ye till you have et and drunk up every bite and sup."

I was hungry, and made good speed to obey the old woman. In about fifteen minutes I heard the step I had come to know so well outside my door, and the gentle knock that heralded Rose's approach.

"Come in!" I cried.

"I morn't," said Rose's voice. "Granny say as you are to come downstairs, and then you shall hear what you shall hear. That's what she say, and I dursent go agin her."

"Oh, all right!" I cried. I felt so full of vigour and health that morning that I was able to wait a little longer for the news which I hoped to get from my good little messenger. Whatever granny had given me it had encouraged me and tautened my sinews. I felt a man again, though not a very powerful one.

In less than five minutes I was on my way down the winding staircase, which I now saw for the first time. It was one of the regular little marshland staircases, with narrow wooden steps coiling round in a half curve, till it reached the yellow-painted door which opened into the kitchen. I understood that there was another stairway and more bedrooms on the other side of the house; this solitary garret had been left for me as being more retired and suitable.

I bent to duck my head under the top of the door casement, and entered the kitchen, with its sweet-sanded bricks, its scoured deal table and dresser, and its superb old china mixed with a lot of cheap modern trash.

And there, in the kitchen, sat my Ruth and Sam Durrant. Of the Prettyman family there was no sign.

CHAPTER XVIII.

I HAVE A VISITOR AND LEARN THE DATE.

No sooner did I appear in the kitchen than Sam Durrant leapt to his feet, made a hasty grab at my hand, and was off out of the room like a bolted rabbit. He was a fat tub of a good-natured little man, famous as the helmsman of a racing yacht sailing a winning race, but no good when emergencies arose or he got a bad start. But he certainly had tact, I told myself, as I made for Ruth, delighted to feel that my strength had come back to me enough to hurry to clasp her in my arms.

"Oh, Jack!" cried Ruth, submitting to my embrace for a minute or so. "You ought not, you know. But I am so pleased to see you again that I cannot forbid you, not just this once. Oh, Jack dear, how ill you look!"

She threw her arms around my neck, and in sheer abandonment of delight, kissed me heartily, frankly, with all the courage of a love in which she felt no shame.

"My dearest," I cried, "I did not expect to receive so sweet an answer to my message. What made you think of it dearest, and however did you manage to slip away?"

"I did not think of it," said Ruth, looking a little vexed. "It was that noble girl, Rose! Oh, Jack,

how she loves you! She didn't say so, but I could see it in every word she said, and in every flash of her eyes. So lovely a girl, too; I ought to be jealous, Jack! But she told me so frankly that you were pining for the sight of me, and she said, with tears in her eyes, and in her voice, 'I can't abear to see him pinin' hisself sick agin, miss.' Jack, that girl is far better and stronger than I am. I could never go to a rival and bring her to the man I loved. Jack! don't you think you'd better give me up and love her?"

I suppose I looked so angry at this ridiculous tirade that again she flung her arms around me and cried: "But if you do, you will kill me, dear. Rose may have more sense and more courage than I have, but she can't love you more! Oh, when I heard that you were drowned I thought I should have died! Fortunately Sam here said to me and June he did not believe you were killed, though he pretended to all the others that there was no doubt of your death. He told me and old June that he saw the blow that brute struck you and knew that it was not enough to do for—it was his expression, dear!—do for a man like you, and he said he saw Fred and Bob leap overboard, and did not doubt that they would find you and swim with you to shore somewhere. But he warned me and June not to let anyone know what he believed. He said that if Stafford suspected that any of you three were alive he would hunt you out and never rest satisfied till you were dead. And then at last Fred got word to Eugéne, and I tried to be happy again! You know that my brother is well again, though he does not seem to have all his old power and magnetism. He is strange. I do not know if he believes all Stafford's lies, but he pretends to do so. He does not confide in me. But I am sure

that he is worrying about something. He was half mad when one of Stafford's tools let out about the murders of the preventive men. But he seemed to pull himself together and to accept it as an inevitable tragedy. But he has been changed since that night—greatly changed. I cannot understand him. But oh, Jack, here am I going on gossiping, and you have not told me a word about your adventures. Tell me quickly, you bad boy! I can only stay a few minutes. I got leave to go for a sail in the *Dabchick*, and to take Sam with me. That's how it is that I am here. I brought your pretty messenger back with me unseen by any of our people. They are all in the great chamber this morning except my brother. There's something going on."

I saw that it was no time for shillyshallying, and I told her all I knew concerning the dirigible and the plan to seize the *Otter* for Germany at a critical period of the impending strike. Like a fool I felt an indelicacy in telling her of the plot to carry her off in the dirigible! And for that error I was to pay dearly, very nearly to the utmost.

I flattered myself that I would get Potin on the magic telephone again, and discuss ways and means with him. But if only——bah! What is the use of complaining about a hideous mistake when the whole affair is over?

"You know the strike is started, and is already very serious?" said Ruth. "There have been riots in the East End of London, and troops are beginning to be moved to the most violent places. And if you are right, the Germans are at the bottom of this! Oh, how I wish we could sink all their fleet and that the French could give them a thorough good thrashing on land! The cowards, to fight battles by bribing labour leaders and strike agitators! The cowards!"

"Yes," I said, "It's cowardly enough, but I suppose it is fair enough in modern diplomatic strategy. We are the idiots to permit it. But, my darling, what had I better do? Dare you tell your brother what I heard on the marsh? He ought to know. I—I suppose he does not know?" I asked, a little nervously.

"*He* know?" cried the girl, in innocent amazement. "Why, he'd kill Stafford if he knew of it. That is why I am afraid to tell him! That might bring things to a crisis beforehand. And I understand that you wish to frustrate them at the very moment!"

"Yes," I said. "I say, Ruth dear, don't think me impertinent. But do you know if your brother had the money himself for all those wonderful things—the *Otter*, the *Buzzard*, and all the expenses that must have been incurred in arranging the grounds and underground works of the brotherhood for secret service?"

My darling shook her head. "I don't think it can have been all his money," she said. "I fancy that some city gentleman financed him at first. I believe he has been paid off since. But I am almost sure a Mr.—a Mr. Solano, I think, advanced large sums. Yes, that was how my cousin Stafford came into it. He introduced Mr. Solano to my brother. My brother had had the notion of this smuggling in his brain for a long time. Then he mentioned it to Stafford, and he brought forward this Mr. Solano."

"Ah!" I said, "Solomons! he may be English or German. That does not help."

"But can't you go straight to the government and tell them all you know, dear?" urged Ruth.

"And tell them about the *Otter*, too," I said, with a sad laugh. "No, my dearest, I can't do that."

"Oh!" cried Ruth, "How disgusting it all is! I do wish, Jack, we could get out of it—you, and Raymond, and I. Fred and Bob and the other good fellows would soon be out, too, I know. It's only that wretch, Rex Stafford, that urges on my brother."

"Ah!" I said. Then I thought: "Now I wonder how much the skipper knows. It is just on the cards that he knows as much as I, and is laying a little trap for our friend the air man. I dare not trust to that, though! Lord, what a mess it is! And the strike on and everything! Fred didn't know about that. Of course he wouldn't." I looked up. "What's the date, dear?" I asked, remembering that up to then no one had told me the real date, but that every one had avoided the topic.

"It's the fifteenth of August, Jack," said Ruth. "Didn't you know?"

"My God!" I cried. "I must have lain unconscious nearly three months."

"Oh!" cried Ruth, "and no one had told you! Perhaps I should not have told you. Jack! Jack! You won't have a relapse, will you?"

I suppose I looked a little overcome by the shock. "No, no!" I said. "It was only for a moment. By Jove, how good the Prettymans have been! They must have tended me night and day."

Ruth flushed a little. "Yes," she said, "and not I, Jack! You don't hate me, do you? You don't think I ought to have come when I didn't know? I couldn't help it that Rose nursed you and I didn't. Jack, you don't think you ought to give me up and marry Rose, do you?"

I burst out into a laugh. The notion at the moment, with my darling sitting there before me, was too absurd.

"No, you silly darling," I cried, kissing her. "I don't. But now listen, dear! Use your own judgment if you will tell the skipper. And be careful of yourself. Above all, be careful of yourself! Remember that villain's attempt upon you when first I fought him! He may try again now that he believes he has a clear course. For God's sake run no risks. Fred cannot be there to look after you. I will warn Potin, and tell Sam Durrant before you go."

"Potin!" asked Ruth. "Was it true, then? Did he manage to communicate with you through old June's magic? I told you she could do more than you believed, now didn't I?"

It was the word of a true woman. She had told me so, and had been proved right. I admitted it.

At this moment in came Durrant, grinning all over his fat, jolly face. "You'll escuse me, master, you and me will hev a planty o' time ta mardle in time ta come, I hope, but the young missis said as she were to be home agin by arternune tea time, and there's an ebb tide and a foul wind. I reckon we'd best be a gettin' under way!"

"Right, Sam!" I said. "Get her ready. Miss Pettingill won't be long."

I was torn with love and patriotism. The strike was in active operation. How long would it be before the Germans struck? I must get particulars. I must get daily papers somehow. One of the Prettyman boys must go to Yarmouth or Lowestoft to buy me a sheaf. God knew when it would be the time for me to be on the watch day and night. Thank goodness, my strength was coming back! But oh! This anxiety for my country and for my love would keep me back if they could!

For the ten minutes which were occupied in our farewell nothing happened which will interest the

reader. It is sufficient to say that they were given up to a devout and radiant thankfulness that once more we two were together as true lovers, that once again there was hope for us that one day we might come together and be happy afar from all these plots and plans, smuggling and treachery. I dared not accompany her to the riverside lest I should be seen and recognised by any passing boat crew, or from the powerful telescope which was, I had reason to believe, mounted on a raised platform near the hangar on the hill behind "The House of the Three Skippers," miles over the levels to the north-west. It was painful to part, but when I saw my darling springing down the river wall to the gangplank Sam had laid over the moist rond, I felt that I was far the happier and better for the interview. I knew now where I stood, and could judge something of the difficulties with which I had to grapple.

It was not till I saw the mains'l of the *Dabchick* glide past the window that Rose and her grandmother returned. The old woman passed through with a look at me. Rose remained, and held out her hand tremulously. "I did what I could, Master Jack," she said. "You—you don't want to thank me."

And with those pitiful words the noble child ran sobbing up the staircase on the opposite side of the house to that leading to my garret.

"Damnation!" I said to myself. "Why on earth should my happiness mean this dear girl's misery! It's deuced hard luck. I wish I could make her happy somehow," I said half aloud.

"But you can't, bor!" came the loud tones of the old woman from behind me. "She'll ha'e ta grin and bear it like most on us! One man and two women won't split up right nohow. And one's

your proper mate and t'other bain't. If so be you'd come a courtin' my gal I'd ha' broke my copper stick on your head. But you ha' acted straight and honest, and if the gal must be a fule, why she must, and that's all about it. Now dee you set down and drink this here bowl. You'll feel twice the man you be arterwards."

I did as she bade, and felt power returning to my bones and muscles with every spoonful.

CHAPTER XIX.

UNEXPECTED DEVELOPMENTS.

THE longer I thought over the news which Ruth had brought me, the more important did it seem to me to familiarise myself with the actual situation in the labour world at the earliest possible moment. I could send one of the marsh boys over to get me the London papers on the morrow. Could I not do more than that? Two or three years since I had come into contact with a private detective named Harold Milbank, who had become famous in East Anglia for his work in connection with the Diamond and the Lady, when he was engaged by Peter Blunderfield, and also in the attempted revolution, also financed by a foreign enemy, which had been crushed at Ottermere and Pines Place only a year or so back. I determined to write to him and ask him to investigate the labour situation on my behalf, to keep my whereabouts, even my existence, a strict secret, and to report to me under cover to "Harold Prettyman." There was no Harold in the family, and though the postman might wonder at the amount of correspondence he would leave at the Queen's Head, Haddiscoe, whither all the marsh folk had to resort to obtain their letters, he would not associate this mystery with me.

I wrote the letter at once, and soon Dick Prettyman, a fine young fellow of two and twenty, was on his way across the river to post it.

I did not see Rose again that night, but had a long and cosy chat with the old farmer and his offspring of two generations.

Dick, on his return, promised to go over to Yarmouth early in the morning and bring me back the *Telegraph*, the *Times*, the *Morning Post*, *The Standard*, and the *Daily Express*. I thought that from these I ought to be able to extract the heart of the position.

I got the papers before noon, and found myself little advanced. It was clear that the whole transport service in London was disorganised. But as yet the railways were working fairly well, though there had been trouble at Liverpool and Birmingham. There were rumours of the massing of troops here and there, and to anyone who had not been warned of the invasion danger it was difficult to understand why two thousand should be stationed at Willesden Junction, a larger number at Manchester, and other large detachments at places where there had been and seemed no likelihood of any serious rioting. But to a mind quick to see preparations against an invasion it was easy enough to comprehend that all these bodies of troops were stationed at places whence they could easily and speedily be moved to some centre of probable attack. To a certain extent I was rendered the easier by observing this. It taught me that our government was not asleep. The rumours of battleships shut up in the Tyne and Humber without coal were less reassuring, for I did not then know of Mr. Churchill's admirable strategy, the strategy that so completely fooled our enemy, and which, in connection with the final *coup d'état* of Mr. Churchill, Sir Edward Grey, and

Lord Kitchener, brought us out of the danger with renewed prestige and with added honours to the men who were responsible for the arrangements. It has always seemed to me a pity that the truth of the government's action at that time was not made public, for the three great men whom I have named saved their country from ignominy and disgrace, and they should have the public credit of it.

I was reassured to a considerable extent by the papers. If, as I had gathered that night on the marsh, the Germans did not mean to strike until our railways were completely disorganised, the time was not yet. But I must have someone on the spot who would telegraph me when the railway difficulties came to a climax. That thousands and thousands of pounds were being sent across the North Sea I was certain. And when it became known afterwards that two labour agitators had fled the country after receiving very strong hints that this was advisable, I understood, and learnt that I was right, that these two had been traced as in possession of funds received for treason.

To read the papers it seemed that no one understood how near the peril was. But for that guttural voice on the marsh I should have been as much in the dark as the public at large was or the editors pretended to be. I felt both a pride and a terror that so great a secret should be locked up in my bosom. And I could do nothing but watch over so small a part of the plot as was connected with the *Otter* and with Ruth.

It was on the third day after I had had the delight of seeing Ruth that I saw a smartly-appointed pleasure wherry bring up opposite the marsh farm. I thought I knew her, and slipped up to my garret, whence I called for granny or Rose. At that time of day the males were, of ccurse, out about the

marsh, looking after their late hay crop, or home-bred snipe and fowl, or marking dykes to be slugged, and drains to be cleared.

I had not seen much of Rose since she had brought Ruth to me, and, unreasonable and almost wicked as it was, I felt some annoyance because the girl now seemed to avoid me.

But she came up to me as I called. "What is it you wish, sir?" she asked, as demurely as any well-trained parlour-maid in the land.

"Look here, Rose," I said, angrily, "if you call me sir, you and I will quarrel. What the deuce do you mean by it?"

And then I was sorry. I saw the poor girl's eyes fill with tears. "Damn it!" I said to myself, "I'm always making her cry because she is fool enough to be fond of a blighter like me."

"You—you are a gennleman—Master Jack," murmured Rose, "and I am only a pore mash gal. It's fittin' for me to call you sir."

"Very well, miss," I said, in a pet. "Sir to me and miss to you. Will you be so very obliging, miss, as to find out, miss, who it is on that wherry, miss. I regret to be obliged to put you to the inconvenience, but there are reasons why I do not wish to be seen by every Tom, Dick, and Harry on the waters, miss, and perhaps you may be willing to do me the favour."

"I don't deserve that, Master Jack," flashed the girl, "and you know I don't. If you can find it in your heart to speak so to me, perhaps it is all for the best. Certainly, sir, I will learn who it is on the wherry, if I know who it be."

"Rose!" I cried, heartbroken with remorse, "Rose!"

But she had slipped from me, and perhaps it was just as well. She had wrung my heart so by her

well-merited rebuke that I was just in the mood to make a fool of myself and her. And although I daresay there is no great harm in a kiss, yet in the circumstances it was about the last thing that ought to pass between the girl and me.

Presently she came up again to me. "I don't know who it be," she said. "He's a tall, dark gennleman, and he say as if I tell ye the skipper want ye, you'll onnerstand."

So Ruth had told him, and he was innocent of any complicity in Stafford's treason. At least his call looked like it.

He came into the kitchen, on Rose's invitation, with his hands outstretched. "My dear fellow," he cried, "I can't tell you how pleased I was to learn that Rex Stafford was mistaken in imagining that you were done for. Now, I want you to tell me all about that night. I've heard nothing from an eye witness, although I have heard enough to make me very wretched and uneasy. Is it true that Stafford killed three preventive men? Is it true that he tried to kill you and flung you overboard on Breydon? Is it true that you have reason to believe that he is in alliance with the Germans to hand the *Otter* over to them on certain terms?"

"Yes," I replied. "So far as it goes, all that is true. But sit down, skipper. I'm glad you are all right again. Sit down, and I'll tell you everything."

I made a mental reservation that I would not tell him that I had heard from Harold Milbank that he would undertake my work, and that he expected to send me down a report to reach me within twenty-four hours. I would test the skipper's honesty fully before I said a word about this.

"Why didn't you come to headquarters as soon as you were well enough?" he asked me when I

had briefly outlined the history of the fight upon Breydon, and of the guttural voice and the dirigible upon the marsh.

"How was I to know how you would take it?" I asked. "I had interfered with one of your men, one of your chief officers, who was fighting for the liberty of your own submarine. How was I to know that you would not look on me as a traitor to the brotherhood? And, you'll forgive me for saying it, skipper, you are not the man to whom I should look for mercy if you considered I had been guilty of treachery to you."

"As to anyone guilty of treachery," replied the skipper, with a look upon his stern face which fully corroborated his words, "you are right. But your action could hardly be called treachery. Good God, man! Do you think I approve of those cold-blooded murders? I tell you this affair has shaken me, shaken me, terribly."

The man was changed, I could see that. There was less inflexibility of purpose about him than there had been on that night when he kidnapped me. It might have been the effects of the injury to his head; it might have been that, during his illness or convalescence, he had been compelled to think, to analyse the real nature of his conspiracy. Taking my own point of view when first I had agreed to join the brotherhood, I had done it with a more or less light heart. Smuggling seems so venial an offence. It was not till I saw to what smuggling led—the logical and tremendous effects which proceeded inevitably from such premisses, that I revolted from the business. A momentary doubt crossed my mind. Was Raymond Pettingill in earnest, or was he endeavouring to blind me to his real intentions, his real nature? Why should he take the trouble to do this? I did not believe that

he thought me capable of becoming King's evidence. He must know that a man of my temperament could not do that. And, if he were indeed sincere, to what might not his conversion lead? Dare I inform him of all my information, of all my suspicions? Ruth had told me that she believed he had been financed by some city capitalist named Solano. But I dared not let him know that I had learnt anything from his sister.

"You are your own master," I said. "If you feel this thing so deeply, why do you not drop the whole thing? You cannot be ill to do. Your submarine, the aeroplane, and the enormous expense to which you must have been put to arrange your head-quarters, to render habitable and cosy that wonderful Roman chamber, the dynamos, indeed everything connected with your subterranean haunt and its accessories, prove that you are a wealthy man. You are your own master, as I said before. Why don't you retire from business, eh?"

"I'm *not* my own master," replied the skipper. "Look here, Haakon, I don't often make a mistake in a man, though I fancy I have done so in one or two instances." Again his face grew very grave and menacing. I wondered if he was thinking of Stafford! "It's like this! See? A city man sought me out—I've never quite understood how or why—and told me that he had heard I had spoken jokingly of the possibilities of smuggling saccharine. I daresay I had done so, lots of times, for I always took an interest in the picturesque old smuggling yarns, and it was a hobby of mine to devise schemes by which money might be made by dodging the revenue even in these days. I had probably talked of saccharine to more than one friend. And I am positive that I must have done so in the presence of my cousin, Rex Stafford."

Again his face became menacing, stern, inexorable.

"This city fellow, a sheeny, by the look of his jib, asked me if I wanted to make money? I did. Who does not in my position? For I found myself and my sister with about five thousand pounds between us after the smash up of a mine in which I had been fool enough to invest. Solano asked me if I would undertake to organise a smuggling band if he supplied all the necessary cash? He would ask for twenty per cent. on his money, a bond to cover the capital, and an undertaking that if at any time he were to give me directions as to the use of any of the materials used in the scheme, and bought with his money, I would obey his instructions without hesitation and without asking questions. It was he who chose the submarine scheme out of many that I mentioned—and here again I remember that I had said, in Rex Stafford's presence, that provided the initial cost could be overcome, a submarine in these waters was the craft above all others to use."

"When was this?" I asked.

"A little more than three years ago. It took us some time to get under way, as you may imagine. My sister Ruth had been brought up near Cantley in her childhood, and had conceived an affection for old June Rivett, who had told her fairy tales and stories of the marshlands; and old June loved my sister, so that when she, Ruth, came to me in town, the old woman accompanied her, to my disgust. However, when I took Ruth into my confidence, she said that June was the very woman to advise me as to the best place for headquarters. It was old June who told me of these hidden ways, and of the chamber under the hill at the back of 'The House of the Three Skippers.' I had no difficulty in finding out that the recent excessive

dredging of Yarmouth harbour rendered the passage of a submarine specially built for us quite practicable. But to skip the details, we established ourselves as you found us. With June's help I was able to engage the best men of the waters. Fred Banham, who had recently been left adrift by the death of old Robins, the owner of the famous racing yacht, the *Privateer*, Bob Baldry, Sam Durrant, and the rest of the best of the watermen all came in by degrees, and every man of them was delighted to be associated with a smuggling enterprise. Then my backer suggested an aeroplane, and that Stafford should have control of that department under my captaincy. We got Eugéne Potin through an advertisement. And it was he who chose and bought the *Buzzard* for us. Stafford had already made something of a name as an amateur airman, and seemed quite competent to undertake the post suggested for him by my backer. The enterprise went on wheels. My dear fellow, you can have no notion of the enormous profits we have made. While we ran choice spirits and tobacco for our own consumption, we never made a business of anything but smuggling saccharine, for there is nothing else on which so high a duty is charged for a commodity which is in such small bulk. I could have paid off my backer over and over again if he would have accepted the money and the twenty per cent. interest in discharge. But he would not. He kept me to the terms of the original understanding, and reminded me that I was not the actual master of the submarine and the aeroplane; that at any time, on his demand, I was bound to hand them over to his nominees. I thought at the time that this was only because he wished to continue to rake in twenty per cent. every year, and I offered him a bonus which ought to have satisfied his cupidity.

When he refused this I began to have suspicions as to his purpose. But as time passed on and he made no move, nor even suggested that I was not absolute master of the *Otter* and the *Buzzard*, as well as of the timber yard, the boathouse, and the subterranean dwelling—by the way, I doubt if he knows all about the latter, unless—unless it has been betrayed to him by someone other than myself—I let my suspicions sleep and determined that he was of the opinion that his twenty per cent. would amount to more even than the huge sum I had offered in settlement. Even now I have no real reason to doubt that this conclusion is the correct one."

"And yet you do," I interrupted, intensely interested.

"Well, yes, since the affair on Breydon, and for another reason, I do. See?"

"What's the other reason?" I asked.

He hummed and hahed for a minute or two. "Well, I've told you so much, I may as well tell you all," he said. "Only a fortnight ago I received a formal notice from my backer that at a date in the near future he would demand the fulfilment of my undertaking, that I should hand over the temporary control of the *Otter* and the *Buzzard* to some person or persons who should show me an authority which he described fully in his notice. Now, Haakon, I have not known you long; but I have known of you for long. I have heard of you from Fred and Bob, and although I do not understand these watermen and marshfolk as well as you do, I do appreciate the fact that there are no finer judges of a straight man and a gentleman than they are. That was one reason why I was so anxious to have you with us, as well as the great convenience the *Dabchick* and yourself would be in assisting us

to distribute our smuggled goods in quarters where suspicion was becoming rife—for that there was suspicion my spies had warned me, although they did not tell me, nor did I imagine, that it was so strong as it proved, so strong as to send a boat out with an officer to look out for us on Breydon. And," he added, " I don't believe that was all suspicion. I believe that someone put them on to it for certain reasons. See ? See what I mean ? "

I nodded. The skipper's thoughts then coincided with mine. But why should Stafford have put the preventive people on our track when he himself was to be aboard the submarine instead of the skipper ? Was it possible that he meant to commit those atrocious murders even when we cast off on our outward journey ? Was it his design to cut off the skipper and all associated with the brotherhood from all hopes of reconciling themselves with the law ? If that was his idea, what had he done with the bodies of the murdered men ? I shuddered to think that he might have hidden them where he could denounce to the authorities that they had been hidden by the orders of the skipper.

I was silent for a bit. " Well, what d'ye think ? " asked the skipper. " I've come over here on purpose to hear your opinion. Ruth told me where you were. Stafford does not know that you are alive—or so I believe—and it's as well that he should not know. See ? What d'ye think ? "

" Listen ! " I said, and with that I told him what I had heard as to the German plot from the dirigible on the marsh. I told him too that I feared lest Stafford might intend to kidnap Ruth, and I gave him my reasons for my fears. I saw his face grow sterner and sterner, greyer and greyer, his eyes begin to flame in such a blaze of menace that I felt that it would go hard with Stafford if he attempted the

outrage on my darling now that the chief was warned.

I was surprised that he said little in reply to my information. He seemed to be silenced rather than impelled to make further confidences.

He rose at last, and pressed my hand hard. "Thank you," he said. "Now listen! Would these good people here take in my sister if I paid them well for it? No one must know that she is here. For the next ten days or so she must be supposed to have gone to town or somewhere distant from this neighbourhood. Do you understand me? I cannot quarrel openly with Stafford just now. There are reasons against it which you will hardly understand; but which, I assure you, are weighty and of the utmost importance, having regard to what you have just told me. Will they take her in and hide her as they took in and hid you?"

"Not if you offer them money," I said. "The Prettyman's are not like the ordinary marsh peasant folk; they are old riverside yeomen. They will extend their hospitality gladly to any friend of mine, and, I think, to any friend of old June's. Cannot June come with her?"

"I think not" he replied. "You see Stafford would never believe that Ruth took June with her on a distant visit. Ruth must be believed to have gone to town, or to Yorkshire, or some distant spot. And although June came with her to town when first she left Cantley, things are different now. She is no longer a girl, and does not need an escort of an old woman to see her safe up to Liverpool Street. No! June must remain at headquarters; besides, she may be useful in another way. But if Ruth could come here, under this roof, and only move outside when she is certain that there is no one on the watch, it would relieve my mind of a great

dread, and enable me to act with more confidence and determination."

I thought of Rose, and of the unpleasant position which Ruth's visit might create. It was not that I did not long to have her there, although I wondered that the skipper should suggest that she should sleep under the same roof that held me. He must, I thought, know that I loved Ruth. If he did not, he must think me a fool. It is thus that young asses of lovers are apt to misjudge the brothers of their beloved. At that time I doubt if the skipper thought that I loved Ruth. I will say this, though. That even if he had known of our mutual love he would have subordinated it to his plans. And, with the knowledge now of what he meant to do, I do not blame him. He had such a task to carry through as seldom comes to the lot of a patriot.

"If you will leave it to me," I said, hesitatingly, "I think it can be managed. And she will be safe."

"And I free to act without regard to her presence at headquarters," said the skipper. "See?"

Well, I did not see, but I guessed that he might have some rash idea in his head which would render headquarters anything but a desirable residence for any woman like Ruth, especially a woman whom Stafford was known to covet.

"I'll send her round to-night," said the skipper, "after dark. By the way, what about Fred and Bob? Why don't they turn up?"

"For the same reason as I held aloof," I said.

"I must see them. Tell Fred to be at the Berney Arms at midnight to-morrow. He's an old man. He can't cling much to life, eh? What? Midnight at the Berney Arms, to-morrow night. And Ruth will come in the *Dabchick*—by Jove, yes! That's it! She shall come in the *Dabchick* in broad day-

light, and I will give out that she has sailed to St. Olave's to catch the main-line train. It's much quicker than going round by Norwich from Reedham. That will do it. She and her luggage shall sail round. Do you have a boat ready to take her off in case anyone would be watching from the hangar. Land her and her trunks and let the cutter sail on to St. Olave's. That will put 'em off the scent. I'll do better than that, too. I will take down the telescope to-morrow on the excuse of having its lenses properly cleaned. They want cleaning. See ? "

He rose and seemed about to take his leave. " But look here," I said. " What about this German plot ? "

He flung out his hands. " My dear fellow, you must see I am helpless ! I am bound by my undertaking ! But——" he hesitated, then he peered eagerly into my eyes, then gripped my hand ; "don't be afraid," he said. " If you will protect Ruth I will see that England suffers no harm from the *Otter*. See ? Fred at the Berney Arms, midnight to-morrow. Ruth to be taken off on the farm boat about eleven in the morning. She's to be supposed to be catching the 1.36 up from St. Olave's, you see. Ha ! Ha ! See ? "

Well I must do the best I could. I had not the slightest doubt that the Prettymans would welcome my sweet love. But I thought of what Rose would think and feel, and I was thankful that the marshgirl had already shown such *indicia* of nobility that she could be eliminated as a possible source of danger to my beloved. But jealousy is a tremendous force, and the *spretae injuria formae* carries more momentum in the world's events than the shell from a 13·5 inch gun.

The skipper turned once at the door. " I sup-

pose," he said, "you'll keep your eyes open. And Potin? Can we trust him?"

"Yes," I cried. "But he doesn't like Stafford."

"So much the better, but don't tell Stafford I said so. Ah! I forgot he believes that you are dead. Once more so much the better. Let him continue to believe it, and watch over Ruth."

"Oh, I'll keep my eyes open. Now that I am getting back my strength, I mean to do a little night stalking on the marshes. One never knows one's luck."

"Quite so," the skipper nodded, and grinned rather than smiled. "Remind Fred, be ready for my sister, and—and remember that I am bound to my backer."

I didn't like that last sentence. How far was he bound? Would he let the Germans have the free use of the submarine because he was pledged to the scheming city capitalist? for now I did not doubt that the whole thing had been organised by this man Solano, if that was his name, with a view to such a situation as was now imminent, in order to place a submarine *within* the circle of defence of our own ships, at the service of the Germans whenever the critical moment for the *Tag* should arrive.

The great sail of the wherry filled, I saw a hand push off with a quant, and the beautiful and comfortable craft swung out and headed for St. Olave's. I understood, of course, that she would return to headquarters by the cut leading from St. Olave's to Reedham.

I was still puzzling over the problem of the situation when Rose came tripping in.

"He's her brother, bain't he, Master Jack?" she asked, and I saw that her sad face was aquiver.

"My dear child, what's the matter?" I cried.

"And I wanted you to be so cheerful and happy now. Do you think your people would hide Miss Pettingill for a few days? There are reasons why she should be concealed. And there is no place so suitable as this."

"O' course, they'd be glad to take in any friend o' yourn, Master Jack," said Rose, but her face was sadder still and the rims round her eyes deeper and darker. "Can't I look arter ye well enough?" she asked, hesitatingly, most tenderly, coming towards me with trembling hands outstretched.

"No one could do it so well, my kind girl," I said. "But now, thanks to you and your people, I am well. It is because you are all so kind and good that I hoped you might be willing to help Miss Pettingill."

And then, perhaps, I might have had a warning. Rose's eyes flashed, and she drew her graceful body up in dignified protest. "Oh!" she said, in a very low tone, her eyes holding mine with an expression new to them. "I will look arter her, you needn't be afeared!"

"Thank you," I said. "And you will tell your people!"

"That I will," said Rose. "And thank ye for war— tellin' on me fust."

She stepped forward hurriedly, snatched at my hand, pressed her lips to it, and rushed out of the kitchen. Presently old granny came in and the coming of Ruth was again discussed.

I thought the old lady looked at me once or twice with a mild wonder, and, perhaps, something of contempt. But she showed herself willing enough to accept this fresh burden on her hospitality.

"If you think it right we shall fare content, Master Jack," she said. "And I reckon you do think it right or else you wouldn't ax us."

"I shall never know how to repay you!" I cried with enthusiasm.

"I daresay not," was the old woman's enigmatic reply, and then she turned and strode out of the room, holding her head higher than when she entered, and taking strides like a grenadier.

CHAPTER XX.

EARLY MORNING ON THE RIVER WALL.

It may have been my fancy, but certainly I thought that there was some constraint in the manner of my kind hosts that evening. Certainly there was less bonhomie about old granny than usual, and Rose went about with a face which racked my soul with remorse every time I looked at her.

I was glad to get to bed, and to find that the exertion of the day, and its excitement, acting on my body still not fully recovered of its debility, had rendered me drowsy, so that I fell off to sleep in a few minutes. I woke to find a brilliant August sun throwing gold and emerald over the river and shorn "mowing" marshes. The post would be in at the "Queen's Head" soon after eight in the morning, and a glance at my watch told me it was not yet half-past six. I looked round for my gun, which Ruth had brought me on the *Dabchick*, and with a pocketful of cartridges made my way out of the farmhouse and along the river wall for my four or five mile walk to the inn.

Half-past six on an August morning can only be bettered by half-past three on a morning at midsummer. The dewdrops are still glistening on the grass and reed fronds, and the wild life has not

yet awoke to its full wariness of the day. The levels were dotted with stock and horses, and hard by in the dykes of Prettyman's level half a hundred green geese were chortling and disporting themselves in a riot of play. I looked away to the nor'west, to the hill on which was situated the hangar where the *Buzzard* was hidden, and I hoped, as I saw its elevation above the flat surroundings, that the skipper would remember to remove the lenses of the three-inch glass which stood there on its tripod. "Peeink!" and a zig-zag dart of grey and white, followed by a swift motion of my arms, a crook of the finger, a "crack," and the fall of a "full snipe." Good. I always like to begin with a kill. It puts me in a good humour and gives me confidence, so that I shoot better throughout the day for it.

The way led along the narrow top of the river wall, and was hard going, but I gritted my teeth and made up my mind to go through with the trip. Now, if ever, it was necessary for me to get into trim. At any moment I might have to fight for my life and Ruth's liberty; for although Stafford might not yet know that I was alive I could not rely on the continuance of his ignorance of the truth, and as soon as he knew I did not doubt that he would use his best endeavours to remedy his failure to put me out of the world on Breydon.

A rustle, a flutter, and a "quaack! quaack," and a green-necked and extra shining mallard rose at an angle of forty-five from the dyke inside the wall. It was a long shot, but I risked it and got him. He fell on the rond and I clambered down from the wall to retrieve him. Something made me go on to the river bed, and there, to my amazement, I found the marks of a boat which had, quite recently, been thrust up on the yielding mud. It was not one of the farm boats, of that I was certain, and it was

not the time of year when one might expect gunners after wildfowl to come down or up the river to watch for flighting or casually-passing fowl. Also there had been some attempt to obliterate the marks of the boat's keel. Now, why should anyone take that trouble?

I stood puzzling over the matter, and when I went again on my way I felt less at ease than when I started. Could it be possible that Stafford or one of his auxiliaries already suspected that I was alive and had been spying round Prettyman's level? It must have been in the night or during the first dawn, and there was no sign of the boat on the waters. It was curious. I strained my eyes all round, but saw nothing but the mills, and away up the Wensum, a couple of slate-coloured trading wherry sails. Here and there were dotted the bare masts of hired yachts, lying-to in cosy nooks, aboard which the trippers were not yet astir. Perhaps some one of them in their ignorance of the proper conditions of wildfowling might have been persuaded by one of his hands, with the usual contempt of the local man for the cockney visitor, to bring up a dinghy and lie in wait at first dawn for the flight of non-existent fowl! I tried to make myself believe that this was so, and that the mark in the mud had nothing to do with my own affairs or those of the brotherhood. But ever and anon the question persisted in my brain. "If it was a tripper why did he try to rub out the marks of his dinghy's bows?" On the other hand if it was *not* a tripper, if it was a man who knew the waters and was a skilled stalker or watcher, why did he not obliterate them properly? Had I, or Fred, or Bob, or even Sam Durrant, wished to delete the marks of a boat from the mud on an ebbing tide we could have done it so that no

one could have guessed that there had been any interference with the ooze.

As I strolled along the river wall I kept my eyes to the right mostly, away from the river and over the marshes on the Norfolk side. Not far from where I was lay the marsh on which I had seen the dirigible rest, and where I had heard the German tongue. I should have to pass the very spot where the *Dabchick* lay when I slipped from her decks into the river, for old Clinker's rond lay on my way.

I walked swiftly now, eager to get my post at the inn, and eager, too, to get back again to the marsh farm. The sight of those markings in the mud had upset me more than was rational. I daresay my nerves were in such a condition that it took little to disturb them.

Ahead of me I soon saw a figure I knew well, it was that of Jimmy Jinnis, another marsh farmer, whose house was on the cut, and with whom old Fred and Bob had hidden for a space. I hastened to catch him up.

"Hallo, Master Jack!" cried Jimmy, when I was alongside. "Lor bor, you're the wery man I wanted ta see this mornin'. Ha'e ye seed a great long balloon afloatin' about arter nightfall? Well there, bor! I see one larse night right over my hornpie mash! And tha'ss a true as Gord I thought the old daavil had come for me at last! Hor! Hor! Hor! And then there was one o' them flying traps come a buzzin', and I fared that frighted I runned home leavin' my eel nets full! I reckon things be come to a pratty pass when such things as them's allowed, doan't you? Can't you write to the paaper about 'em, Master Jack?"

I had given a look at the old fellow out of the corner of my eye, and was amused to see that he was a squinnying at me in the same way. I understood

at once that the old boy meant a lot more than he said.

"Well," I cried, "that's a rum thing, Spider!" (His name was Jimmy but he was always called Spider by anyone who knew him at all well.) "We shall have to put Noggin the policeman onto 'em!"

Spider chuckled. "You're a mark you are, Master Jack," he said. "I allust said as you were a mark. Now you know as Fred and Bob ha' been a keepin' me company for a bit. And you know the rest on it. You bain't the on'y one to ha' seed that theer balloony thing and the hummy buzzer ayther. I thought you might like to know as they wuz a playing all sorts o' pranks on my mashes larse night, and as true as Gord if I can catch 'em they'll ha'e ta pay for it, a frightenin' the young things* and the pa'tridges like that!" Still he looked askew at me, and I understood that there was still more to come.

"And old Fred, he says," continued Spider, "that if he was you he'd get one o' them Mouser pistols and guns! Them in yar cabin aboard the *Dabchick*. He says as you can't never tell when they may come handy."

Oho! Then Fred was on the trail, and Bob, and, best of all for spying, Spider. I knew that it would serve no good turn to speak out. There was nothing which a marshman enjoyed more than making a mystery of anything he knew or was hunting. I also knew that he would understand me however obscure I chose to be in my replies to him.

"You forget I'm dead, Spider!" I said. "You are talkin' to a bloomin' ghost!"

"Wha lor, soo I be!" cried Spider. "And I

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* Young bullocks and heifers.

hain't seed one since I went down Turkey Cock Hill, Haddisca, that'll be five year come Kerrissermus. I'm right down obliged tee ye, Master Jack. Ho! Ho! Ho!"

I thought for a moment. "Tell Fred," I said, "that I expect the *Dabchick* will call for my corpse sometime this morning, and if the pistols and rifles are still in the cabin I'll remember his advice. I say, Spider, did ye see anything of a row boat in the river this morning?"

"Ah!" chuckled Spider. "I thought I'd taught ye to take notice when you was a lad. Yes, I did. But you don't want to be afeared. Fred see it too, and he tode me to say to you as that was the Franchman, Pottin he called him, a rum name, too, I reckon. Pottin! Ho! Ho! Ho!"

I began to understand. Could it be that Potin had followed Stafford's aeroplane in the boat on the chance of getting to the appointed rendezvous before the dirigible turned up? It looked like that. But the little man hated rowing. He must have thought the matter serious to try that game.

"Thank ye, Spider," I replied. "Don't forget I'm dead, and tell Fred what I've told you. Tell him too that the regatta is fixed for two or three days from now. He'll understand."

Spider chuckled. "So shall I," he said. "You might let me start to see if I can win a prize, Master Jack."

I laughed outright. "You shall have your chance, Spider, I promise you," I said, with great courage and cheer in my heart. The knowledge that I was being helped by three such capable men as Fred, Bob, and Spider enlivened me mightily. If it had, indeed, been Eugéne Potin who had spied upon Stafford by means of the dinghy, I thought it possible that Ruth might have news for me when she

came off the *Dabchick* that morning. But I did not believe that Potin had left the marks in the ooze. They were too fresh. They were this morning's, not last night's.

I thought it possible that I might have no chance to get the rifles and pistols from the cabin, for the cutter would only haul wind long enough for the transference of Ruth and her luggage to the farm-house boat.

"I say, Spider," I said, "dead bodies take an interest in the past you know. You know the *Dabchick*, don't you?"

"As well as my own fut!" said Spider.

"I daresay you'll see her making up for St. Olave's Staithe about noon time to-day. You might go aboard, there's only Sam Durrant who will be there, and you know him. If you see a couple of queer-looking pistols and their wooden cases, and a couple of rifles hanging against the bulkheads, just bring 'em with you. You remember the flag locker. Bring all the cartridges you can find there. And tell Fred that the dear departed would be glad of them as soon as he can bring them to the tomb."

"Lor, you are a one for your jook!" chuckled Spider. Then his face grew serious again. "You unnerstand, master," he said, "as if there's any fur to fly, all t'ree on us, me and Fred and Bob, want to help in the scratchin'." Fred had evidently taken him into his confidence, and rightly too as was clear.

"You shall have your chance," I promised. "But you see I can't tell when or where the game may bolt or the scrap begin. And tell Fred that the guv'nor wants to see him at the Berney Arms at midnight to-night. You'll remember that, won't you? It may save Fred a journey to the cemetery."

"Yes," replied Spider, thoughtfully. "Look here,

Master Jack, you bain't a goin' to risk yar life 'thout one or two on us by yar side, be ye? Ye see you belong to all on us, you ha' done all on us kindnesses, prewented us from bein' put upon by the new swine who call hisself squire at Duckingham, and you ha' acted right and true like one o' the old sort o' gentry. If you're goin' ta risk yar life you ote ta let us share it! Tain't fare to the whool willage as you should go and get yourself kilt for the fun on it and lave us without no one to look arter us when we get put upon. That Sir Berkeley Axminster he'll sune try to stop a gun bein' fired on the levels. We can't spare ye, Master Jack. Can't ye let me do the stalkin' and fightin'? I wish to Gord you could!"

The man's sincerity was so transparent, his affection for me so genuine, that my heart throbbed in my throat.

I gripped his hand. "My dear old Spider," I said, "there are certain things I must do, and risk. No one can do them but me. But I promise you that if I want help, and I am certain that I shall, I'll let you know. Now don't forget to tell Fred. I must be getting on to the Queen's Head. I expect important letters there this morning."

"Then I'm damned if I don't wait to go back wi' ye!" cried Spider. "Lor, bless yar heart, man alive! Dee you mean to say as you don't know you're watched, and if you hev important letters bain't it likely as they would be useful to the parties as is watchin' on ye? I know more 'an I say. But you can trust me and you know it."

He stopped speaking for a moment. Then he added, "whatever you and me may play at, consarnin' tombs and corpses and such like, there's parties as don't believe in 'em, and who fare more pertickler consarnin' livin' bein's. Now you know!"

Yes, by Jove ! I did know. So Stafford had learnt that I survived. How ? Whose was the treachery ? Or was it through my own carelessness ? However, the means whereby he learnt the secret were of less moment than the fact that he had done so. I again grasped Spider's hand and gripped it firmly. "You've done me a rare good turn my friend," I said. "And if you like to look out for me on my way back you'll be doing me another. Yes. You've opened my eyes to a danger I didn't expect just yet."

"Tha'ss what I meant ta do," chuckled Spider. "Now dee you let me take that there snipe and mallard. I'll hev 'em plucked and cooked ready for yar brekkust at my house. After what I ha' told ye you'll see there's no need to get back afore people are about, and you can do with a rest before you walk all the way back along the wall to old George's."

I let him have his way. It would only take me a little off my course, and I began to feel that I should need nourishment and stimulant before I got back to the Prettymans'.

I found a letter from Harold Milbank at the Queen's Head and tore it open.

It was in cipher, but an easy one, and one with which I was well enough acquainted to be able to dispense with a written code; for I had arranged it with the detective.

"Things will be critical within a week. But the Government is awake. Be ready, but take no action till you hear from or see me. The others" (no doubt the Germans) "will do nothing for a few days. I am informed about the twenty-first or second will be the critical time. Destroy this."

I tore it up and burnt it in the inn kitchen whither I asked leave to go to hot my "Dew drink."

So far as it went it was satisfactory. There seemed to be enough time for me to frustrate all attempts on the *Otter* and on Ruth if only Raymond Pettingill, the skipper, were true. And I believed that he was, though what he meant by his enigmatical references to his obligations to the man who had financed him I was unable fully to understand.

"Bewtiful mornin' ta be sure, Master Jack," said Dick, the landlord of the Queen's Head. "There was a strange gentleman, slim and smart, clane shaved, with a face like—like a harnsa's (heron's) a axin arter you, and if I'd seed ye or knowed anyone what had seed ye? I tode him I didn't know nothin' o' yar consarns, and if he wanted ta see ye he'd better ax at the Hall. But I had heard that you was gone furrin."

So Stafford had made inquiries at the Queen's Head! The comparison of his face with the profile of a heron was a caricature, but it was amazingly illuminating. I knew what Dick meant.

"Thank you, Dick," said I. "You were quite right. Never answer questions like that about anyone. If he was all right he'd ask at the Hall. He may have been a burglar for all we know."

"He may ha' been," said Dick. "Anyways, Master Jack, ever since you paid off that blarmed man who got me into his debt, I'm yar's ta do as you like."

Lord! What a power it is to have a number of true and gallant fellows like Dick and Spider at one's back! I knew now that Stafford was on my track. But I told myself, in my pride of heart, that with my marshland auxiliaries I was more than a match for him and his Teutonic balloon men. I laughed at his imprudence. I shook hands with Dick, and made my way out to "brekkust" with Spider.

I daresay to the average reader the idea of wild

duck and snipe for breakfast will seem *outré*. But let the doubter rise at half-past six or earlier on an August morning, take an eight or ten mile walk along the river wall, enjoy his "dew snack," and then see if he is not ready to eat perfectly roasted mallard and snipe. I enjoyed my breakfast as much as I had enjoyed anything since I had been struck down on the deck of the *Otter*, and I understood Spider when he told me that Fred and Bob were engaged on other business. They were, of course, engaged in spying, on my behalf. God bless them and all the gallant friends of mine who had been won to fidelity and eager assistance by one or two acts of simple kindness which had been a pleasure to me to perform, and the fact that I treated them as men and brothers and not as inferior slaves! How can a man and a sportsman treat these splendid fellows as his inferiors when in all that makes a man they are probably infinitely his superior?

It was past eight o'clock before I left Spider's marsh house, after a hearty shake o' the hand from him and a shy grin from his comely daughter who had cooked the mallard and snipe to perfection. "Graisin' 'em," as she said, "graisin' 'em with strips o' hoome-cured baacon and a twiddlin' 'em in front o' the fire 'cos 'faa'er oan't hev noo birds baked!"

It was the first time since my adventure on the *Otter* that I had shown myself openly in broad daylight at an hour when ordinary people were about. I had not meant to be so bold, but after Spider's information it seemed certain that Stafford knew well enough that I had survived his blackguardly attack, and it was only from him and his myrmidons that I desired to conceal my survival.

"Kape yar eyes open," were Spider's last words, "and mind this. That there's more 'an one on us

who kape watch over ye though ye may not see us. Hor! Hor! Hor! Lord, Master Jack, you ought to know what we can do in the way o' hidin' by this time! As for them furriners! Why, they bain't a mite o' use! Not a mite! Doan't you be afeared. We'll see no harm don't come ta you."

I felt a little like royalty being guarded carefully by an unseen patrol. I tried to feel that I suffered an indignity. But I couldn't. I was not so self-opinionated, so conceited, as to believe that I was so acute a man as Spider or Fred, or that I could judge better what course to pursue if only they had all the facts before them. And that they had these and a few more than I knew of, seemed probable. On the whole then I felt a certain pleasure, a confidence and trust in my chances of success, which I had not possessed when I left the Prettyman holding that morning.

Part of the river wall was very bad going. Not only did it narrow to an edge of greasy clayey soil, but it was thick with thistles and docks. I slipped down the side of the wall onto the strip of even marsh against the inner dyke and strolled along there. Hidden under cover of the wall on one side, and by a tall growth of flowering purple blossoming reeds on the other, I was as lonely as in the middle of a central African desert. I strode gaily, my heart sang high. Ruth would be with me that very morning! I had learnt of new and most valuable allies! Milbank told me there was time to foil the German plot. God was in His heaven, all was right with the world. I even forgot the anguish which my foolish self had caused to Rose. I started to sing, and I carolled like a youngster while the red legs, amazed at the noise I made, wheeled piping around me, and the waterhen scuttled with a complaining croak under cover of the reed beds. Twit-

tering among the reed stems were the reed birds, and I saw the dainty pretty tail of a reed pheasant as he preened himself and wooed his mate with flaunt of tail and bend of delicate neck.

"By Jupiter!" I said to myself, "I've seen the Derbyshire Peak, the Derwent Valley, the Devon hills and moors, but to my mind there is nothing to compare with these dear, dreary marshlands, with the song of the river in my ears, the piping of the red legs, the peeweeps of the hornpie, and the superb tonic of the ozone from the sea and the freshness of the marshes in my nostrils. It is my native land, thank God! Give me the Norfolk river, valley, grazing-lands and ronds, and—and—well, Stafford can have the rest if he can bring his Dutchies over to take it! He! He! He!"

I was so glad at heart that I chuckled sillily at my silly thought. And then, in less than ten seconds, I was fighting for my life.

CHAPTER XXI.

A ROUGH AND TUMBLE.

I HAD just turned the point of a bend in the dyke when something, someone, some bulky mass of muscular viciousness hurled itself upon me, knocked my gun clean out of my hands, and at once strove to bear me down into the fathomless depth of the ooze in the dyke at my feet. For the first second or two I thought I was done for. The attack was so sudden and so unexpected that I was taken at such a disadvantage that it was God's own mercy that I got the better of it.

The man who hurtled through the air upon me was strong, "beefy," and relentless in his use of the muscular power which had been granted to him. He leapt upon me as a mountain cat leaps on a hare, and wrapt his arms round mine and held them close to my sides as though he feared I might draw some weapon. Like a silly, careless idiot I had left my Webley and Scott at home, and the Mausers I had never taken from the cabin of the *Dabchick*. For a moment I was paralysed by the onset and let my assailant bear me back till my head was over the dyke, my heels slipping beneath me, and, no doubt to his view, my whole unworthy carcass ready to be cast with a thrust into the ooze of the dyke that gaped and sucked for me.

But at the extremity of the peril I recovered my senses, and the shame I felt at being mastered in so fatuous a fashion added, I believe, extra "vim" to the pith in my arms when I began to struggle. With a mighty heave I wrenched myself upright and struggled free from the inclined position over the water which had been so dangerous. I felt my enemy stiffen himself, and start as with surprise. Probably he had been told that I was recovering from a serious illness and would prove as clay in the hands of this most evil potter. But those who thought this did not know of the virtue of Granny Pettingill's herbal tonics, or of the admirably recuperative effect of a mallard and a full snipe eaten at breakfast with a cup of home-brewed old ale and a mouthful of ship's rum.

Also I was furious at the indignity put upon me. Me, an athlete and sportsman known throughout the three rivers and their tributaries!

I contracted every sinew and muscle I had and heaved back. I could not see the face of my assailant, but I knew from the feel of the man that he was not Stafford. Stafford had not this man's thews and sinews. He had, no doubt, more jiu-jitsu tricks than this fellow—and I told myself even in the height of the struggle, that it was well for me at that time that I had not to contend with those dangerous tricks and holds—but he had not the good honest bulk and muscle of the man who had thrown himself upon me. I squeezed his body beneath his own arms, and felt his ribs give in. Thank God, I had got a good deal of my strength back! I said to myself. The man held his head thrust hard unto my neck. I could not see his face, but I felt the scrub of a bristly beard, and I saw the colour of his hair, a true "carrots," coarse and dirty. Then I knew my man. I had seen him

in commune with Stafford in the great hall of headquarters. Was he the only one watching for me? If not my time was come, for I knew that this meant my death if it could be compassed by Stafford or his emissaries. If, on the other hand, I had only this fellow to deal with I hoped I might come through it safely. For already I felt him weakening in my arms. He drank too much rum, did this chap.

Little by little I heaved my head forward, forcing the other man's back till I had rather the advantage of the position. With a swift turn and leap I managed to get on the wall side of him, so that his back was to the dyke, as mine had been at first. I could hear him "blow" and curse, and feel him exerting his utmost strength to subdue me again.

Then I felt his grip relax, and, in an instant, wrenched my arms outside his and had his within mine. I was just in time, for in the moment's relaxation of his grip he had managed to pull out a knife. That, I think, maddened me. I could have forgiven a pistol against an unarmed man rather than a knife. It is, of course, illogical, but to my mind there is something more cowardly in the use of the knife, the silent, stealthy use of steel against an unarmed man, than there is in the firing of a pistol—unless the latter be furnished with a Maxim silencer. Then I admit the one is as dastardly as the other.

My man had no chance to use his knife. I had him gripped too tightly. I felt my strength was greater than his. Indeed, my temporary muscular power was abnormal, so furious was I at this cowardly assault.

I was gifted with the strength of a madman just for those few minutes, and I knew it, and felt that my assailant was beginning to realise it. "My Gord!" I heard him mutter. But it was a cockney

"Gord," in fact "Gawd," and not the East Anglian "Gord." And that gave me still more confidence. I felt him wriggle to get free, and then I caught my heel against a tussock of snipe grass and was all but over on my back. He saw his chance, and exerted more power than I had believed to be in him. Doubtless he thought that it was a case of my life or his. I do not know what he had been told by his employer, but I am certain that he believed that if he did not succeed in killing me his last hour had come.

Then indeed it was a fight for life. The advantage my slip gave the man consisted in my being forced to bend back so that he could use his spine, convex and strung to effort, against mine, concave and yielding. But my father, God rest his honest soul as that of a fine and stalwart gentleman! had given me stout bones and sinews, and above all, a stout heart. With a mighty effort I managed to straighten my back till the pair of us stood breast to breast, neither spine being curved more than the other. And now I felt the effects of my recent illness. I could not "last" as I used to before I had been weakened by my long idleness in an unconscious bed! I could not endure much more.

With a fury of hate in my heart I used every ounce of my strength in one last attempt. Now it was a case of my right arm outside his right arm, and my left arm beneath his. It was a fair grip. It was man to man now, and no favour.

I believe there was a prayer on my lips as I put forth my strength. A man does not like to talk of his appeal to the Almighty in moments such as these. Yet I believe there are few men who would not put up such an appeal, and that it is only a false shame that prevents their acknowledging it. I prayed as I fought, and feel no shame in writing it.

My strength must have been greater than I thought. As I put it forth, with the appeal to God still on my lips, I felt my enemy's body collapse in my arms. His bristly beard no longer scratched my neck, his head hung down, he gasped, quivered, and slid from my hold to lie motionless, unconscious, on the strip of peaty soil by the dyke side.

I bent over him, gasping with my recent effort, hardly aware yet that I had been the victor, suspicious lest his collapse might be a trick, but too exhausted to protect myself.

No! There he lay. Breathing in great gulps of air, his eyes open, but only showing the whites, his limbs listless, and at angles which looked as though they were dislocated.

I pulled myself together and swiftly made bonds of reeds and long grasses woven together. He had not recovered his senses when I had bound him hand and foot. I stood upright, and looked about me. But for us two, who had been engaged in a fight for life, there was no living thing to be seen but the wheeling hornpie and darting red legs and a few "tit larks" or meadow pipits, which flew dipping and rising, and ever "piping" from marsh to marsh. These and the stock and horses, and here, I, and the man lying bound at my feet!

What should I do with him? I determined to leave him where he was and to return on my tracks and seek Spider Jinnis. I gulped in great gasps of air. I began to feel pleased with myself. I was my own man again now, no longer a weakling. And then, as I stood, congratulating myself on my victory, and looking round for my gun, I heard the sound of a body rushing through the reeds, and before I could look up through the cover of the walls, or pick up my twelve bore, another blue-jerseyed ruffian simply hurtled into my arms.

I gave a cry of desperation. I had defeated one strong man that morning. I knew that I was unequal to the conquest of two. Still, I did my best. I put forth such strength as I had left and inwardly congratulated myself that this new fool had not the sense to release his unconscious ally on the chance that he might recover sufficiently to help him in his designs on poor me! But now, as I strained my muscles, I felt that those I encountered were the fresher and at the moment the stronger. Well, well, if I were killed now it would absolve me from any dereliction of duty as regards the German plot and plotters. But I did not want to die! Who does in such moments of physical effort? I tried again, but feebly, to wrench my arms free so that I could control the limbs of my second adversary. But I was weary, and the enthusiasm, the mania, which had given me abnormal force for a time, was dying within me. I gave myself up for lost, and once again a prayer, not for victory, but for pardon, and for Ruth, sweetened my agony of defeat.

Harder came the pressure I must perforce endure, Back went my head and shoulders. I was all but falling into the ooze where I might have lain for months as eel meat, when I heard a "biff, spank," and a "hold that t'other one Fred, don't let the warmin git away. Ah! Would ye!" There came another mighty "biff," and the arms about me relaxed, and I fell on the damp edge of the dyke.

I did not lose consciousness and I could not help smiling as I saw Spider, old Spider of over sixty and Fred of over seventy, turning up their jersey sleeves to "hev a goo" with the man who had attacked me. "Git you up you warmin," said Spider, to my last assailant. "You doan't think as I ha' done'd wi' ye yet?"

He used his knee boots freely on this last scoundrel till he rose up with a curse, and flung himself, knife in hand, upon Spider. The latter seemed amused and exhilarated. I rose to my feet and watched. He winked humourously at me, as he dodged the first downstroke of the knife blade. "We shall ha'e ta draw the fangs o' this here sarpent," he said with a quick dive and hoist.

He caught the right ankle of the man with the knife in one hand while he thrust back his upper body, knife and all, with the other, and, *kerplunk*, went the gentle assailant on his shoulder on the edge of the dyke. Swiftly Spider caught at his other ankle and held both in his hands. "Now," said he, "dy'e want to see how we trate warmin here, Master Jack? But I reckon you know. You're one o' us uns. But this here chap don't know. I don't know where he come from but I should think he come from Harwich." (For some reason or other Harwich is used as a means of expressing contempt by Norfolk people. "Go to Harwich!" means go to a warmer, reputedly warmer, spot than that torpedo boat centre. "All up at Harwich" means hopelessly confused or muddled. And Spider believed he was using the extremity of abuse in saying that this fellow might have come from Harwich.) "Yes. I reckon he come from Harwich. Now dee you look. Though ye know that may fare to make ye laugh."

He thrust forward on the two feet he held till the man's head overhung the dyke's bank. The helpless ruffian shouted and swore. "Do you mean to drown me?" he yelled. "You'll 'ang! You'll 'ang!" That made it clear he was no East Anglian. No East Anglian, at all events of Norfolk and Suffolk, except certain Yarmouth, Gorleston, and Lowestoft people who have been corrupted by communication

with low-class cockneys, ever omits to aspirate in the right place.

"'Ang!" roared Spider! "Oh, Hang! Jes so! Well you'll drownd fust tha'ss one comfort. Now dee you look here, Master Jack," he said, exulting. He dipped the man still further over the edge till, although he writhed and wriggled like an eel on a night line, he could not help but project over to the surface of the dyke. "Here we go sperlosher!" shouted Spider in an ecstasy of delight. "Tha'ss right, the more ye wriggle the more you'll get in your garp. Hor! Hor! Hor!" He spoke truly. If this fellow had been content to lie still on his back and to endure the touch of his head to the water he would not have suffered half so much. But as he wriggled about and about he kept bringing his mouth to the filthy muddy water, the depths of which had been stirred up by the thoughtful Spider, so that he swallowed an infinity of filth.

When the man began to gasp and gurgle Spider pulled him out. He was venting quarts of the filth through his mouth, and Spider stood and roared with laughter at him.

Old Fred was busy examining the first scoundrel whom I had made fast, and who now pretended to be senseless.

"Ha'e ye got a bit of twine, Fred boy?" asked Spider. And Fred, as ever, was able to produce a couple of fathom of spunyarn. Still chuckling hugely at the baiting of the foe, which he had delighted in—for he was a good friend, and a good enemy to his own enemies and to those who sought to injure his friends—Spider bound his captive in cunning turns and hitches, and, with a contemptuous kick, left him while he turned his attention to Fred, who stood grinning and exultant over the man whom I had mastered by myself.

"D'ye mean ta say as you did for this chap all by yourself, Master Jack?" said Fred, "and you not got over that crack o' the skull and half drowndin' on Breydon! Well, bor, you fare a masterpiece! D'ye know who this be? Why he's Mister Stafford hog's chief sarvant he is! He's his mighty man and centurion! Hoo! Hoo! He's hand in glove with Mister Stafford he is, and he's a—furriner at that, blarm him! Tha'ss Gord's own marcy as he din't kill ye, and as Spider and me come up in time to take the tother! Lord, Master Jack, whatever dee ye mean by riskin' yar life like so?"

I was now recovered, and full of laughter and triumph. I grasped Fred's hand and then Spider's. "My dear old chap," I said to the former, "do you think that I invited these men to go for me? Not I! I wanted to walk peaceably home, didn't I, Spider?" I appealed to my host at breakfast. "Besides, I had my gun."

But Spider shook his head. "I doubt you're a rumegge, Master Jack," he said. "I tode ye ta keep yar eyes open. But there! You must go back by yarself! You worn't afeared 'cos you din't believe as anyone would interfere along of a dead body. You must hev yar jook! Well, you ha' had it! As for yar gun, bor, tha'ss no good at close quarters, especially when thas's knocked clean out o' your grip. Ha! Ha! Ha!"

"Yes," I roared, "by the lord, I *have* had my joke, with the help of you and Fred here. You are better than half a dozen guns!"

And that took the fancy of my two old friends so that they joined in my riot of laughter.

I daresay my readers will think that we had little enough to laugh at; that there was little enough humour in my remark to cause uproarious merriment. But remember that we were all strung

above concert pitch; that I had just been saved from a horrible death in a dyke, and that the men who had rescued me had just preserved a young man for whom they had, however unjustifiably, a sincere affection. That will explain the loudness of our laughter.

"Well there, bor," said Spider, bringing out a flat pint bottle from his game pocket, "if you bain't a *mark*, and I never minded to pore some o' this down yar t'root when you come round."

"Hang it all," said I, taking a good gulp at the ship's rum—splendid old spirit—which Spider had handed, "I don't remember ever being square, and it's never too late to remember the rum."

Lord, how a man can play the fool and say silly things after moments of intense stress! To us it was funny. We laughed again till Fred spluttered and almost choked with the flask at his lips.

"You're a *mark*, you are," gasped Spider, "a reg'lar mark." Then, quite thoughtfully and seriously, he added: "You know, Master Jack, I allust said as you were a MARK!"

"Well there, bors," interrupted Fred, "what be we to do with this here truck? I reckon we'd best heave 'em in the deeaks for the eels. The ooze will soon suck 'em under. They oan't want no weights to their little tootsicumses!"

"Oh, for 'eaven's sake, don't murder me!" whined my last assailant. "Hi'll pay—hi'll pay five pound to heach of you."

"Lorgoramighty!" shouted Fred, holding his sides with laughter, "He think he carcase is wuth ten pounds, no, fifteen, if we take in Master Jack."

"No, no!" gasped the man on the peat, "Mr. Haakon wouldn' take it; 'e's a gentleman; 'e wouldn't tike a pore bloke's money."

Spider and Fred roared again. "Well," said

Spider, "if that doan't beat the band! Now listen here, ye fule! No one's goin' ta kill ye, though you set out to kill a man who's wuth a hunnerd o' such as you and yar master too. You'll come back to a nice little house cloose by, and there you'll stay till you've answered a few little questions. Bain't that all right, Master Jack?

"Yes," I said sternly. "And let them starve till I come to-night. They will be more willing to tell the truth if they starve for twelve hours or so."

At this the first assailant, the more "beefy" one of the two, uttered a groan. However, I was done with them for the time. There could be nothing better than to have them taken bound to Spider's and there held till they had been put to the question.

CHAPTER XXII.

ROSE'S QUESTION.

It was past ten when I got back to the Prettyman farm, and found the whole house in a state of consternation because of my disappearance. Young Dick had spotted me coming when I was still nearly a mile off, and instead of telling his people that I was coming, had run to meet me. However, the others had seen us soon afterwards, but were still in a state of excitement and unrest when I entered the kitchen.

"Lor, Master Jack," cried old granny, in an angrier voice than I had ever heard from her, "you might hev more thought. Why din't ye tell as you meant to go a gunnin'? I thought better on ye, and that's a fact!"

I was sorry. I ought to have remembered that my absence would cause anxiety. To justify myself I may say that I knew that when I went out of the farmhouse all the males were up and about, and, if I had thought, I should have considered that they would have seen me making my way along the river wall. What kept me quiet was the guilty conscience that I did not think. Certainly, now I came to remember, I had not seen any of my friends about on their level as I walked to the south. Un-

fortunately for the peace of mind of the women, they had all gone across the river to Fritton to see about some store pigs which were for sale, and which they had brought home in the pig cart which did for pigs, for going to market, and, at the end, as a hearse on which to bear the bodies of the dead marsh folk up to the village church at Fritton.

I understood that granny felt annoyance, but I did not understand why she should be so excessively bitter till I again looked round the kitchen and saw that Rose was not present.

"Dick," said granny, "for goodness sake go and try to find that gal! She can't ha' gone far. I told her that was no good her goin' Berney Arms way. Lord! she might have thought he wouldn't come to no harm!"

She flung a contemptuous glance at me. Certainly she was very angry. I feared lest poor Rose had made an exhibition of her anxiety, and that this had, naturally enough, irritated the old woman against me.

"Here she come, granny," said Dick, as soon as he reached the door. "Here she come."

I looked out of the window, and my heart smote me. Rose was running swiftly along the river wall that had so tried my paces. Her lovely hair was streaming unbound, her face was white as the bloom of arrowhead, and her eyes were strained. I pushed out in front of Dick, and she saw me. And then I knew that once again I had made a fool of myself, for no sooner did her eyes meet mine than she stumbled in her running and fell down upon the wall, rolling from the narrow top through the grass and reeds till she lay on the strip of peaty soil between the wall and the inner dyke, a similar strip of boggy, fibrous land to that on which I had that morning twice fought for my life. "Come you

back, Master Jack!" cried granny, in her most strident tones, "Come you back!"

But I was too vexed with myself to heed her, and, thrusting Dick back as he ranged up alongside me, I ran at my top speed to Rose. I raised her in my arms and carried her up the wall as though she had been a feather-weight. And, by the time that the somewhat slow minds of the farmer and his descendants had stirred them to follow Dick, I had her at the door of the house.

She opened her eyes soon after I had raised her in my arms, but she made no effort to escape from my hold. Indeed, she lay most comfortably as I carried her, and I was forced to keep my eyes from her face lest I should be compelled to comfort her in the way I knew she would like. She seemed reluctant to be put down in the kitchen, for, as I placed her gently in a chair, she caught at my hand. Then she began to sob, but only for a moment.

"Why, my wench!" cried the good old farmer, "you don't want to upset yourself now. He's all right."

"He—he saved my life, gran'faa'er," said Rose.

"And he'd do it again," cried the old man. "But you look a bit rumpled up, Master Jack. Hev the bullocks been a chasin' on ye? Hor! Hor! Hor!"

I hesitated. Should I tell these honest friends of mine what had happened. On the whole I thought that it would be as well. It would at least excuse me for being so late home, and might soften the wrath of the old great-grandmother. So I said, "A good deal worse than that; I've had to fight for my life." And with that I told them everything.

"So that warmin know you bain't dead," cried Dick. Every member of the household knew my enemy by this time. "Tha'ss lucky you come off

so well, Master Jack. He oan't get another chance. Us uns will see to that."

Granny's eyes had grown kinder, and Rose was gazing at me, wide eyed, not flushed, but no longer tearful.

"That'll take us all our time to keep a watch on you and the young lady," said the farmer, thoughtfully; "but I reckon we can do it, what d'ye say, boys?"

There was a rumbling chuckle from the sons and grandsons. "Yes," said Tom, the young man who had been to Hamburg to teach the Germans how to make their own herring nets, and who had many an insult to return to the Teutons. "Yes, I reckon so!"

It seemed that the story which, at first, I had so jealously guarded, was gradually getting known to all my friends on the marsh. But now that things were developing to a climax, I was not sorry for this. The time was coming when it seemed probable that I should be glad of every friendly hand I could depend upon. And not a man or woman of the marsh farms but was stirred both by an earnest patriotism and by an affection for unworthy Jack Haakon. I began to think that even if the skipper were really in with England's enemies, I might be able to frustrate their plans. If only he were true, and had some scheme whereby he meant to evade his obligation to his backer, I did not doubt that we should triumph. And that he was true he was giving hostage. Had he any notion of treason to England in his mind he would hardly have confided the safety of his sister to us. For that he was sincerely devoted to Ruth I did not doubt.

We had all been sitting silent for a minute or two when granny said, "But come you on, Master

Jack. You say you ha' had yar brekkust at Spider's, but you hain't had my broth, and that's a medsun as well as a food, so you ha' got to take that and let me see if you ha' been hurt in yar fights. Rose!" she cried to the girl, in order, I fancy to give her something to do so that she might no longer devour me with her eyes, as she had been doing since I carried her indoors, "just hot up that earthenware cook pot for our master, and bring it up to his room. Now, Master Jack, you don't want to be ashamed of an old woman a nursin' on ye, so come you along upstairs and lemme see if you be bruised or hurt."

"Mind what you're arter along o' her," said the old farmer, roaring with laughter. "She's no more sensible than a wench o' sixteen, she bain't! She'll be hevin' on ye for breach o' promise if you don't fare careful! Ho! Ho! Ho!"

The humour was of the kind the old man loved, and I laughed at it a bit against the grain. If I had not I might have been suspected of "mucky pride."

It took a very little time for the old woman to satisfy herself that I had incurred no serious injury. She rubbed me on the muscles of my arms and neck, and applied a lotion to one or two abrasions and contusions. Then she said, "I hope to Gord, Master Jack, as Rose won't go shanny. But that'll be a sore trial for her to see your young lady here. Lord, why don't the silly wench see as you're not for the likes of her. When we couldn't find you this mornin' I thought she'd ha' gone right crazy there and then. Dee you try to make her more sensibler like, now do ye, Master Jack, or I doubt that may be the wuss for all on us."

"I do all I can," I protested a little peevishly. "I can't hurt the girl's feelings. I can't!"

"That 'ud be better than breakin' her heart," said granny sententiously. "But there! there's no good me interferin'. Don't think as I blame you, Master Jack. You ha' behaved like the gennleman you be. But that gal! Lord bless me, I could take and larrup her till she thought o' her flesh more than her feelin's. But I suppose 'tis nater, and contrairy nater too!"

The old woman left me at last to my great relief. For I had to make myself tidy—to "brisk myself up"—and Ruth was coming. Ruth! I might hope to see her and have her beneath this very roof soon after eleven.

Fool that I was to underestimate the possibilities of Rose's jealousy! Fool not to know that unhappy love may change a girl's whole nature, or a man's, for that matter. Fool not to comprehend the meaning of that steady gaze which Rose had bent on me! How was I to know?—But, lord! What is the use of these "vain regrets"! We had to play out our game as the cards fell.

I was wondering how my enemies of the morning were getting on in the custody of Fred and Spider, wondering how late Ruth would be, wondering what should be my next move against Stafford's machinations, when I saw a white jib and mains'l I knew well swinging round with a ported helm from the Wensum into the Waveney opposite Burgh Castle. The *Dabchick* still had two or three miles to sail before she reached our staithe; but she was coming! She was coming, my own, my sweet!

"Lor!" said the old farmer, when I reappeared in the kitchen, "anybody can see he's a goin' a courtin'. Hor! Hor! Hor! Well, there, Master Jack, I wish ye luck. Hor! Hor! Hor!"

The dear old fellow had stayed at home instead of going out again to his work upon his level on

purpose that, as master of the house, he might be on the spot to assure his new guest of her welcome. I loved the old boy, but just at that moment the particular nature of his joking was like acid on a sore to me, and even old granny flared an angry look at her son. "She ought ta like ye in them clo'es," continued the old man. "Rose!—Where's that gal?—Rose! don't ye reckon as our wisitor ought ta like Master Jack in them clo'es?"

I don't know if the farmer was entirely unconscious of his granddaughter's fancy for me, or if he were endeavouring to show her her folly. But I do know that I could have smote him on the mouth!

Rose stifled a piteous little cry and stole from the room. I saw old granny look at her son as though she could have laid him across her knee and administered to him the salutary punishment of his early years. But the old girl was crafty enough not to let him see her thoughts. If she and I knew of her great-grandchild's folly, it was not for either of us to make it known to her grandfather, who, with all good intentions, would have used it as a flail to scourge her with his humour—not meaning to hurt her, mind you, but in his simple, rough way, wishing to show her how silly she was.

The wind was blowing very fresh now from the nor'-west, and I had noticed that there was not a reef in the *Dabchick's* mains'l or second jib. I was glad to see that Sam, for I supposed that it was Sam Durrant in charge of the cutter, had had the sense not to set the big jib. The second was quite enough with such a breeze, and I fancied that the little cutter would keep both Sam and Ruth hard at work as she roared along the shallow reaches of the Waveney past Burgh Castle.

It was useless, now, for me to hide myself. The

attack on me that morning made it clear enough that Stafford knew that I had not succumbed to his cowardly attack on Breydon, so I went out on to the river wall, and called to Dick Prettyman. The pair of us laid down plank bridges, or "liggers," as they are locally called, from the edge of the wall to the end of the rond where the river impinged. The tide was running high that day, and I did not wish Ruth to wet her dainty feet. I could not but admire the way in which the cutter came foaming along. Her two great sails bulged out in a way which all yachtsmen will understand; the perfect pull of them, the bellying of their canvas, the heel of the boat, all formed a picture. There were, as was natural at that time of year, two or three tripper-hired craft footling about the river, under half canvas, and every now and again touching the "putty"—the mud—on shallow points. I knew that the call for hands on yachts during the season was responsible for the employment of a lot of unskilled men, and that however unskilled the hired hands might be, their lack of ability would not be noticed by the ignorant crowd who hired them. Pleasure wherries, with giggling girls with their hair down their backs, flanneled fools with their trousers turned up to the knee, exposing their ineptitudes on the foredeck of their craft, passed towards Breydon. London "clurks" with air guns and rook rifles stood poised to shoot pheasants, cattle, tame ducks, or anything they saw. August is the shame of our Norfolk waters. But luckily for us Herringfleet and Haddiscoe men, the greater number of trippers go up the Bure to the Broads, and the Waveney was not so full of the noxious crowd as the North River.

As the *Dabchick*, perfectly handled, roared up our reach I saw some of the trippers expostulating

with their crew, their hired hands, and I guessed that they were asking why they could not "go like that"! I had seen so much of these syndicating hirers of our craft, who starve their men, and imagine that the seven or eight guineas a week they pay for wherry or cutter and hands entitles them to treat the men like slaves and the waters and surrounding country like conquered territory, and I laughed at the expression of the men and the cockneys as the *Dabchick* shot up in the wind, the jib fell, and a line was thrown by Sam and caught by Dick all in a breath.

Sam hailed me. "She's a handful, Master Jack," he yelled. "Hev ye anyone wi' ye who could come and tend the jib sheets now our young missis is goin' ashore?"

"Do you know how to sail a boat?" I asked Dick, for I was by his side now, on the rond, waiting for Ruth.

"Do I know how to ate my wittles!" was the reply.

"Then go with him," I said. "And look here, Dick! When you get off at St. Olave's, or on your way back here, I don't think it matters much which——"

"Then I'll sail back here in her," said Dick.

"Bring ashore the two pistols and rifles you'll find in the cabin," I said. "I've spoken about 'em to Spider, but if he wants them at St. Olave's, tell him you are to bring them here. The ammunition is in the flag locker. Bring all there is."

By this time the *Dabchick* was brought up, nose to rond, and we ran a gangplank from shore to deck. Ruth tripped daintily ashore, and Sam hoisted a couple of trunks and shoved them along the plank. Dick collared the trunks, and I held out my hand to Ruth.

"Dearest!" I cried. "Thank God you've been able to come."

She looked at me, and there was love and trust in her eyes. "And I thank God, too, Jack!" she said. "Why! Oh, it's all right!" She had not understood Master Dick's evolutions. He had snatched up her trunks and carried them, one after the other, to the marsh farm, and then returned. He sprang across the gangplank, and with a shout of farewell to me, he helped Sam to hoist the jib again, the cutter paid off and again roared on her way to St. Olave's, in order to put Stafford off the track if it were possible. The stay at the rond had been so short that I hoped it had not been noticed from the hangar, especially since the skipper had promised me that the telescope should lack its lenses that morning.

I longed to catch my darling in my arms, but there, on the rond or river wall, in full sight of the marsh house, it would have been atrocious! So I took Ruth's hand and guided her over the wall to the marsh house.

Rose met us before we reached the farm.

"Granny say as she hope you will let me look arter ye, miss," said the girl, her face a dead white, and her eyes fixed in an expressionless stare. "I'll do my best to please ye!"

"Why!" cried Ruth, "my dear child, you must not wait on me! I am not helpless! Oh, Jack," she said, as Rose turned away sullenly, "how pretty she is! I ought to be jealous of you living in this beautiful old farmhouse with her. Did she nurse you, Jack? Now, tell the truth!"

Although all my love was for Ruth, I did not like to speak of Rose to her. "No," I said. "You shall see my nurse. She's nearly a hundred years old. and this girl's great-grandmother. But, my

dear, these people have been so good to me; they have nursed me and cared for me, fed me with their best, and attended on me as well as, or better, than I could have been cared for at a hospital, and all because I am the squire at the Hall, and they think I have done well by my people!"

"Dear Jack!" said Ruth. "I shall love them for that."

That was all right, but how long would it be before Rose's jealousy burst out? I was hot as fire as I ushered Ruth into the kitchen.

She was at home at once. The charm of her manner won the old farmer and granny, Tom and another youngster—Frank—immediately. Even Rose seemed to forget her sullenness, and to be glad to wait on my darling.

It was about three o'clock when the *Dabchick* returned, swung to the rond for a moment, and left Dick landed. The boy carried a couple of rifles, and I saw by the bulge of his poaching pockets that he had the Mauser pistols and their holster cases and ammunition there. The Maxim silencers were still fitted to both rifles and pistols.

I had made up my mind what to do with the extra rifle. I meant to tell Tom, the German scholar, the main facts of the case, and to entrust him with one of the Mauser rifles and a pocketful of cartridges. The two pistols and the other rifle I could keep for myself.

For the next day or two there was little or nothing to record. I made my way to Spider's house and learnt that, in some way or other, amazing to Spider and honest old Fred and Bob, the captives had escaped during the night. I guessed that the good-hearted marshmen and watermen had been unable to be strict enough. Anyway, it was no great loss. I could not have brought myself to

torture these rascals, and without that incitement I doubted if I should have obtained any useful information from them. Their interests were with Stafford, and they must be bound to him by stronger fetters than ordinary to have dared to attack me as they had. Fred told me he had met the skipper at the Berney Arms, but seemed reluctant to talk of the meeting. I thought he was exceptionally moved when I took leave of him. There were tears in his eyes as he rung my hand, and he "Godblessed" me over and over again.

It was on the morning of the third day after Ruth had come to the marsh farm that I found an important letter from Milbank at the Queen's Head. "The railway situation is now critical," the detective wrote. "It is rumoured that our scouts have lost sight of the German fleet, which is supposed to be manœuvring somewhere in the North Sea. From what I hear from the inner circle there is a danger of invasion. I hear, too, that Winston Churchill, Sir Edward Grey, and Lord Kitchener are to hold a conference at Whitehall to-morrow with the leading employers. We are approaching a crisis. If ever the attempt you have suggested will be made it will be made within forty-eight hours. Keep watch as well as you can. Unless the conference acts decisively, the railways will be hopelessly disorganised to-morrow. There are rumours that a portion of our fleet is shut up in the Humber for lack of coal. Do not contradict this. If you can guard against the danger of the *Otter* I fancy the great three—Churchill, Grey, and Kitchener—will guard against anything else. Your name is known at headquarters, and a great deal is left to your discretion now. You understand, it is impossible to act before the time, for there is no

evidence of any weight unless you catch the traitors in the act."

This was, of course, in the simple cipher which Milbank always used in writing to me. I mean that it was simple in the extreme when once one had the key, but without that key the mere simplicity of it made it one of the hardest ciphers to solve that are known to experts.

I did not think that the letter had been tampered with. But if it had, I did not believe that its message had been read.

I was certain now, I told myself, that if Stafford and his paymasters, the Germans, meant to take any action they would take it within forty-eight hours. The public did not know what the great three were doing. There was nothing in the papers of that morning referring to any conference of Winston Churchill, Sir Edward Grey, and Lord Kitchener with the employers. It was, I saw, a secret which Milbank had managed to discover by his unequalled means and tact. Well, it warned me. I must hasten back to the marsh farm and make ready for action. I must tell Tom to watch every night upon the marsh, and I myself must take up my post ready to do what I could when the time came.

My anxiety chiefly centred on the intentions of the Skipper. Would he play straight for England, or would be allow himself to he coerced by his "backer"—for by this time I did not doubt that this same backer, from the first, had been acting in German interests, and that the smuggling scheme was but part of a long and deeply-laid scheme of our enemy across the German Ocean.

Since I had been attacked on the river wall, I never went out without an automatic pistol, and now that Dick had brought ashore the Mausers, I usually carried both my ·320 Webley and Scott and

a Mauser. Also I kept my eyes skinned the whole of the way.

I had seen nothing to alarm me since the morning of the fight till I was walking back to the marsh house after I had obtained Milbank's just-quoted letter at the Queen's Head. And then it was not till I had reached the borders of Prettyman's level that I fancied I saw a red shock head ducking beneath the reeds.

I pulled out the Webley and Scott, and made a dash at the spot in the thin bed of reeds where I had fancied I saw the head of an enemy. There were some signs that a body had pushed through the reeds recently, but apart from that, I could see nothing, and even the bend of the reeds, with two or three broken heads, was no strong evidence. It might have been fancy. I stood, pistol in hand, listening for the crackling, hissing sound of motion through the brittle stems. But there was nothing to hear but the croak of a waterhen.

I pulled back the sleeve of the Webley and Scott and pumped up a cartridge, I slid up the safety catch and fired twice into the thicket of reeds for luck.

I heard and saw nothing in the reeds, but at the first shot I heard a frightened cry from somewhere near the river wall. It was a girl's cry.

"God help me!" I cried, "I hope I haven't made an ass of myself and hit a woman!"

I sprang towards the cry, and crouching down, between the straight, upright stems of the reeds and the river wall I found Rose, cowering, her hands over her face, and moaning gently, as though afraid to be heard.

"Rose!" I cried, terrified lest I should have wounded her, although a moment's thought would have told me that I had fired in an entirely different

direction from that which would have reached her where she lay. "Rose! Good God! I have not hit you."

I tore the girl's hands away from her face and was shocked to see the expression upon it. So wild, so despairing, so tender, and so pleading was it!

She caught at my hand and pressed it. "Oh!" she moaned. "I was frightened! I am so silly, Master Jack! I ought to be used to gunnin' by now! Why, I can shoot a gun myself! How silly I be!"

She trembled as I raised her to her feet. And she lifted her great, beautiful eyes to mine.

By Jupiter, she was a lovely girl!

"Has anyone insulted you, child?" I asked, remembering that momentary vision of a red head. "Was it the pistol shot that frightened you, or something else?"

Her face, which had been flushed a moment since, now turned pale as the reed stems themselves. "Insulted me?" she cried. "Why, who is there, Master Jack, 'ceptin' you? And you wouldn't go to insult a pore gal! I know ye too well for that!"

She clung to my arms and her words were coaxing, her manner enticing. But so had her words and her manner been before. I did not pay the attention I should have paid to the sudden change in her manner and in her looks.

"Of course, I would not, Rose," I said, patting her hand which was clutching my arm. "You know you are safe with me! I'm your old friend, you know."

"Ah!" sighed the girl. "My kind old friend! I ought to be satisfied with that, I reckon."

But her lips bit together, and her eyes flashed with a determination I had rarely seen in them before.

"You are allust a comin' to my help, Master Jack, bain't ye?" she asked.

"Well," said I, "this time I seem to have come to frighten you. But if it was not the pistol, what was it?"

"O' course it was the pistol," she said, with some difficulty. "It startled me. I din't know nobody was so cloose."

"And you saw nothing of a man with a red head?" I pressed her, still unable to believe that my vision had been but hallucination, that there had been no red head to catch my eye.

"Red head? Why, no!" she cried. "You——" she clutched me tighter, "you didn't think as I'd took up along o' anybody with a red head, did ye, Master Jack?"

"No, no," I said to soothe her. But I was puzzled all the same. It seemed to me as though I might have disturbed Rose in a meeting with this carroty-headed person, if he existed. Her manner was not natural. She was uneasy. Nor did I believe that she would have cried out at the sound of a pistol shot if there had been nothing else to alarm her.

But I knew enough of women, even then, to be sure that it was useless to try to extort the truth now that the girl was on her guard.

"Well," I said, "I'll see you safe home anyhow." I pressed her hand as I spoke, and her face flamed with pleasure. There was hardly room for the two of us to walk abreast along the top of the river wall, but by keeping very close together we managed it.

"I reckon you're wholly happy now, Master Jack," said Rose, turning her face from me and looking out on to the marsh where half a score of red legs and their young were wheeling and whistling.

"Of course, I'm happy, with you to look after," I said gallantly, but perhaps, a little disgracefully.

I felt her hand grip on my arm. She stopped and forced me to stop, too, turning me so that I faced her full.

"Oh!" she cried, "you know I didn't mean that. I meant that you was happy 'cos you had your sweetheart with ye now at the farmhouse."

I had been a fool, I felt a fool, and I am sure I must have looked it. I giggled inanely. "You ought not to talk like that," I chid her, still more inanely. It would have been far better to be perfectly honest with the girl, but when a man or, rather, a young ass such as I was then, finds himself in the predicament of Paris, he is bound to be an idiot unless he has more brains and self-restraint than nine hundred and ninety-nine out of a thousand. I did not wish to cause Rose unhappiness. But hang it all! I could not say "I am not for you! Avaunt! Tempt me not, for I love anothah!" Also, it was not unpleasant to a young man's vanity to know that a girl so lovely, so pure and so noble natured as Rose loved him. Most of us men are creatures of vanity. I admit it, and most honest men will do the same. Any woman can get round a man by flattering him and playing on his self-conceit if she has sufficient charm to be at all attractive. Provided only that the man be not protected by a genuine and pure love for another girl. That this was my case at the moment was my fortune, and not owing to any merit of mine. I loved Ruth so then that I could not endure any dalliance with another girl. But, had I not loved my darling, I believe that Rose, so *piquante*, tender, patient, and charming a little girl she was, might have been able to win me from my loyalty to my country. Love is the mainspring of life, and God grant that it

may come to all good men in a worthy form, for there is no influence under heaven or above hell which is so potent to make or mar a man as this irrational passion.

I giggled again. Lord! What a fool I was!

"You seem to be well up in my affairs, Rose," I said, still giggling.

Hang it, I could kick myself when I think of my giggle and my words!

The girl was in earnest. Anyone but an idiot would have known it. It was no play to her. "Don't!" she cried. "Don't! You do love her don't you? Oh, tell me the truth, Master Jack. You do love her, love her more than all the world! You'd never look at another gal while she was about!"

"She's a very charming girl," I said. You see I did not want to hurt Rose's feelings by telling her that I thought more of Ruth than of the Universe!

Rose actually shook me. And now that I think over it, I do not blame her for it.

"Do you love her better than all the world? Would you break your heart if anything happened to her? Is she all the world to you? Tell me! Oh, tell me, Master Jack!"

I could not tell this girl, who, I knew, loved me, that Ruth was all that. Of course, it would have been the right and proper thing to do, and I believe that if I had done it, I and others would have been saved much anxiety and peril. But my silly vanity, my reluctance to hurt the feelings of this pretty girl, ruined my candour, broke in on my honour even. "Oh!" I said, "I—I like her immensely. But—but—well, my dear child, you put it very high."

"So," persisted Rose, "you could live without her, could be happy without her. You would not kill yourself if she—she did not love you!"

"I hope I shall never do that," I said, preening my feathers with as much vanity and as little common sense as any cock pheasant in spring.

"Thank God!" said the girl. She stood breathing hard for a few moments. Then she seized my arm again. "Come along," she cried. "I am not sorry now."

What on earth she meant by that last remark I could not guess. But I was glad to see that she was now quite lively and cheerful.

"Will you be a goin' ta the Queen's Head to-morrow mornin'?" she asked.

"I expect so," said I. "Can I bring you anything back?"

"There's some sausages nigh the Old Bell," said Rose. "There's a card in the window as says 'The Lord will provide,' and unnerneath there's 'Home-made sausages on Tuesdays and Fridays.'* I want some o' them for Miss Pettingill. She says she's partial to 'em. She was a laughin' about the vartisement cards t'other night, though I can't see nothing to laugh at."

I did not laugh either. "I'll get some to-morrow morning," I said.

And by then we were back at the marsh farm, and my fancy that I had seen a disappearing red head had almost left me.

* A fact. This shop can be seen opposite the "Old Bell," St. Olave's.

CHAPTER XXIII.

RUTH DISAPPEARS.

I DO not suppose that two lovers ever enjoyed a more delicious idyll than Ruth and I during the days when we were sharing the hospitality of the Prettymans, and, although it may seem like self-conceit, I think that, of the two, Ruth enjoyed them the more. For she had not the incessant anxiety which weighed upon me. Every night either Tom, Dick, or Frank watched down the marsh for the dirigible. Tom was the hardest worked, for whether he watched or not, he had to keep on the look-out because he was the only one of the boys who could understand German, and if either of his brothers had seen the dirigible come to rest upon the marsh they would have to arouse Tom or me, to endeavour to hear what was said by her crew. But so far as we could ascertain, the dirigible had deserted our neighbourhood.

Bob Baldry reported day by day, and at least every other day old Spider came and expressed himself on things in general and on the people who had attempted my life in particular. Fred kept aloof. I wondered why, but guessed from his manner when last I saw him, that he was worried. The time was full of enjoyment for me, had it not been for the ever-present fear. I knew that Stafford

was aware that I lived, and had tried to remedy that drawback from his point of view. I knew that the villain coveted Ruth and had schemed to kidnap her. I knew that the skipper was under bonds to deliver up the *Otter* to any nominee of his backer's, and I could not guess at a plan which would convert this obligation into an advantage for England. Still it was a time of rest, of waiting, and, so far as Ruth was concerned, I hope that it was a time of entire content.

Rose had become the attentive handmaid of my love. And this was one thing that worried me. However highly I thought of the girl's unselfishness, I could not reconcile it with my knowledge of woman, or even of man, that she should humble herself to do menial offices for a woman whom she, if she did love me, could not but regard as her rival. Yet day by day she attended on Ruth with greater solicitude.

"Jack," said Ruth one morning—it was a day or two before Rose had asked me how much I loved Ruth—when we had strolled along the river wall, through the marsh gate and down to the marsh itself, "I don't know what I ought to give that girl. Really she makes me ashamed the way she waits on me. And yet she does not do it like a servant, but like a willing friend. I never knew a girl I liked so much; no, not even in the set which used to be mine before Raymond undertook this dreadful smuggling scheme. You know, I think it dreadful now, don't you? I didn't understand at first. Oh, I did not understand!"

"My darling," I said, "of course you did not and, at any rate, there is nothing very criminal about smuggling. Moreover, the romance, the charm of the secret to the Roman chamber, the pretence of 'The House of the Three Skippers,' appealed to you.

Don't think I blame you for being one of the smugglers, dear. Hang it, I am one myself, and I should have enjoyed the whole thing but for that horrible affair on Breydon."

"Yes," cried Ruth, shivering. "That was what brought the truth home to me, and, I believe, to Raymond too. He has never seemed the same since he learned the truth of that. Indeed, I don't think he has ever been quite the same since he was nearly killed by the propeller of the *Buzzard*."

I had no doubt about the matter in my own mind, but I wished to know what Ruth thought. "Do you think," I asked, "that Stafford purposely guided the aeroplane so as to endanger your brother's life?"

I watched her closely as I spoke, and I saw her face flare up and then pale. "Don't, dear," she said. "I hate to think of it. You know how I hate the man. It may make me unjust to him."

I chuckled drily. "You don't know all about him yet, dear, and it is not the time to tell you now."

I sucked at my pipe and lay looking up into the azure sky, with its filmy veil of white, while half unconsciously I observed the pleasure wherries and smaller craft that every now and again passed us, on their way to or from Breydon.

It was very peaceful, and very delightful. I lay on a grassy hummock, with Ruth beside me stroking my hair. It seemed hard to believe that within a mile of where we were, treason had belched forth her horrible menace, and that within a mile or two I had been forced to fight for my life.

"I'm glad you like Rose," I said. "She—she seems trustworthy to you, then?"

"Of course," cried Ruth, indignantly. "My dear boy, how can you ask that of any member of this dear family? I am new to this sort of people, you must

remember. Since my childhood at Cantley I have seen nothing of the marshfolk. Perhaps my experience of old June ought to have taught me what to expect. But the hospitality, and the hearty and unstrained welcome which have been extended to me here have amazed me. Oh, Jack, I love your people! And they speak so well of you! Of course, I knew when I saw you that you were worthy of any girl's love—how ashamed I ought to be for being wooed and won so easily! And every word I hear of you tells me how wisely I have chosen.'

"Oh, Lord!" I cried. "Don't talk like that, sweetheart. You know we Norfolk marshfolk hang together, hall and village, at least so far as the old families are concerned. I can't say so much for the manufacturer, Sir Berkeley Axminster. Of course the old folk about here who remember that his grandmother took in washing, and that his grandfather made his 'brass' by stealing the invention of one of his own workmen, do not consider that the Axminsters are what they call 'rale gentry.' They laugh when they are told that he is a big man in London, and it only goes to increase their huge contempt of 'Lunnon' and 'Lunnoners.'"

It seemed quite pleasant to be able to talk and think for a while of something not connected with the Brotherhood or the more vital matter of the impending attempt of an enemy to take us by surprise.

We talked a lot of nonsense during the day, and Ruth retired at night without any notion that the crisis was at hand. I had been warned by Milbank to get my post early on the following morning, and to be ready for telegrams. If matters were critical in London and Berlin, I knew that they were critical here, by the Waveney. But it would serve no good purpose to alarm Ruth.

Good Lord, what a fool I was not to take her entirely into my confidence!

The following morning was sunless, and there was a nip of coming autumn in the air when I rose soon after six. I found Tom in the kitchen. He had taken the night watch and reported that he had seen nothing. "I shouldn't be sapparised if you was to find a snipe or two along the wall this mornin', Master Jack," he said. "There's a cold blow come. Don't you worrit to come home quick if you find a parcel or two come over. I know you're fond of snipe shootin'."

I nodded, thanked him, and without a thought that I should return to tragedy, I left the farmhouse.

Tom was right. I picked up three couple of snipe on my way to the Queen's Head, and this made me a little late in getting my post. In fact, it was half-past eight before I opened my letter from Milbank. When I opened it, I started for home at my best speed.

"Things must finish to-day one way or the other. Churchill, Grey, and Kitchener have informed the employers that they must make terms with the workmen within twenty-four hours or the government will take possession of their property and premises in the name of the nation. I hear from a reliable source that an attempt at invasion is expected within twenty-four hours. I dare not say even in this cipher what steps Churchill has taken to make us safe. Anyway, there is a risk. If you are right and there is any intention of the Germans to take possession of the *Otter* to attack our ships from the inner circle, it is almost certain to be tried to-night or to-morrow at the latest, probably to-night, Be on the watch. Unless the attempt is made within forty-eight hours it will not be made at all, for even Churchill will be unable to hide his plans longer than

that, and if once they are known there'll be no attempt on the part of Germany. Wire me if you want me with you. My work here is done."

I did not want him. I thought that my allies on the spot would be enough. So I left the Queen's Head, and the chance to summon the detective, without a thought that at any rate one extra hand here could do no harm and might do good.

The contents of the letter had cheered me. I did not believe now that any attempt would be made to effect an invasion. If Milbank's previous reports had been correct, and I had been told that he never made a mistake, or at all events never made a statement to a client unless he were sure of its accuracy, the critical time had already been passed. If Lord Kitchener had busied himself in seeing to our defences all would be right. The mere fact that the great organiser had been called in to consult would be sufficient to prevent the enemy from trying to land. Ah! But did they know? I forgot that Milbank had warned me that all his communications were strictly private, and certainly I had seen no mention of the conference, or of Lord Kitchener being summoned for consultation, in the London papers which were fetched for me now daily by my young friend Dick.

Then I stopped on the river wall and roared with laughter at myself! What on earth had I, a humble Norfolk gentleman, to do with such great matters as these? What was I, to consider if Lord Kitchener was called in to consult or not? How ridiculous it was for me to suppose that any effort of mine could influence the fate of empires! It was all I could do to look after my own love affairs, let alone the matters of the nation.

My little potty discoveries down on the lower reaches of the Wensum were of microscopical

importance! I must must have been mad to believe that world-wide interests were involved in them. If I were not careful I should develop into an egomaniac! Ha! Ha! Ha!

And yet the laughter did not ring true. I knew that from every rational point of view it was absurd to believe that a smugglers' syndicate at Reedham could be connected with a German invasion. If I were to act according to my reason, I should have confined myself to guarding Ruth from the kidnapping which Stafford had arranged with the man of the dirigible on the marsh. Who was I to interfere with such great affairs as those of which Harold Milbank wrote? As for the detective, he must be playing up to me, and laughing in his sleeve that any country gentleman could be such a fool as to imagine that anything he knew, suspected, experienced or did could affect national interests!

So much the better, I could concentrate my attention on my love and on the sweet duty of keeping her safe! I strode along the river wall gaily. All the recent melodramatic details, the Mauser rifles and pistols with the Maxim silencers, the watching night after night for the dirigible, were but so much absurd pandering to my egomania! There should be no more of that, I was determined! Milbank wrote me that the crisis would come within twenty-four hours! Well, an imperial or national crisis could not affect me! What a swollen head I must have had even to instruct Milbank, and what a fraud of a detective he must be to pretend that he believed that there was anything in my preposterous theories! Dear old Peter Blunderfield was a very good chap; but he, like myself, had evidently been fooled by this Milbank!

The early ill-temper of the sky had given way to the season of the year. Now the slate-grey clouds

had split into white masses, interspersed with strips of gauzy blue, and laughing here and there with dancing gleams of the sun.

The snipe would be on the move. They would not remain here if it was to turn out into a warm day! They must be home-bred. No one ever heard of migrant snipe in August. I dare say they would be back again on the "Poor Marsh," the famous breeding-ground for snipe, which was let at a tenth of its value to Sir Berkeley Axminster because the village guardians of the poor wished to curry favour with that neo-plutocrat. Well, I would get as many as I could. There was, and is, no sport to my mind like that of snipe shooting. The challenging dash and twist of the rise, the reedy chuckle of their protest, the sheer gaiety of their flight, render them the most delightful birds on the wing to shoot.

"Peeink!" from the right on the rond. Ah! Two full snipe. Crack! Crack! Hang it! I ought to have got 'em both! I was too hurried for the left barrel!

I retrieved the one killed without any sense of gratitude for that one, and with a grudge against myself and fate for having failed to kill right and left. Then I saw that I was making myself as big a fool over this couple of snipe as I had been over the menace of the Brotherhood! Surely, surely, I ought to be getting to an age when I should not play the idiot like this!

A little disgusted with myself, I continued on my early walk back along the river wall to the Pretty-man marsh farm. Foolish, as I was, I could not keep up my grudge against things in general. It was only half-past eight on an August morning that now promised to usher in a delicious day. Everywhere about the mighty level of marshes there were specks of red, grazing stock, of dull gamboge, the flocks

of sheep, of flashing white, the sails of the yachts and hired pleasure craft already under way, of slate-coloured huge sails, the motive power of the trading wherries, and whether the colour scheme were red, brown, gamboge or white, slate or dun, all seemed to be upon the marsh, for the very pleasure or trading wherries to one's sight looked to be sailing through the grazing lands, as they traversed the reaches of the rivers which wind in and out the lovely desola tion of the great marsh expanse where the Wensum, the Bure, and Waveney join their valleys.

I was within a mile of the Prettyman farm when Dick, the youngster, who had perhaps most of all the male Prettymans attached himself to me, came running towards me. "What's up, Dick?" I cried, merrily. "Got a parcel of home-bred mallard for me?"

But as he approached me I saw that there was something very serious amiss. The boy's ruddy, bronzed cheeks were chalk-white beneath the stain of the sun and wind, and his eyes were strained with anxiety.

"Hain't you met Miss Ruth?" he asked.

"Miss Ruth? No, my dear Dick. Why? I did not tell her where I was bound for this morning. Isn't she at the farm?"

"Come you on, Master Jack," urged Dick. "There's a some'at wrong somewheres. I see her start out a walkin' Haddisca way, that's as if she was a goin' ta meet you. I watched her till she got past the mill, and she was a goin' along as steady as any man! I'd ha' swore as she was a goin' to meet you."

"How long ago was this?" I asked. It was now barely nine. It cannot have been long since, for Ruth was not an early riser as a rule.

"You stutted out about half arter six, Master

Jack," said Dick, thinking hard, as was evident by the vigour with which he scratched his head, "and I see ye from the mill deeak wall where I was a lookin' at the eel traps. Well then, that must ha' been somewheres about half arter seven when she passed. And she was a goin' as if she meant it, and though she din't see me, for I was a bendin' down over the traps with my arms in the sluice, I see as she was as merry as a missel thrush, ay! And I heerd her a singin' somethin' pratty! That was all about 'The lark now leave its watery nest,' and that fared wonnerful true ta me 'cos there was wholly a dew larse night and there was a planty o' water, though tha'ss a bit late for larks' neesten!"

"Good Lord, Dick!" I cried at last, "for heaven's sake tell me what's wrong. Has she disappeared? Don't you know where she is? Tell me, oh tell me, Dick! I haven't seen or heard a sign of her. Lost! My God, lost! And you and all of you knew the danger she was in! How can she be lost if she started out to meet me along the river wall? I've come straight back and have not seen a sign of her My God, Dick, tell me you don't mean that! She's not lost!"

As soon as the meaning of the boy's words came home to me I went off at a foolish tangent. Ah! *Si la jeunesse savait!* If only youth could curb its fever of impatience and anxiety to the "*optimum*" temperature (as the bacteriologists say) of common sense. A moment's calm thought would have told me that quiet reflection would be of more use than passionate raving, and might gain me half an hour or more on the enemy. But one cannot be sensible when one is young, ardent, and swayed by the love of a young man for a young woman. I was the average ass, and I acted up to that platform.

"She started out a walkin' as I've tode ye, Master Jack," said Dick. "She was just agin' that big bed o' reeds where the deeak run in out o' the river, the old fleet it was afore they banked up the wall. Tha'ss where I see her larse."

"And none of you have seen her since?" I cried. "Why Dick, where can she be? I have walked every yard along the river wall on my way back. She can't have passed me, and she would not have left the wall for the rond. Hang it, man, she couldn't get down to the rond! You mean to say that you saw her against the mill, and that no one has seen her since?"

"No one of us uns," replied Dick, sadly. "And that's wholly a masterpiece!"

"Come on!" I cried, taking to my heels and running at the top of my speed. "For God's sake let us get to the farmhouse and hear if we can learn anything there."

I found granny and Frank in the kitchen. Tom had been up all night watching for the dirigible, and his sleep was sacred. The old farmer was so maddened by what he considered to be a flaw in his hospitality that he was trapesing over his level, muzzle-loader in hand, and had sworn to find his guest or die. Frank and old granny sat against the kitchen fire, though the morning sun was now growing hot, and I could see that they were downcast.

"You can't say a word to me as I shall take amiss," began old granny. "She come here and trusted us, and we ha' let her go like this!"

Frank fidgeted in his wooden chair. "We don't know as she ha' come to any harm, granny," he said, with an appealing look to me which told me even more than granny's wailing that the Prettymans were convinced that harm had come to Ruth. "We wasn't to know as she'd set out alone so 'arly.

I mane so 'arly for her. Tha'ss the fust time as she ha' goned out on the wall so 'arly."

"Where's Rose?" cried granny. "Where's that gal?"

"I hain't seed her since dew snack," said Frank. "I reckon she's a huntin' for Miss Ruth."

Granny sniffed. I went forward and took the old lady's hand. "My dear granny," I said, "whatever has happened no one will blame you! You are the truest and most generous of women! It is not your fault if ill has come to Miss Pettingill. I know that as surely as that I shall find her. Perhaps she's slipped and sprained or broken her ankle, and is lying somewhere on the wall or on the marsh."

Granny groaned. "Don't ye, don't ye, Master Jack," she said. "I can't stand it. You know as well as me that every inch o' wall and mash ha' been s'arched since we din't see her on the wall. She oughtn't to ha' been allowed to go by herself. Dick see her set out. He ought to ha' follered her."

"And tha'ss a fact," said the humble and repentant Dick.

But I couldn't see it in that light. "My dear friends," I said, "there was no obligation on you to watch her. Indeed, she might have resented it. You have no cause whatever to blame yourselves. But all this is no use. Dick, will you come with me and see what feetings we can find? It may be of some good and it may not."

Old granny threw me a glance. "I'll have a hearin' with Rose while you're gone," she said, and I knew that there was meaning in her words. But what could Rose have to do with this disappearance? Surely granny did not suggest that the girl had murdered Ruth for rivalry.

And then it suddenly occurred to me that I had found her, Rose, on the river wall the other day

soon after I had imagined that I saw a red-headed man who disappeared at my approach! Could it be?—oh, pooh! Of course not! Ruth must have slipped down owing to some accident, and I hoped that we should find her none the worse very soon. But although I say I hoped, I did not really entertain such a hope. I had walked along the wall on which Ruth should have made her way. She could have no reason to take her off the wall to the marsh or rond! And if she had slipped from the wall down to the reed bed at its bottom she would have called out to me as I passed.

At heart I knew that she had been kidnapped by some stealthy emissary of Stafford's. But how? How could he have arranged that she should go along the river wall, to meet me possibly, although she had said nothing of her intention, at a time when his myrmidons could seize upon her?

All this speculation and theorising was futile. Action, action, was what was wanted.

Dick looked at me furtively, and then brought out both a Mauser pistol and a rifle. "I wentured to go to yar room," he said, "and brought 'em down. They can't do no harm."

I had only taken out the Webley and Scott that morning. I nodded to him, and took one of the Mauser pistols and a rifle. The other pistol I told him to keep, and asked him to give the other rifle to Tom. For Tom was older than Dick and Frank, and a more experienced shot. I felt that he would not complain of being roused when he knew the facts.

Dick nodded, and ran up to the main sleeping quarters.

Before he had returned I made up my mind what course to pursue.

Ruth had been seen going in the direction I had

gone, and had last been observed when near a bend in the wall which shut in a very thick bank of reeds, growing round the inlet which is all that remains of the old tidal, or "fleet" dyke. I would take one of the farmhouse boats and coast close in by the river side, while the others who searched with me would keep pace along the river wall and the rond.

In less than ten minutes after my return to the farmhouse, Tom, Dick, and Frank were ready.

I asked Tom to take a rifle, Dick to take one of the Mauser pistols, Frank to take the other Mauser pistol. I had my ·320 Webley and Scott and a Mauser rifle. All the firearms, except my Webley and Scott, were furnished with Maxim silencers.

Tom and Frank were to take the wall and rond, while Dick and I paddled along on the river, watching the marks on the mud and peaty rond.

All of us made straight, without pausing, for the point where Ruth had last been seen, a point which proved to be about fifty yards on the farmhouse side of the great bed of reeds before mentioned.

"I can see her little titty feetin's," yelled Tom from the wall. "Here they be as plain as plain, and here come yarn comin' home way atop on 'em. Ah, Lor! Tha'ss wholly rum. And here be yarn a goin', unnerneath hers! Here they go! Here they go! Hallo!" he shouted out when he came near the great reed bed. "Wha'ss this? Wha'ss this? This is new feetin's! Big feetin's, as make a greasy mark!"

I knew what he meant; it is the mark of a rubber sole! I began to curse myself for being in the boat except that I hoped we might "bolt" the villain and his victim out into the river. I began

to believe that some scoundrel helot of Stafford's had been bribed to abduct her forcibly, that he had come upon her on the river wall and carried her to a boat he had hidden in the old Fleet Dyke, which was still plenty deep enough at half tide to float a dinghey. If so, and the villain were now hiding in the thick bed of reeds, Tom and Frank might drive him out from the land side and I should have the best of the action on the river. I looked at my Webley and Scott, pumped up a cartridge, glanced at the magazine and lock of the Mauser rifle I had retained, and pushed in closer to the shore.

It was of no use to hush our voices now. If there were anyone lurking in a boat, or half sunk in the ooze on his feet, within the cover of the great reed bed, he or they had already heard us. Our game was one which depended on fighting force, and I flattered myself that we were bound to win.

"Here they come and here they go!" cried Tom, while his younger brother, Frank, corroborated him with admiring chuckles. "Here they come and here they go! Hallo! Now the little titty ones ha' gorn! Where the blarmed pigstye ha' they gorn tew? They was here"—he stamped on the river wall, and shouted at me, though I was not more than ten or fifteen yards distant—"and now they bain't ta be seed! Ho! Ho! I twig, master! Can you come ashore?"

I motioned to him in the negative. I believed that, hidden in the bed of reeds, probably in a dinghey in the old Fleet Dyke, I should find the kidnapper and my darling. But why did she not cry out now that she heard our voices? That puzzled me until I remembered, with boiling blood, that the villains would either gag her or threaten her with such condign and immediate punishment

should she call out that she dared not disobey them if—IF—she had hopes of rescue. If she heard us round her she would have very high hopes of rescue, and would not endanger her life or her beauty by calling out.

"She ha' been carried down off the wall," said Tom. "Why the bloomin' slush didn't ye call me afore, ye young fools?" He turned on Dick and Frank, though they were not together, one being with me and one with him. "If you'd ha' brought me here as soon as you began to think as some'at was wrong, I'd ha' stalked 'em and had 'em by now. But now, I doubt it! I doubt it! These here feetin's is none too fresh. Thay're a good hour afore Master Jack trod over 'em. But tha'ss no good grumblin' now. Master Jack, dee you drive 'em in by the deeak and me and Frank will try to flush 'em t'rough the reeds."

The plan was as good as any that I could devise. If Tom were to be believed, and none of the Prettyman family were liars, he had found a trail which went to show that Ruth had been carried down from the river wall to the rond and there hidden in the reed bed. But was she there still? On that depended the success of our hunt.

I could not expect my friends to show as much anxiety for the loss of Ruth as I felt. But it vexed me to hear and see Tom treating this search, the most vital to me of anything in my life, as though we were merely driving a bit of cover for game. "Kape yar gun handy," said Tom, with a chuckle, while I headed the farm row boat for the entrance to the old Fleet Dyke. "Kape yar gun handy. There's no knowin' what ye may flush. Hor! Hor! Hor!"

Surely, I thought, if there were any emissary of Stafford's hiding with Ruth under the screen of the

dense reeds he must have shown himself before now. Could he hope to escape by dodging out on to the rond on either side of the bed ? Hardly, for one thing I, who had shot those ronds time and time again, knew that the surface of the peaty soil about that Fleet Dyke was so treacherous that one was apt to find oneself up to the thigh and gasping with the effort to catch some reed stems for safety, within a few minutes of trusting one's weight to the peat. No ; if Ruth and her abductor were still there they must be in a boat.

I shipped my sculls and pushed our row boat, with Dick astern, up the dyke. Dick was very much alive. He held the Mauser I had given him at his shoulder, for I had shown him how to fix the pistol to its holster as a butt, and his eyes were aflame, as I had seen them when he was watching for a rabbit to bolt.

"Look you out yar side, Frank," cried Tom, as he, in his great marsh boots, crashed down into the reeds. "Here, bor," he shouted to Frank, "gi'e me them bits o' match boardin' I told ye to bring."

These thin planks were to act as supports on the treacherous slime of the surface. I heard the swish of the thrust of them through the reeds, and the noise of Tom's feet as he tried his weight upon their support. "Look you out, Master Jack ! " he said, "look you out ! "

You see we dared not shoot at random into the reeds lest we should hit Ruth. But by this time I no longer believed that either Ruth or anyone was within the reed bed. I might have known better from the first. Stafford was not a man to entrust a plan of his to any one who would have been so slack as to be caught in such a place as that !

"Here we come a brooshin',"* said Tom, chuckling, as he pushed forward through the reed bed. "Look you out when I haller 'mark!'"

Dick, beside me, was, I saw, hungry to use the wonderful Mauser, and to hear its report when muted by a Maxim silencer. I believe he was, at that time, almost as interested in that as in finding Ruth.

"Hain't you seed nothin'?" asked Tom, as I thrust the row boat up the inlet, well into the centre of the reed bed. "Hain't you seed nothin'? Hi! Rover, Rover, Rover!" he shouted. "Frank, can ye see Rover?" Frank had kept to the top of the wall to look out for bolters. He looked round, and, I supposed, saw the noble and intelligent dog, a cross between a spaniel and a Newfoundland, named Rover by Tom, his master. The boy put three fingers in his mouth and whistled shrilly.

"Here he come, Tom," said Frank. "He's a comin' like billyoh!"

"I ought to ha' brought him," said Tom, "but I doubt that oan't make much differ now. We're too late. What d'ye think, Master Jack?"

I had pushed up the dyke in the boat and he had thrust his way through the reed bed on his plank matchboarding till we had met. And neither of us had seen a sign of either enemy or friend.

"Too late!" I groaned. "What's this?"

This was Rover, bounding furiously through the reeds to reach his master. "Ha'e ye got anything as smell o' Miss Ruth?" asked Tom, in all innocence. "If ye hev——"

Alas! I had not.

But the farmhouse was not far distant, and soon, with the help of the agile Frank, we had a boot of my darling for Rover to examine.

* Brushing, beating: *c.f.* Beating or brushing at a ghost.

The fine old fellow smelt and smelt, then looked up at us as though to say, "All right, my friends! Now what do you want me to do?"

Tom showed him the footprints on the river wall, and at once he broke into a whimper. He came eagerly down into the thick of the reeds, and at a spot a little nearer the wall than where I had brought up, he sat on his tail and whined.

"Blarm!" shouted Tom. "And I ought to ha' seed it and all!"

I left the boat and leapt ashore, sinking to my ankles as I did so. I tore my feet out of the mire, and snatched down a double handful of reeds which I laid before me to walk upon. Then I advanced to Tom.

He was pointing to an indentation in the side of the dyke, and to sundry marks in the reeds and undergrowing vegetation amidst the reeds.

A child could have interpreted the signs. There had been a boat there since the last high tide; a woman, for there was the sweep of skirts visible in the bend of the reeds, had been forced forward through the reeds to the boat. One could see that she trod on her heels, throwing herself back in resistance, for the round edge of the heels was stamped deep into the peat, as though she were leaning or pushing back at an angle of forty-five degrees. Behind her one could see the strained tips of the man's toes! The curve of the soles of his boots as he thrust forward to counteract the furious resistance of the woman. It was all plain enough to a man who had tracked hares and rabbits through snow, who had traced weasels to their lairs, and found nest after nest of rats, ay! and waterhens, by their "runs."

And to us, for I believe that even Frank, the youngest of the party, was sportsman enough to

understand every detail as well as Tom and I could. There was only one message. "Too late! Too late!" Though how the villain who had ensnared Ruth had succeeded first in capturing her and then in getting away with her so swiftly was more than we could comprehend.

I think that Tom voiced the opinion of all of us when he drew himself up till his fine head was almost on a level with the summit of the soft purple reed blossoms, and said, "There's more 'an one in this, Master Jack! I on'y see one man's feetin's ashore. But who got the gal to come here along the wall when they was on the look-out for her? I reckon there was more than one in the boat; there was two as tried to put you unner the sod. It may be tha'ss the same two. But there's more than that. Who was it as sent out the lady this mornin'? Master Jack say as he knowed nothin' on it and never tode her where he was a goin'."

"She may have guessed that," I said, for I wished to be fair, and I began to be terrified at what Tom might find before he had got to the end of his deductions.

"But you didn't ax her to come arter ye, and you didn't know she was a comin'," said Tom, with great seriousness. "For Gord's sake, Master Jack, don't le'ss hev no mistake here. You know—yes, you know as well as I do what this may mean. I don't say as it do mean it yet—Oh, crumbs! I reckon I'd better shut my trap! Don't put us on a wrong track, Master Jack! Don't ye! don't ye! Not for *no one's* sake!"

I reached up through the reeds and grasped Tom's hand. "Before God," I said, "I won't. I know of no reason why Miss Pettingill should have come out this morning on the wall. I did not ask her to do so; I did not tell her where or

for what I was going out; I did not even tell her that I should be out and about by soon after six. I know no more about this than you do, Tom."

"Then," said Tom, "I reckon there've been a decoy duck. Now who ha' been playin' decoy?"

I could think of nothing but that Stafford had sent some message to Ruth, franked by some token of her brother's. I knew that the girl was so unsuspicious, so trustful in general, that it would have been an easy thing to deceive her. Again and again I blamed myself for not having warned her of the words I had heard upon the marsh. If I had told her, proved to her, that there were plots abroad whereby she was to be kidnapped and brought aboard the dirigible, she might have been more awake, might never have wandered forth upon the river wall upon that August morning, that August morning which was, if I were to believe Harold Milbank, the morning of the crisis of an Imperial peril! Oh, lord! Here were once again the vain regrets, the helpless grief of folly!

One expects such moments of repentance in the evening, perhaps, but when one is brought up against them at about ten in the forenoon, on a pleasant August morning, with the rustle of the reeds and the ripple of the river in one's ears, one is inclined to think that the world is out of joint and to rage accordingly. I raged.

"What can be done, Tom?" I cried. "Tom! you are sure the dirigible has not been on the island for the last week?"

Tom chuckled. I could not blame him. Now I think of it, I believe that if I had been in his position, I should have chuckled.

"You know me, Master Jack, and what I ha' told ye?" was all that he said.

It was a sufficient reply. I did know him, and had heard his reports.

If the dirigible had been on the triangular island he would have seen it.

I leapt to my feet. "I can't bear to do nothing!" I cried.

"Here," said Tom, "come you home and see what ole granny ha' got to say. She know a lot, she do. Come you home and see what she ha' got to say."

Rover, having ranged throughout the reed bed and decided that he could not remedy the fact that the scent had gone by water, came up with a very damp and active tail. I patted him. I love dogs! He seemed to wink at me. I believe he did, for I am certain that dogs often try to convey their meaning by their eyes since they know they cannot use their tongues in a speech which is intelligible to poor human beings. "Come on," he seemed to say. "Come on!"

I patted him again, thrust the boat off out of the dyke, and pulling sharply, with Dick in the stern, was able to reach the staithe at the farmhouse before Tom and Frank got there.

They ranged up, though, before I had landed. "Now," said Tom, gripping my hand, "you come and hev a hearin' with ole granny. She know a lot, she do."

We entered the farmhouse kitchen together, and found old granny seated in her straight-backed chair looking stern and vexed.

"Granny," said Tom, "Master Jack ha' come to ax ye about Miss Ruth."

I saw the old woman close her eyes for a moment. Then I saw the eyes open, and there was more fire in them than before.

"I bain't a witch," she said. "Master Jack

want to ax June Rivett. She've done magic for him afore now."

It was then that the first suspicion whispered in my mind.

I went to the old lady, and took her hand in mine. "Yes," said I, "June Rivett has. Shall I go to June and ask her if she can help me to find a guest of Judith Prettyman's?"

The old dame sat without a quiver on her face, but I thought that the hard, parchment-like skin warmed for just a second.

Somehow I felt that granny was keeping something to herself, and it annoyed me. "Very well," I said, seeing that she did not reply to me, "I have the means of obtaining information."

The old woman looked at me, and there was an appeal in her eyes. But I could pay attention to no appeal from anyone who was, as I believed, keeping back some material facts in connection with Ruth's disappearance. Gratitude for a saved life, for kind and sympathetic treatment, must all go as naught when the uneasy passion of love intervenes.

I left the room without any clear notion of what I was to do next. Then, as it chanced, my hand touched the magic bag which still hung suspended from my neck on the eelskin.—I mean, when I say that my hand touched it, that I pressed against it through my clothing.

I seemed to feel it tingle to the pressure.

The skipper ought to be warned that his sister could not be found. Was there really anything in this magic bag business more than there is in the ordinary sausage of commerce? It had seemed so to me once, but in spite of my former experience it was hard for me to credit that such mumbo-jumbo hanky-panky tricks could be real.

Some silent influence kept on bidding me try. It could do no harm to try. Try then, try!

I made my way up to my garret and laid myself down on my bed. I was weary, both physically and mentally. And still the inward silent voice kept on murmuring, "Try, try, try!"

Impatiently I opened my shirt so that I could follow the ritual prescribed by old June. I took the bag and pressed it to my forehead, and willed that Eugéne Potin, my blood-brother, should hear me. "Do you hear?" I kept asking. "Do you hear, Potin?"

And presently I heard his voice.

"Ah, M'sieur! Yais, I 'ear. I 'ear! Vot ees it? You speak as eef somesings vere vary bad."

"Thank God!" I cried. "Potin, is the chief with you? Where are you?"

"I am in ze great 'all! Ze chief ees not 'ere; 'e is in ze boat'ouse! I can send for 'im."

"For God's sake tell him that his sister has disappeared. Is Stafford with you? Or is he absent?"

"'E ees in ze 'angar I sink. But Gingaire Billee and George are not 'ere. Ze skipper was asking for zem dis morning, and I do not sink as Stafford felt comfortable! But 'e is 'ere! I tell you zis zough. I sink he go avay to-day."

"Thank you!" I cried. Then another thought came to me. It might be of vital importance for me to be able to summon Potin and the *Buzzard* to me at a moment's notice. If my idea was correct, and Stafford meant to kidnap Ruth aboard the dirigible, he would not come down to marsh with the aeroplane, but would find his way down by boat and on foot. The aeroplane would be left in the hangar. Supposing, which God forefend! I

were unable to prevent Ruth from being shipped aboard the dirigible, I might at least be able to follow her in the aeroplane if I could get word to Potin in time. I knew the little Frenchman was as full of courage as an egg is of meat, and it would go hard with us if we did not catch up the heavy dirigible with the *Buzzard*.

"Potin," I said, "be on the watch all to-day. I may call you at any time, day or night, to come to me with the *Buzzard*. You can do that if Stafford is away, can you not?"

"And eef 'e is 'ere, my friend," protested Potin. "I weel go to you despite zis so grand Mistaire Stafforrd! Hein? Call me wiz zis extraordinaire messagerie of old June, and I weel come! Farevell! I go to tell ze skippaire."

I "rang off," if one may use so modern a term in connection with so antiquated and old-world, so unbelievable, a system of intercommunication at a distance. I was about to go downstairs again when I felt the tingling on my chest which warned me that the other end of the "wire" was in operation. Again, I dragged out the bag and held it to my forehead. "Ze skippaire is going to you!" said Potin's voice. "And 'e too suspect Mistaire ze grand Stafforrd. I am commanded to vatch zis *polisson!* Aha! I veel vatch 'eem! Ze skippaire is not 'imself; 'e is vary strange! You will see, my friend. I veel remember to be on ze alert for you! Till zen good fortune! *Hein?*"

So the skipper was coming. I was glad to hear it. I had much to ask him, for it was no time for finicking now. Harold Milbank warned me that the crisis was imminent. Pettingill would have to choose whether he should obey his backer or defy him for the sake of his country.

Fool that I was to think that I could teach the skipper his duty!

To my dying day I shall feel some shame whenever I remember my parting interview with that gallant gentleman, the chief of the submarine smugglers.

How would the skipper come? The wind was now fresh, and from the west. He could reach the farmhouse in the *Dabchick* as quickly as by any other means. I ran downstairs and looked out across the marsh. I put my binoculars to my eyes, and soon I saw the mains'l of the little cutter rise. In a space of time that proved the skill of the waterman or watermen aboard, the mains'l was trimmed, the jib hoisted, and with a following wind straining out the boom at right angles to the lines of the yacht, the *Dabchick* came roaring down towards Breydon.

In little more time than a motor-boat would have taken to cover the distance, the cutter luffed up to the farmhouse staithe and the skipper leapt ashore.

I never saw a greater change in a man than that which stared at me from the skipper's face. Formerly, although there was often a sternness, an imperative commandingness of expression, noticeable about him, he was often gay, genial, and humorous. There was *la joie de vivre* in him. But now it was as though a man twenty years older than the Raymond Pettingill I knew confronted me. No sign of mirth, no flash of humour, no glimmer of light-heartedness was discernible in him. Yet there was an added nobility, a look as though he were prepared to give his life in a good cause, which made him even more impressive than he had been before. There was a look of "Kismet," of a willing obedience to an inexorable decree

of Destiny which illumined and transfigured the man.

He ran to meet me, and gripped my hand.

"Eugéne told me," he said. "Anything new?"

"No!" I replied. When I had descended into the kitchen I found it empty. I had caught sight of the boys, Tom, Dick, and Frank, on the river wall, and did not doubt that they were still hunting for signs of Ruth. The old farmer was still scouring the marsh, muzzle-loader on shoulder. Granny had withdrawn to some upstairs chamber, possibly to Rose. There was nothing fresh for me to tell my darling's brother.

"Of course it's Stafford," said the skipper. "But the man is at headquarters. He can't be mixed up in it personally."

"He wouldn't," I said with a sneer. "He has handed over the work to two of his men, red-headed Billy—Ginger Billy, Potin calls him—and George are not at headquarters. They've worked it. It was the red-headed man who nearly killed me, and I fancied I saw the shine of his topknot the other morning. They've got her, but where on earth they've taken her beats me. Can't you do anything to force this man to surrender her?"

"I could, but you don't know what's at stake. My God, Haakon, it's simply infernal! I dare not cross the man now, not for the next twenty-four hours! I dare not."

My lip curled in contempt.

"You fool!" cried the skipper angrily, "you don't imagine that I fear for myself! You don't know what is at stake!" he repeated. "But, Haakon, I am glad to come here to you again. I know you are thinking bitterly of me now. Put that aside. In the future, if we should never meet again, what will you say of the man who kidnapped

you, of the captain of the submarine smugglers? Will you call him a villain?"

He spoke so earnestly that I could not put him off with a light answer. His words sunk to my heart. No, I had no unkind thoughts of him apart from his *laissez faire* policy in the matter of his sister's abduction. I held out my hand and he gripped it. "No," I said, "I shall think of him as a gallant man, and a gentleman. I tell you frankly that what weighs on my mind is that you say you have to obey your backer. Will you do so at the cost of your country? I can't believe it!"

"Wait till to-morrow or the next day to find your answer," said the skipper, with great solemnity. "I do not think that you will blame me when you know my reply to the riddle. I should like you to think kindly of me, Jack! Something tells me, and old June as well, that Ruth will be rescued by you, and that you two will lead a happy life together. Lord, yes, man! I know all about your love affair, though you were fool enough to think that I did not. I am glad that Ruth has found an honest gentleman to love her. My dear sister!" He stopped speaking and remained silent for a minute or two. Then he tossed his head, and turned to me with a brighter look. "Come," he said, "tell me everything about the disappearance. I may be able to give you a hint, although I cannot spare the time to help you in your search, and I dare not, dare not, tax Stafford with his treason just yet, Jack." He turned to me and caught me by the shoulders with both hands. "Within twenty-four hours I shall have given my reply to you—and to my backer. I shall obey my backer in every respect. But do not fear that I shall betray my country. If you do not see me to-morrow by nightfall, look

for a letter I will leave for you with old June Rivett. And I believe that you will not be ashamed of having been my friend. Please God, Jack Haakon, you will succeed in rescuing Ruth. And remember this, that you are at liberty to call on any of my men to help you, to use any of my property—always excepting the *Otter*." He spoke the word "Otter" with an infinite contempt. I guessed at once that he had some notion that I meant to call on Potin for help if I found it advisable. Raymond Pettingill was no fool. I have never met a man so worthy of respect in all ways as he, if once one can forgive his defiance of the Revenue.

I told him briefly all that we had discovered of Ruth's abduction.

He did not interrupt me, nor did he offer any advice.

"I believe," he said, at the end of my story, "that Ginger and George have got her hidden somewhere near and that Stafford will come and get her aboard the dirigible to-night—yes, to-night! Never mind how I know it, but you may be sure that the attempt will be made to-night. I myself am going to make an attempt to-night. My dear Jack, to-night will see the fate of empires in the balance!"

He checked himself. It was curious. I dared not tell him all I knew, all I had heard from Harold Milbank, and it seemed as though he were equally fearful of informing me of all his knowledge or his plans. Yet somehow I was assured that we were both working for the same end.

"I've done no good," he said at last. "I feared I could do none. Only remember that to-night is the psychological hour. It may have been worth my journey to see you to tell you that. Good-bye to you, Jack! Good luck, and long years of happiness to you and to Ruth."

He shook my hand hurriedly, as though he dared not trust himself to hold it long. Then he turned swiftly and ran aboard the *Dabchick*.

The cutter cast off and swung round to the north, and soon she was beating and sailing close-hauled up the Wensum on her way home.

CHAPTER XXIV.

ROSE'S CONFESSION.

I COULD not remain inactive at the marsh farm. I even felt that I could not sit down to eat with old granny until she told me what it was that she was withholding, for that she knew more than she had told I was certain. So I took my gun, with my Webley and Scott in my hip pocket and a Mauser in its holster strapped to my belt, and walked towards Haddiscoe with the intention of dining at the Queen's Head. What my people at the Hall thought of my continued absence I did not trouble to consider. I knew that my housekeeper received the necessary funds for carrying on the house from my solicitors, for it was not the first time that I had chosen to absent myself and disappear from the regions of rural convention. So it did not seem likely that my absence was creating any serious trouble at the Hall.

Dick Girling, at the Queen's Head, Haddiscoe, would not open his mouth concerning me. He was staunch and faithful, was Dick. My marshland friends knew how to keep a secret as well as any one in the world. It was nothing about my home and acres that troubled me. All my mind and heart were now set on Ruth and on the problem of the night's crisis.

The whole thing seemed so absurd. It was absurd that I, a man of position in the county, should be walking along the peaceful river wall armed as though I were about to go into action. Here, while cockney trippers sailed past and uttered their witticisms, according to their custom, while racing yachts flew along within sight towards Cantley, here within a mile or two of the "brakes" which drove over from Yarmouth and Lowestoft with horns and concertinas and trippers, always trippers, I was striding along with a Webley and Scott, a Mauser, and a double-barrelled gun, and uncertain that I might not be glad to use all three at any moment. To think that within four hundred yards of where that girl with her hair down her back was shrieking out nasal repartee to the gentleman with the Hope Brothers flannel suit and his trousers turned up to his knees on the deck of the syndicated pleasure wherry, a German dirigible had night after night rested and plotted against the peace and welfare of his Majesty the King, seemed burlesque, operetta bouffe, extravaganza. And yet it was the truth. Worse than all, to me, was the fact that in broad daylight a girl had been abducted and conveyed away from this very river wall, and that by men, if I were not mistaken, who were associated with this very German dirigible, who were preparing to betray their country to the enemy.

It was unthinkable! Therefore, I said to myself, as the fresh air and sun did their work upon my temperament, it was futile to think of it!

I made my way along the wall without encountering any one of the three Prettyman youths. But as I swung round into the last reach for the Queen's Head, I saw Spider Jinnis coming towards me.

"Wha'ss that you?" cried Spider. "Ole Fred

he axed me to tell you that he was off on a bit o' business to-night, that he reckoned he was old enow anyways, and that him and Bob was in for a rare old to-do to-night. He said as if he din't see ye no more you was to mind what he taught ye. He said as you was born a gennleman, but he'd made a man on ye, and yew worn't to go back and be a mere gennleman. He say, too, as his old six-bore muzzle-loader is at his old shud on Cobholm Island, and you're welcome to it. Bob he din't say so much, but he did say 'Blarm! Tell him ta use number six shot mostly, never to let the head sails be too much for the main, never to jibe onready, and to take the wind whenever ye can.' Then he drunk some o' my rum and said, 'and tell him as all's well.'"

Here again was the crisis of to-night. The uncouth messages sent me were in the same strain as the skipper's farewell. Fred and Bob evidently did not expect to see me again. There must be some desperate venture on. I was certain now, though, that it could not be a venture against England. The skipper would never risk taking two men like Bob and Fred with him if he were acting against his country.

"Are Fred and Bob with ye now, Spider?" I asked.

"Noo," replied the old fellow. "They left 'arly this mornin', and I tall ye, bor, I reckon there's queer doin's a comin'. I never heerd nobody cuss like Fred and Bob larse night. I tell ye they cussed some'at proper!"

I laughed, as I was expected to do, and shook the old fellow's hand.

I went on my way to the Queen's Head, puzzled, afraid. There were indeed "queer doin's" coming on. God send us all—Ruth, the Prettymans,

the skipper, Fred, Bob, and myself—safe out of them.

I daresay my readers, or at all events some of them, have experienced days which seemed to lower with menace in spite of a blue sky and a fresh breeze. It was so with me that day. I could not throw off the sense of imminent tragedy. It was all vague, and so much the worse for that. It was not owing to my anxiety on Ruth's account, for, curiously enough, Ruth did not seem to be associated with this hovering dread. There were tragedy, menace, terror, in the air, sweet as blew the west wind, and bright as shone the sun. I could not doubt that this feeling was subjective. I saw cockney trippers enjoying themselves in their usual ingenuous fashion, flinging empty beer bottles at each other, or pieces of pork-pie crust too hard to eat. I heard their japes and their hyæna laughter. They were free of this hovering cloud of dread.

I found a telegram at the Queen's Head which Dick Girling was about to send on to me by hand of a marshman. I tore it open. It was from Milbank. "Crisis over by to-morrow. Churchill, Grey, and Kitchener have informed employers that they must come to terms with strikers to-day or government will take possession of their property forthwith. Reason is that railway must be in hands of government. German fleet ready to convey troopships across. Invasion all prepared. To-night is climax. Watch dirigible to-night. Fear government's move too late to prevent invasion, but is in time to render it ineffective. Churchill's strategy in Humber and Tyne will be sufficient to defeat Germans. But invasion may be attempted, probably at Harwich."

That was the purport of the long telegram in cipher which Milbank had thought it advisable to

send me. Here again was the warning that the ensuing night was the critical time. I was ready to bet every farthing I possessed—and I am not a poor man—that the dirigible would appear on the marshes to-night, and that Stafford would endeavour to get Ruth aboard with him. Could I prevent it? I did not see how. But with Potin's help I might be able to follow and foil the dirigible on the *Buzzard*.

What would be the chief's action! I could understand the fearful effect the *Otter* might have on the British fleet, attacking it with her torpedo tubes from within our own lines! Could it be that the skipper would consent to such an infamous trick? I did not believe it. And yet I felt certain that the *Otter* was to sail that afternoon or evening with the skipper, Fred, and Bob on board. Would there also be aboard a German detachment who were to come to take possession of the submarine on behalf of the backer, or rather of the Kaiser's honourable government?

I worried, and could not throw off my anxiety. Dick—dear, good attentive Dick—was quite anxious about me, and when I only managed to eat half the breast of a delicious mallard (roasted brown with sage and onion stuffing, like a tame duck), and did not finish the peck of enormous marshland marrowfats served with the wildfowl, mine host showed his concern. "I niver see ye like this afore, Master Jack," said Dick. "I thote you'd ha' et up that mallard and been ready for a couple o' snipe arterwards! I reckon you bain't well!"

I was not. I was in a fever. I tried to speak kindly to Dick. I drank a couple of glasses of his admirable sloe gin. I tried to sit and smoke. But I could not rest. It was only a few minutes after

two o'clock when I left the Queen's Head, gun on shoulder and pistols all about me. Lord ! it seemed like delirium !

I was within a quarter of a mile of the Prettyman marsh farm when my spirits gave out. I sank down on the wall and hid my face in my hands ! Ruth was lost ! After all my hopes, after all I had gone through in the hope of winning her, she was lost. No doubt I was below "par" at the time. But a wave of sorrow swept over me. I bowed my head between my hands, and confident that I was unseen, I felt my shoulders heave with the sobs that burst from my torn heart.

It is said that appetite comes with eating.

This is open to doubt. Walter Cable, a marshman of my acquaintance, told me that he had heard that raw eggs gave ye "a rare appetite for brekkust." So one morning when he had a mighty mess of perch and eels a frying he tried the appetiser. "But," he told me, "I don't think much on it. I took eight raw new-laid egges, and I didn't fare no hungrier arter 'em than I was afore."

But if it may be doubted that appetite comes by eating, there is no question but that tears come from tears, and that hysteria grows from hysteria. It was weak, unmanly, I know it. But first I wept for my love, and then I wept for myself, and, lastly, I think I was ready to weep for any mortal reason at all material.

I might say that I had not fully recovered my strength. But I believe that it would be a lie. I prefer to let my readers despise me for my lachrimosity if they like. It is not a chronic complaint of mine.

The fact, anyway, is that I sat on the river wall and "howled."

It was a relief ! I must say that. It was a relief

to my o'er-charged breast to let the silly gulping sobs hiccough themselves out.

In a word, I soon revelled in my fit of emotionalism.

Was that an echo ?

Interest made me choke my sobs and listen.

There it was again, and close by. I did not lift my head and look about me. I was not yet enough of a man to do that. But my sobbing stopped and I began to sniffle: that most degraded form of weeping. That stopped my tears. I could not endure the thought that I was snivelling or sniffling. Also I listened.

Yes ! there was the sound of sobbing. And quite close. A hand, a small but rather rough hand, stroked my head and rested on my bowed neck. An arm stole round my chin, and I felt my head drawn down to the swell of a soft bosom. Great Scott ! What was this going on ?

I opened my eyes and raised my head, all my recent sentimentalism flying like spin drift before a gale.

My head was bent gently backwards. I looked, and above me was the lovely, tear-stained face of Rose Prettyman. " Oh ! " she moaned, " my dare, my dare ! I can't abear to see ye blarrin'. I can't abear it. God forgi'e me ! Oh, God forgi'e me for bringin' such sorrer on ye as to make ye weep ! "

Remember that the girl was very lovely. There was nothing coarse or uncultured about her exquisite eyes or features. The bosom on which she had pressed my head was firm and full. Her figure in her simple cotton frock showed itself better than if it had been garbed in the preposterous antic caricatures of fashion. Never, I believe, did a more lovely face look down pleadingly into the eyes of a young and impressionable man.

"Forgive me, Master Jack!" sighed Rose. "Forgive me! I was that jealous I couldn't abear it! I couldn't bear to see ye a warshippin' the wery mowld she trod on! And she bain't no prattier than I be! Look at me, Master Jack! Oh, look at me! Dee yew think as she's any prattier than me?"

I loved Ruth with all my heart and soul. But it was true that she was no more beautiful than Rose. Indeed, I doubt if a more exquisite face than that bending over me in tearful appeal could be found in Europe.

And Rose had been brought up amongst the members of a class which does not consider personal purity as of so much importance as many other qualities. It is true that old granny watched over Rose, and had an intense longing to protect her from ill. Still Rose was essentially a child of nature. And the little silly had let herself love me.

"You love her so dare, then!" moaned Rose. "You love her so dare! Oh, Master Jack, couldn't you love me a little now she ha' gone?"

She suggested this hopefully, and her eyes beamed upon mine with an exquisite flame of passion. "Dee you think, Master Jack," she said, "she ha' gorn? Can't ye—can't ye take a bit of a—a bit of a fancy to pore Rose?"

She had her arms round my neck and she bowed her head till her cheek touched mine. It was wonderful wooing! But, as I have said before, I was armed in proof armour. I loved Ruth and Ruth only. No other woman, however fair she might be, could turn my heart from my darling.

But it seemed to me that I was in, if I may use a vulgarism, a tight place. Moreover, Rose's words had aroused a suspicion in me again. I remembered that I had seen her on the river wall soon after I

had spotted the red head of Ginger. Had this girl betrayed Ruth into the hands of the enemy in order to get me to herself? I believed it possible now that I saw to what lengths she was prepared to go. I must not offend her by too callous a refusal of her love.

"Child! child!" I said. "You must not talk such nonsense! I am old enough to be your father. Rose dear, you would never be happy as my wife."

"I don't want to be your wife!" cried Rose. "Lord, no! I never thought o' such a thing! I bain't fit for that! But, oh,! Master Jack, I do love ye, and I can't abear to see ye takin' arter another gal! That's how it come about!"

"How what came about?" I cried, for she had given me an opening.

"How it came about as I nursed ye and looked arter ye," said Rose, with a demure smile which told me that she had seen her error and taken the best means of correcting it.

Certainly Rose was no fool. Was there any way in which I could enlist her sympathy, in which I could win her to tell me all she knew about Ruth's abduction—for that she did know something of importance, I was now positive?

I caught the poor, hard, rough hands in mine and kissed her fingers. "Child," I said, "you tell me you love me. Perhaps you do as a child. But, Rose dear, you would hate me in a year's time if I were to take advantage of your love! You know, oh! you must know, that I love Ruth Pettingill. You have seen it. You have said so. Dear Rose, can't you see that she is nearer my own age? That she and I might be happy as man and wife, and you know, you have said yourself, that you and I could not be."

"Oh, Master Jack, my dear, my dear!" moaned

Rose. "I don't care nothin' about man and wife. Let me be your sarvant, to wait on ye, to do all you wish. I love ye so! Oh, I love you so dare!"

I soothed her, patting her hand and kissing it. She seemed to like this last-mentioned treatment. Then again I appealed to her.

"You will soon look on me as an old man, Rose," I said, "and be grateful to me for telling you the truth. Dear child, you must let me help you however I can, I will do anything to make you happy——"

"Then," said Rose, on the instant; "you'll love me. Oh, Master Jack, if you'll do anything to make me happy gi'e me a kiss."

She held up her rosebud of a mouth to me, and I do not think I ever felt a bigger fool in my life than when I refrained from pressing my own lips to those crimson beauties.

"You know I love Ruth Pettingill," I said sternly, hoping that this change of front might do some good. "And she loves me."

"Not so much as I do. Not half. I'll make ye a bet on it," said Rose.

"Hush, child!" I rebuked her, and she twisted her pretty self about and looked down on me with a determined grin.

"Hush, child!" I said again. "Don't try to rob another woman of the love that belongs to her."

"That don't belong to her no more 'an to me," cried Rose. "I nussed ye through your fever. I don't ax what she ax. I only ax ye to love me and let me love you. Oh, Master Jack, ta bain't much to ax!"

"Child, child!" I said. "What would your great-grandmother and your grandfather think of me if I were to tell you I love you! You know they would think I had been a scoundrel."

"That doan't matter what they think," said Rose, decidedly. "It's what I think. I love ye, Master Jack, I love ye!"

And at that, I suppose, I was tired and worn out, irritated by this poor girl's incessant harping on the one string. I tore my head away from her and again burst into sobbing.

For a few moments Rose sat still. Then she threw her arms around me again and began to plead. "Forgive me, oh, forgive me, Master Jack!" she said. "I din't know you loved her like that, like I love you. Forgive me and I'll tell you all I know. There, there, Master Jack! Doan't ye cry no more. That red-headed chap he come acrost me one mornin' and axed me if I could get Miss Pettingill out onto the mash alone 'arly. He said as he reckoned she'd be better took away from us uns. Well, I was glad enow to hev the chance of seein' her back. So I tode her this mornin' as you was goin' to Haddisca along the wall an' would she hurry arter you for you'd be back 'arly. I see the red-headed chap in the reed bed, and I reckon he copped her and took her off where he belonged. Oh, do forgive me, Master Jack! I done it all for the love of you!"

She hugged me to her, and kissed me again and again. Hang it all, I could not be rough with her! But as soon as I could, I withdrew from her embrace and rose to my feet. There was no more hysteria about me now.

"Child," I said, for I could not be rough or angry with her. She had, as she had said, done what she did for love of me. "Child, I won't scold you. But tell me all you can. Do you know anything more besides the fact that a red-headed man asked you to decoy Ruth onto the river wall early in the morning? Do you know how the man meant to take her away and what he meant to do with her?"

"No, Master Jack," said Rose, now in tears, "I don't know no more that I ha' tode ye! I on'y did it 'cos I hoped you might take a fancy to me if she was gone! You do forgi'e me, don't ye, oh, please?"

She crouched along the wall on her knees and caught my hand and kissed it.

"Of course I forgive you," I said. "But you must help me now to find her."

She shuddered at that.

"I can't," she said. "I can't. If you won't forgi'e me, well you won't. But I can't help to bring her back."

"I was wrong to ask you," I said, and so I was.

I hastened towards the farm. It had been only surmise before. Now I knew that the red-headed man, and probably an accomplice, had abducted Ruth.

I was eager to get on their tracks. And yet, as I walked back to the farmhouse, I could not but remember how beautiful Rose was, and how devoted she was to me. Poor child! I was very sorry for her.

We men are generally sorry for the women who love us. They need it, poor things!

CHAPTER XXV.

THE CHASE.

I CALLED out to the Prettyman males as I made my way back to the farmhouse. There was now no need for them to hunt about the marsh. I knew that Ruth had been taken to some hiding-place, and that there would be no sign of her on the marsh, wall, or rond. I strode along fast, my heart growing hotter and angrier against Rose at every step. How *could* she have betrayed Ruth? Now that I was myself again, uninfluenced by the charm which her beauty in close proximity had exercised on me, I felt that I could not forgive the girl, although I had assured her of my pardon.

She, poor wench, crept behind me, shamefaced and dolorous. As I drew near the house and saw old Granny sitting in the porch, knitting, the girl came close to me. "Don't shame me," she begged. "Don't tell them all what I ha' done."

"Why not?" I asked, sternly. "Why should I spare you?"

"'Cos you said as you forgave me," whimpered Rose. "And old Granny, she suspect some'at already. Oh, don't shame me afore the boys!"

Well, it would not help to publish her infamy. After all, the girl had done what she did for love of me. No man can regard that circumstance without some tenderness of heart.

"I'll do my best," I said. "Perhaps it won't be necessary."

She sighed out her thanks. But I believe that she recked little of anything but the fact that she had begged for my love and failed to win it. She did not wish to incur the contempt of her people. But if she could have won me to love her she would have accepted any contempt or contumely with a glad heart.

Granny gathered up her wool when we approached her. She looked keenly at us. "So you ha' confessed," she said to Rose and went indoors, retiring to her own part of the house.

Rose followed her, and soon the boys came back.

I told them briefly that I had learnt beyond any doubt that Ruth had been abducted by emissaries of Stafford, and that we must watch every likely place the coming night for the dirigible.

Dick said, "I may keep this here Mouser, Master Jack. Lor! I wholly want to hear how it sound with this thing on the end of it."

Tom I again armed with the rifle. He was a good shot, and if it were possible to prevent the carrying off of Ruth by shooting one or more of the German aeronauts, or Stafford or any of his men, I did not mean to hesitate to shoot. I warned my allies to this effect. If necessary, I told them they were to shoot, and to shoot straight. But not to kill, if it could be avoided. However, they were not to permit any dread of killing to unnerve them. It would be better to shoot and kill than to shoot and miss.

I do not think I ever knew an afternoon pass so slowly as that of that lovely August day. Time after time I recapitulated my plan to myself and my allies. I was to watch the marsh where I had seen

the dirigible, Tom was to take up his station about half a mile upriver, Dick and Frank were to watch to the north. Surely, I thought, if the dirigible came, one or other of us would be near her place of descent. We might, with luck, see Stafford or his myrmidons bringing Ruth ready at the appointed spot. On the other hand, however skilful were the German aeronauts, they could hardly bring their dirigible down with certainty in any fixed marsh. There must be a certain amount of luck in their descent, and it seemed likely that Ruth would not be brought out from her hiding-place till the dirigible were actually within touch of the ground.

The moon was young, and was down before ten o'clock. I and my men were all posted. The wait was inexpressibly tedious. The very calls of waterhen and fowl irritated me. My nerves were all a-jangle! How long must we wait? Oh, to get to grips with these scoundrels!

A little before midnight, when there was not a light to be seen about the rivers or marsh, save on the railway line which ran from Norwich to Lowestoft, along the Cut, I lifted my head to a faint whirring sound. I remembered that the dirigible had not so effective a silencer on her exhaust as the *Buzzard* boasted. Was she coming at last, the great Zeppelin which came over treacherously in order to save Stafford from the penalty of his treason and to help him to steal my love from me!

There were a few fleecy clouds over the stars, and the night was not "sheer." I should see the great inflated envelope easily enough.

Louder and louder came the hum of the engine. And now I looked up and saw the mighty torpedo-shaped balloon swinging over the marsh, swinging in a circle, and coming lower at every turn. She

came right over my head more than once, and I flattered myself that she would come to land in the very marsh where I expected her.

I had cartridges pumped up in the barrels of every one of my weapons. I was ready to shoot at a fraction of a second's notice!

Round and round swung the great dirigible. I could hear the guttural talk of her crew. Fearful of being seen, I crouched low amidst the reeds.

Ah! What a fool I had been to place all my men on the same side of the river! What a fool! With one last glide the dirigible swung down, and came to rest. But on the broad expanse of marsh which stretched on the other side of the river from the rond to Belton Common!

And the starlight hardly gave me sufficient illumination to distinguish the crew aboard her. I could hear though, and sound carries wonderfully over the flat space of marsh and river in the stillness of a summer night. Ah, God! I heard a woman's cry! And I'll swear I heard Stafford's voice!

I strained my eyes. I dared not shoot at the black specks which were the men about the dirigible. I might hit Ruth! I snatched at my binoculars, and tried if they would help me at all. They did a little. I thought I could see a muffled shape hoisted up to the dirigible, and as I saw it sway up I believed I saw Stafford preparing to follow. I was within less than four hundred yards of the whole thing. But I could not cross the river in time to get to hand grips. Furiously I put my Mauser rifle to my shoulder, took sight at the figure which I believed to be that of Stafford, and fired.

There was practically no sound. The Maxim silencer did its work well. And, to my excited vision, it seemed as though the shape that was

struggling up towards the dirigible, relaxed its grip and fell to the marsh!

If this were so those aboard the airship wasted little time over the loss of their ally. I heard guttural exclamations, eager shouts, and to my inexpressible agony, I saw the dirigible rise. Swiftly I fired the rest of my magazine of cartridges at the envelope. And I believe I hit it. But the damage I did was not sufficient to stop her from rising.

Ah! The *Buzzard!* Trembling with agitation I tore open my shirt and pressed the magic bag to my forehead. "Potin, Potin!" I cried. "For God's sake, come to the marsh with the *Buzzard!* The dirigible has taken up Ruth, and is rising to depart. Come at once, at once! Answer me, oh, for God's sake, answer me!"

"*Mais mon ami!*" I heard, "I am 'ere at ze 'angar! I veel be wiz you in five meenit! Where, where?"

"Close to the black mill!" I said. "Oh make haste! They are rising fast."

I sprang to my feet, for I guessed that the aeronauts would now be too occupied over their escape to search the river wall and marsh in the darkness, and I heard the thump, thump of running feet. Tom, Dick, and Frank, all came round me, asking me eagerly what had happened. "And," said Dick, "I niver got a shot arter all!"

I told them briefly what I had done, and the three stood, their mouths open, their heads lifted to the stars, listening for the coming of the *Buzzard*.

They begged to be allowed to come with me, but I told them that the aeroplane could only take one passenger.

In an incredibly brief space I saw the flying machine circling to make a volplane to the marsh. I recharged my rifle magazine, shook hands hurriedly

with my allies, and ran to the spot where Potin had descended. "Up," he said. "Zere is no time to talk now. Ze Zeppelins are vary swift! Up!"

It was my first experience in flying, but I leapt into the passenger's seat without a second's hesitation. Potin started his engine, and head to wind the aeroplane shot up into the night. "Zees discovery of my friend Monsieur Vendrines is *extraordinaire*," said Potin. "By its 'elp I can rise in ze airsheep from even ze rough *marais*! Hein! Eet is fine! Ees it not?"

I did not answer him. I was gasping as the air caught me in the throat, for it seemed as though the *Buzzard* gathered speed immediately. In fact, I thought we were flying at a fearful pace within two minutes of our rising.

"We must not wait," said Potin. "Eet is my prayer zat zey may not have flied off at once. Deed you shoot at zem?"

I told him how I had emptied my magazine at the envelope and he chuckled approval.

"Zey weel know eef you did 'it," he said. "And eef so, zey weel mend ze 'oles before zey go over ze sea. Eet is our chance. Eef we do not catch zem before zey are over ze Norse Sea we can do nussin till zey reach 'Olland. It vould not be safe for ze lady, eef we attack zem over ze sea. *Hein?*"

No, by Jove it would not! I saw his point. If we could not come up with them before they had traversed the tiny strip of land between the river and the North Sea we should have to follow them across to Holland, and there should be handicapped by being in a foreign country. I prayed that my shots might have rendered it imperative on the German aeronauts to delay their oversea flight till they had repaired the holes I hoped my bullets had made in their envelope.

"Zees is ze way?" asked Potin, as he steered the *Buzzard* high above the timber which covers the upland on the east side of the Waveney at this point. "I must get over zem. Zen zey cannot see! Eef zey see zey veel shoot! An' zey will 'ave a gun! Oh, yais! Zey veel 'ave a queek firer, and zat we do not desire!"

I sat gasping, but growing more comfortable every moment. I could now see further than I could have believed possible. At that time of year there is still a glow after a fine day which pervades the sky. We sped seawards, our eyes straining for a sight of our "chase."

Suddenly I felt the aeroplane swerve round in a sharp curve to the north. Potin nudged me. "Look zere," he said. "Zey are repairing! Good fortune."

I saw that we were swinging over the Runham marshes to the west of Yarmouth. The dirigible had certainly discovered that it had been seen. Possibly I had been right in believing that I had hit the man trying to climb up. I wondered how they had got Ruth up. Was she that swaying bundle I had seen? Then I recollected the chair or cradle at the end of the rope up which the Teuton had gone when first I saw the dirigible. Naturally it was better not to bring the great airship sheer to earth but to hover a few yards from the land and to raise any passengers by means of a cradle, a whip, and a pulley.

But now that we had found the airship I wondered what we were to do. It would be absurd for our little aeroplane to attack her on a level. "We are ze 'awk," said Potin, with a chuckle. "Ze Jairman ees ze *perdrix! Hein?* You watch, and 'ave your rifle and your peestols rready!"

Up we went, climbing up in widening circles till we were afar above the elevation of the dirigible. Potin steered us till we flew sheer above the great

envelope. It was impossible for any one of the German crew to see us.

"Take zis," said Potin. "Eet is more better zan ze bullet. Zis veel bring zem to ze ground, and zen! Aho! Ve veel shoot at zem. No?"

He thrust a rope into my hand, and pulling on it I found it was tied to a pair of scythe blades. I began to understand the clever little Frenchman's plan. He would sink gradually till we could reach the envelope with these scythe blades, then we would rip it, and the craft would sink on the marsh. Then, indeed, we might have a fight for our lives, if the enemy dared to use firearms or to make a noise.

I knew that on that night of all others our coast-guards and our Navy scouts would be on the alert. And the Germans would know it, too.

War was not actually declared. The enemy on the airship doubtless knew that the probabilities were that an attempt at invasion would be made during the night or the early morning, and it was important that no suspicion of the truth should be aroused in England, till the troops were landed. It is a fact that the Germans at that time believed that our government was entirely hoodwinked, and that at an interview with Mr. Winston Churchill after the crisis was over, the German Ambassador complained that he and his countrymen had been led to believe certain matters other than the truth. I am informed that Mr. Churchill laughed pleasantly at this *naïvete*, and remarked, "Quite so. You believed what we wished you to believe. You see, sir, that we are not always asleep."

The polysyllabic reply of our distinguished guest is not fit for print. Indeed from first to last during that infamous plot the really able members of our government were laughing at the enemy. Conservative as I am I cannot but record my admiration

for that *coup*. It has raised our prestige across the North Sea more than anything has done for decades.

"Got eet?" asked Potin, swerving now lower and lower.

"Yes," I whispered.

We could hear the angry voices of the Germans busy about repairs, and once, ah, once! I thought I heard an English voice, the voice of an English girl! Oh! please God, please God, we might be able to rescue my darling without injury to her! I believe at the moment, at the sound of that beloved voice, I forgot the danger of my country. All my hopes and thoughts were bound up in that one dear parcel, in Ruth!

I dropped the pair of scythe blades, fastened so as to make a semi-circle of sharp steel, over the side of the *Buzzard*. Down and down we went.

"Now!" hissed Potin.

I felt the scythe blades catch in the envelope, I tried the rope, as a fisherman tries his line if he is fast in a fish. It held.

"Tie it, tie it!" hissed Potin. "You cannot hold it. Tie it!"

I hitched the rope round one of the steel stays of the aeroplane and I felt the little craft dart ahead with all her power. There came a sound of rending from below, and a mighty shout of terror.

A moment more and I felt the scythe blades come free. "Cut the rope now," advised Potin. "Eet is of no more use. See. Zey sink."

Hovering and swinging in a circle we could see beneath us that the mighty envelope had collapsed, and the dirigible was sinking fast, but not so fast as to cause danger to her passengers and crew.

"Crack!" and a flash of light came up from the marsh on which the German airship had fallen.

"*Ahi*!" cried Potin, as soon as the whine of a bullet had spun past us. "Zis weel not do. Shoot at ze flash wis ze silent rifle."

I shot, and heard another curse.

"Take zis," said Potin, handing me a megaphone. He seemed to have stocked the aeroplane with all sorts of contrivances. Ah! What a man, what an ally the little Frenchman was!

"Tell zem eef zey fire again you drop ze bomb," said Potin.

"But we have not any bomb," I protested. "And it might kill Ruth."

"*Sapristi!*" cried Potin. "Do zey know as we have not ze bomb? Do zey know zat we know zat M'selle ees wiz zem? No! Call out in ze 'orrific Jairman tongue."

I raised the megaphone to my lips and shouted that unless the enemy laid down their arms we should drop a bomb in their midst. "Swear to surrender," I called out. "Swear, or you are all dead men in ten seconds."

A great shout of submission rose to us. And then, with my heart in my mouth, I called again. "Ruth!" I called, "Ruth! Are you safe?"

"Jack! Oh, Jack!" I heard my darling's voice, and I could have kissed Potin for sheer gratitude. "Thank God! Yes. But, oh, I have been so terrified! I thought that villain would have got me across into Germany."

"Is he with you?" I asked.

"No. These men were frightened and would not wait for him after he was hit by some bullet from a noiseless gun. But they refused to put me on the ground again!"

"Have they insulted you, harmed you?" I cried in a terrible voice, repeating the question in German.

"No," she replied.

"Is there a light, a searchlight, or a powerful lamp on the dirigible?" I asked.

"Yes," said Ruth. "I know there is. I've seen it."

"I onderstand," whispered Potin. "You are right."

I called out in German to the enemy, and bade them light a powerful lamp or searchlight and put themselves in its glare. At first they protested and began to threaten again. "The bomb falls in five seconds!" I cried. "Ruth, can you run away?"

I think she understood, for she lied. "Yes," she cried. "Don't mind me." She too spoke in German, and I heard the curses of frightened men.

"One, two, three," I began to count at the top of my voice, and then with a yell a light flared up below, and the wrecked dirigible and about six men showed up black in the powerful illuminant. And, huddled on one side, I saw a bundle of feminine clothing. "Are you tied up, dear?" I called out furiously to Ruth.

"Yes, at present," was her dry reply.

I shouted orders that she was to be set free at once, and that the enemy were to pile arms on the marsh and give their parole to surrender themselves as prisoners on our descent. "And, Ruth," I called out, "keep an eye on them as they pile arms and if you think they are keeping any weapon back, give me a call. In the meantime, draw away from them in case I have to let the bomb fall."

I could see the excited gestures of the frustrated enemy, and hear their hoarse ejaculations. But they dared not interfere with Ruth, and they were afraid of that bomb with an infinite terror.

"*Alles ist*—it is all done!" shouted a red-bearded

rascal, whose hairy face showed up in the brilliant light.

I held my Mauser in one hand and my Webley and Scott in the other while I laid the rifle ready for Potin as soon as he should be able to give up his control of the aeroplane. Then, with a volplane, we slid to the marsh within fifty yards of the dirigible.

I leapt to the ground and started to run to my darling. "Take care," cried Potin, "zey may not keep ze faith!"

But there was no attack on me when I ranged up beside Ruth, and caught her in my arms. Sullen and furious the enemy stood together; but, to do them justice, there was no attempt to break their parole. I think they realised that the game was up and that their best chance was to rely upon our mercy.

As I gathered up their weapons I was startled by hearing a report of a rocket behind me. I looked towards Reedham and saw the fires of a red, white, and blue rocket dissolving in the darkness.

And it had been sent up from the neighbourhood of "The House of the Three Skippers."

What could it portend?

I heard our prisoners whispering among themselves and laughing as though well pleased, despite their wrecked airship and their capture. And again I wondered if the chief would betray his country at command of his backer, in spite of his last words to me. I did not believe it.

What were we to do? The prisoners were useless to us. The main thing was to get Ruth back into safety. I called to Potin and asked him if he could take her with him in the *Buzzard* back to the marsh farm.

"I'd rather go to 'The House of the Three

Skippers,' Jack," said Ruth. "I am wanted there. I know it. And June will be there."

I thought of Rose, and of the bitterness which was probably in old Granny's heart towards the woman who was the successful rival of her beloved great-granddaughter. Perhaps it was as well that she should go to "The House of the Three Skippers" now. The chief had told me that that night would see the end of the crisis. It must be over by now. She would find old June and would await my coming.

"Very well," I said. "Take her home, Eugéne. I'll try to get there before noon to-morrow, or rather to-day."

Ruth flung herself in my arms, and for a moment or two we gave ourselves up to the ecstasy of renewed confidence that our love would win to happiness. Then I went with her and saw her safely seated in the *Buzzard*. Potin started his engine and the aeroplane shot up, and headed for Reedham.

I turned to the prisoners. "I have no further use for you," I said. "You are at liberty to go where you will. But I will keep these mementoes of our acquaintance." I pointed to my pockets, bulging with their Mausers.

As I have said, these Germans kept to their word scrupulously. They might have attacked me and taken their revenge if they had been less honourable. But they merely grunted a word or two of thanks for their liberty. I left them, standing there by the wreck of their airship, and what happened to them or how or whither they dispersed, I have never learnt.

I made the best of my way on to what is still called "The New Road" from Yarmouth to Acle, and stepped briskly along towards the town. I meant to go to Southtown Station and catch the first train from there to St. Olave's. Scoundrel as he was, I could not bear the thought that Stafford might be

lying wounded and in agony on the marshland between Belton and the river. If he were dead—well I should not suffer many qualms of conscience. But I did not like the thought of him lying in anguish conscious of his pain, and waiting for a lonely death.

As I crossed Southtown Bridge I heard a sound of foaming water. I looked up towards Breydon, and, as I live, I saw the *Otter* coming hissing down the river. As soon as she had passed under the bridge she sank to the lens of her periscope. I followed that little dot of a mark as far as the light permitted. She was bound out to sea. To do what?

I never saw, never heard of her again.

CHAPTER XXXVI. (AND LAST.)

GOD BLESS HER!

THERE is little more to tell. So far as my own part in the drama is concerned it practically ended when I had placed Ruth safely alongside Eugéne Potin in the *Buzzard*. But there is still the more important secret to disclose, the secret of that midnight mission which sent the *Otter* out into the North Sea on a voyage from which she was never to return.

On my arrival at the Prettymans' marsh farm I found that Stafford had managed to make himself heard by Tom, and had been picked up with a shattered leg from the place where he fell from the dirigible. He was furious with the Germans for deserting him, and had revealed many things to the Prettymans which might have been useful if they had been intelligible to the honest marshfolk, which they were not, and if they had been in time to be of any practical value, which also they were not. All my heart was now at "The House of the Three Skippers." I did not feel comfortable at the marsh house. Rose was ill, I heard from Granny, and the old woman was unjust enough to look on me with disfavour on that account. I knew that it would not be long before she saw the unfairness of this. But, at the time, the marsh farm was no pleasant

abiding place for me. There was now nothing to keep me from "The House of the Three Skippers."

I left directions that Stafford was to be handed over to the men I would send for him, unless he summoned friends of his own, and took an affectionate and hearty farewell of the male members of the Prettyman household. Then I started to walk to the "Berney Arms" Ferry so that I might catch a train for Reedham.

I had hardly got to the wall, however, when I saw my own cutter, the *Dabchick*, coming over Burgh Flats, and I guessed that Ruth had sent her for me.

She was aboard. Ruth herself was aboard, and as soon as I was alone with her in the little cabin, with Sam Durrant at the tiller, she threw herself into my arms and burst out weeping. "Read it, oh! read it, Jack!" she cried, holding out a letter to me.

It was from her brother—from the chief.

In it he wrote that his backer had ordered him to take half a dozen of his, the backer's, nominees aboard the *Otter* on the previous evening and to go out with them in search of the German Fleet which was convoying transports. The *Otter* was to torpedo any British warship she encountered and to act as a vedette, or pilot, scout, or leader, of the German vessels, seeing that they passed in safe from the mines of Harwich.

A rendezvous was given thirty miles out from Aldeburgh, and there the Germans would await her.

"I shall take the six nominees aboard," wrote the skipper; "but as prisoners. As soon as they enter the precincts of the Brotherhood they will be seized and bound. Fred and Bob and the best of my men are willing to go with me to our deaths, for there is no chance that we shall ever reach land again. I shall sink all the German ships I can, and when I am discovered and destroyed, as I am bound to be,

I shall take the six nominees with me together with the gallant watermen who are willing to die for the safety of their beloved country. I have dismissed the other hands and all the women except June. No tell-tale can injure me now. My last prayer is that you may be rescued by Jack Haakon. I know you love him, Ruth dear; look forward to many years of happiness for you both, years which I shall not see. Tell Haakon that I liked him from the first, and that if it had not been for Stafford the infamy of the Breydon murders would never have happened. I have no doubt now that Stafford meant to kill me by striking me with the *Buzzard's* propeller, so that he could have made a bid for the captaincy and secured you. I cannot write more. I have no time. But I can save England from the peril that menaces her. There will be no German ship to reach Harwich or any other point of our coast. Perhaps this last work of mine, this sacrifice of my beloved *Otter*, may atone for my sins against the laws of the land. At all events, the saccharine smuggling does not lie very heavily upon my conscience. But I loathe myself when I see that I have been used as a dupe from the first by that villain Solano. From the first he meant to have a submarine in British waters at the service of Germany. Thank God, dear Ruth, that I have been able to foil him. I regret most of all that I must take Fred and Bob with me. Without them I could not get clear out to sea. But the gallant fellows understand everything, and are willing to follow me to death. I can hear Fred singing now, something about 'Boney was a warrior.' I shall fire a rocket from the rond just as we go out. It will be our farewell to England and to life. Dear Ruth, it would do no good to write more. Haakon will understand me now. My great regret is that I must go to my death

uncertain if you are rescued from that villain or not. Good-bye, dear Ruth. Good-bye."

I held my darling in my arms. There are few English people even now who have heard how the little *Otter* brought confusion to the naval force that was expecting her as an ally, how she torpedoed three of the most powerful German battleships, and was at last only destroyed by a torpedo fired at hazard by a cruiser. At least, that is her supposed end. No one really knows what was her fate beyond the certainty that she and her crew disappeared for ever.

I pressed Ruth to me, and I said aloud, "God rest the soul of a gallant gentleman. God forgive me the suspicions I once entertained."

And my darling clung to me, and found comfort in my arms.

My friends who come to see me at the Hall now will know my wife, and will know Potin, who is experimenting daily on the *Buzzard* and on a new aeroplane of his own invention. Old June is here, too, and has instilled such a wholesome dread in my housekeeper that she is allowed to do as she likes. She has insisted on the destruction of the two bags of magic. She says that such things are not meant for ordinary life; that she only gave them to us because she foresaw that we were about to undergo extraordinary experiences. Often now, although it is but a year or so ago, I wonder if I really did send a message to Potin, if he really did communicate with me, at a distance of three or four miles, or if the whole thing was sheer hypnotism or imagination. Then Ruth reminds me that the magic brought the *Buzzard* and her pilot to my aid, and by it I was enabled to rescue her. Well, well, in the twentieth century it all seems ridiculous. Yet sometimes, by night, on the edge of the great lonely marsh, as I sit

and hear the voices of the Unseen whispering in the darkness, I feel that the twentieth century can explain the mysteries of women such as June no better than the sixteenth. June is still wonderfully active for her years. But she says she is called, and that she will be "lavin' on us in a yare or tew."

She chuckles as she says it, and adds, "But doan't ye be tew sartain as you'll ha' seed the larse o' me! Yew ax old Granny Prattyman! She know what June can dew!"

We are content to take the old woman's word without conferring with Granny Prettyman. For Ruth and I live in such happiness as I never dreamed of. It is true that as yet we are newly-married people. But I feel confident, and Ruth says the same, that years will only bind us closer together, that the things we went through upon the marsh and in the precincts of the Brotherhood have soldered our loves so that they will never come unsealed.

I do not know if Raymond Pettingill purposely destroyed the openings to the Roman chamber, the great hall of headquarters, or if a landslip occurred accidentally. But on Ruth's return to "The House of the Three Skippers" she found the way blocked at both ends.

The boathouse, timber-yard and hangar are now desolate. The backer, Solano, did not care to put in any claim. Neither Ruth nor I wish to be associated further with the place where we first met, for the joyful recollection of our meeting is overshadowed by the memory of the traffic carried on by the Brotherhood, and saddened by the knowledge of the tragic end.

Rex Stafford was removed from the Prettyman holding by some friends of his own. I neither know nor care if he recovered from his injury.

I often see Spider Jinnis, often meet the male Prettymans, and chat with them. But I steer clear of the farmhouse. Rose had her good points, but I cannot forgive her for betraying Ruth. Indeed I think more hardly of the girl than when I was with her. Granny knows and resents this, so that I am better away from the farmhouse.

Milbank refused to send in an account when he heard about the end of the *Otter*. A useful sort of detective to employ!

At the staithe, at the bottom of the grassy rise from the river to the Hall, lies the *Dabchick*. My wife and I often sail in her, although Ruth says that she will have other interests, maternal ones, which will soon prevent her from spending so much time on the river.

I love the little cutter. It was through her that I first met the skipper, through her that I first met Ruth. And that I met Ruth and won her I reckon the greatest good of my life.

God bless her!

THE END.



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