The Marriage of Esther

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A Torres Straits Sketch

CHAPTER I

Two Men—a Fight—and a Series of Calamitous Circumstances

SCENE.—The bar of the Hotel of All Nations, Thursday Island. Time, 9.35, one hot evening towards the end of summer. The room contains about twenty men, in various stages of undress; an atmosphere like the furnace doors of Sheol; two tatterdemalions lolling, apart from the rest, at the end of a long counter; a babel of voices, with the thunder of the surf, on the beach outside, over all.

There was surely complete evidence before the house that the two ragamuffins particularised above were unpopular. So far the silent but contemptuous superiority of the taller, and the drunken and consequently more outspoken insolence of his companion, had failed to prepossess one single soul in their favour. Even the barman, upon whose professional affability the most detested might, during moments of the world's disaffection, rely with some degree of certainty, had not been able to bring himself to treat them otherwise than with the most studied coldness. This fact was in itself significant, not only because it showed the state of his own feelings regarding them, but inasmuch as it served to give the customers of the Hotel of All Nations their cue, upon which they were not slow to model their own behaviour. Men are peculiarly imitative animals at times.

But, however much his manners might fall short of the ideal, the taller of the twain was certainly not ill–looking. In stature he might have been described as distinctly tall; his inches would have totalled considerably over six feet. His frame was large, his limbs plainly muscular; his head was not only well set upon his shoulders, but admirably shaped; while his features, with the exception of a somewhat pronounced nose, were clearly cut, and, if one may be permitted the expression, exceedingly harmonious. His eyes were of an almost greeny shade of blue, and his hair, brown like his moustache, fell back off his forehead in graceful curls, as if the better to accentuate the fact that his ears were small and flat, and, what is uncommon in those organs, packed in close to his head. On the other hand, however, his costume, judged even by Thursday Island standards, was not so satisfactory. It consisted of a pair of much worn moleskin trousers, a patched shirt of doubtful texture and more than doubtful hue, open at the neck and revealing to the world's gaze a waste of sunburnt chest, and a cabbage–tree hat that had long since ceased to be either new or waterproof. His extremities were bare, and, at the moment of our introduction, for want of something better to do he was engaged in idly tracing Euclid's *Pons Asinorum* in the sand of the floor with the big toe of his right foot. So much for Cuthbert Ellison, the principal figure in our story.

Silas Murkard, his companion, was fashioned on totally different lines. *His* height was as much below the average as his companion's was above it; his back was broad, but ill–shaped; while his legs, which were altogether too long for his body, had a peculiar habit of knocking themselves together at the knees as he walked. It was for this reason that he wore the two leather patches inside, and halfway up, his trouser legs, that had been the subject of so much ironical comment earlier in the day. But, since the patches had been put

in, the garment had shrunk almost out of recognition, and consequently they were no longer of use in checking the friction. As a result, two ominous holes were assisting still further in the business of disintegration going on all over his raiment. It was peculiar also, that in spite of the workmanship once bestowed upon his threadbare coat, the hump between his abnormally broad shoulder–blades gave his head an appearance of being always craned forward in search of something, which notion of inquisitiveness was not lessened by the pinched sharpness of his face. Indeed, it might almost be said that his features backed up the impression thus given, and hinted that he was one of that peculiar class of persons who, having much to conceal in their own lives, are never really happy unless they are engaged in discovering something of an equally detrimental character in those of their neighbours. But in this respect Dame Nature had maligned him. He had many faults—few men more—but whatever else he might have been, he certainly was not inquisitive. Doubtless, had he been questioned on the subject, he would have replied with the Apocrypha, “The curiosity of knowing things has been given to man for a scourge.” And even if he had not anything else to boast of, he had, at least, his own ideas of the use and properties of scourges!

The two men had appeared in the settlement that morning for the first time. Up to the moment of their debarkation from the trading schooner *Merry Mermaid*, not one of the inhabitants had, to his knowledge, ever set eyes on them before. Who they were, and what the reason of their destitution, were problems presenting equal difficulties of solution. But Thursday Island has not the reputation of being a fastidious place, and it is probable that, had their behaviour not been such as to excite remark, their presence would have passed unnoticed. But, as I have already said, the smaller of the pair was unfortunately under the influence of liquor; and, as if to be in harmony with his own distorted outline, it was a curious form that his inebriation took. Had the observer chanced upon him casually, he would, in nine cases out of ten, have taken it for his normal condition. He stood leaning against the counter, his head craned forward, slowly and deliberately talking to himself, criticising the appearance and manners of those about him. And though every word he uttered could be plainly heard all over the bar, his companion did not seek to check him. Indeed, it was very possible, being buried in his own thoughts, that he did not hear him.

“The depth of a man’s fall,” Murkard was saying, with drunken deliberation, “can be best gauged by an investigation of the company he keeps. To think that I should fall as low as this spawn!” Here he looked round the room, and having spat in disgust upon the floor, said in conclusion, “How long, my God, how long?”

A big pearler, known in the settlement by reason of his fighting powers as Paddy the Lasher, rolled heavily along the counter and confronted him.

“Look here, my duck,” he said warningly, “I don’t want to interfere with you, but if our company aint good enough for the likes of you and your mate there, I don’t know as how it wouldn’t be best for us to part.”

But the little man only sighed, and then remarked somewhat inconsequently to the moths fluttering round the lamp above his head:

> “The honest heart that’s free from a’
> Intended fraud or guile,

However Fortune kick the ba',
Has aye some cause to smile."

Paddy the Lasher's reply was a blow direct from the shoulder. It caught the other half an inch above the left eyebrow, and felled him to the ground like a log. In an instant the whole bar was alive; men rose from their seats inside, and more poured into the room from the benches outside. There was every prospect of a fight, and as the company had stood in need of some sort of excitement for a considerable time past, they did not attempt to stop it.

Murkard lay just as he had fallen, but his companion was not so comatose. He picked the inanimate figure up and placed him in a corner. Then, without the slightest sign of emotion, rolling up his tattered shirt–sleeves as he went, he stepped across to where the hitter waited the course of events.

"I believe I shall be obliged to have your blood for that blow," he said, as calmly as if it were a matter of personal indifference.

"You mean to say you think you'll have a try. Well, all things considered, I don't know as how I'm not willing to oblige you! Come outside."

Without another word they passed from the reeking, stifling barroom into the fragrant summer night. Overhead the Southern Cross and myriads of other stars shone lustrous and wonderful, their effulgence being reflected in the coal–black waters of the bay until it had all the appearance of an ebony floor powdered with finest gold–dust. Not a voice was to be heard, only the roll of the surf upon the beach, the faint music of a concertina from somewhere on the hillside, and the rustling of the night wind among the palms.

Having made a ring, the combatants faced each other. They were both powerful men, and, though temporarily the worse for the liquor they had absorbed, in perfect condition. The fight promised to be a more than usually exciting one; and, realising this, two little Kanaka boys shoved their way in through the circle to obtain a better view.

Half an hour later Ellison had sent his adversary home with a broken jaw. As for himself, he had for the time being lost the use of one eye and a thumb, and was mopping a cut on his left ear with a handkerchief borrowed from his old enemy the barman. Everybody admitted that never before, in the history of the island, had a more truly gorgeous and satisfactory fight been seen.

And it was curious what a difference the contest made in the attitude of the public towards him. Before it had occurred openly despised, Ellison now found himself the most courted in the saloon; there could be no doubt that the fair and open manner in which he had taken upon himself the insult to his friend, the promptness with which he had set about avenging it, and the final satisfactory result had worked wonders with the on–lookers. He could have been drunk twice over without cost to himself, had he complied with the flattering requests made to him. Even the barman invited him to name his favourite beverage. But he would accept nothing. Hardly replying to the congratulations showered upon him, he reentered the bar and hastened towards his now recovering companion. Passing his arm round him, he raised him to his feet, and then drew him from the house. Together they picked their way through the circle of benches outside, and making towards the east,

disappeared into the darkness of the night.

Without talking, on and on they walked, slowing down now and again to enable Ellison to mop the blood that trickled down his neck. The path was difficult to find, and very hard to keep when found; but almost without attention, certainly without interest, they plodded on. Only when they had left the last house behind them and had entered the light scrub timber on the hillside did they call a halt. Then Murkard seized the opportunity, and threw himself upon the ground with a sigh of relief.

At first Ellison did not seem to notice his action; he stood for some moments looking down upon the star–spangled sea in a brown study. Presently, however, he returned to consciousness, and then, also with a sigh, sat down a few yards away from his companion. Still neither spoke, and after a little while Murkard fell asleep. In the same posture, his elbows on his knees and his chin in his hands, the other sat on and on, gazing with eyes that saw nothing of the Present into the tangled wilderness of his Past.

The waves broke on the shingle among the mangroves with continuous rhythm—a night–bird hooted dolefully in the branches above his head—the wind moaned round the hillside; but still he sat oblivious of everything—thinking, thinking, thinking. He seemed unconscious of the passage of time, unconscious of what was going on around him, of everything but the acute and lasting pain and horror of his degradation. The effect of the liquor he had drunk was fast clearing off his brain, showing him his present position in colours of double–dyed distinctness. He had once been what the world calls “a gentleman,” and it was part of his punishment that every further fall from grace should cut deeper and deeper into his over–sensitive soul.

The question he was asking himself was one of paramount importance: Was he past pulling up? And if he did manage to stop himself before it was too late, would his stand against Fate be of any avail? Would he ever be able to rid his mind of the remembrance of these days of shame? He very much doubted it! If that were so, then where would be the advantage of pulling up? Like a good many men in a similar position, he had discovered that it was one thing to commit acts which he knew to be degrading, and quite another to be saddled with the continual remembrance of them. Jean Paul argues that “remembrance is the only Paradise from which we cannot be driven”; Ellison would have described it as “the only hell from which there is no escape.” Moreover, he was the possessor of one besetting sin, of which he had good reason to be aware, and the existence of that peccability was the chief terror of his existence. It crowded his waking hours, spoilt his dreams, operated on all his thoughts and utterances, was a source of continual danger and self–humiliation, alienated his friends, reduced the value of his assertions to a minimum; and yet with it all he considered himself an honourable man.

His had been a gradual fall. Coming to Australia with a considerable sum of money and valuable introductions, he had quickly set to work to dissipate the one and to forfeit any claim upon the other. His poverty forced uncongenial employment upon him when the first departed; and his pride prevented him from deriving any benefit from the second, when his hunger and destitution called upon him to make use of them. In sheer despair he drifted into the bush, and, by reason of his very incompetence, had been obliged to herd with the lowest there. At the end of six months, more of a beast than a human, he had drifted back into the towns, to become that most hopeless of all the hopeless—a

Remittance man. At first he had earnestly desired employment, but try how he would he could discover none; when he did find it the desire to work had left him. His few friends, tried past endurance, having lost what little faith they had ever had in him, now turned their backs upon him in despair. So, from being an ordinary decayed gentleman, he had degenerated into a dead–beat beach–comber of the most despised description. And the difference is even greater than the lay mind would at first suppose. By the time he had come down to sleeping in tanks on wharves, and thinking himself lucky to get one to himself; to existing on cabmen's broken victuals, and prowling round dust–bins for a meal, he had brought himself to understand many and curious things. It was at this juncture that he met Silas Murkard, a man whose fall had been, if possible, even greater than his own. After a period of mutual distrust they had become friends, migrated together into Queensland, tried their hands at a variety of employments, and at last found their way as far north as Torres Straits, and its capital, Thursday Island. What their next move was going to be they could not have told. Most probably they had not given the matter a thought. Blind Fate had a good deal to do with their lives and actions. "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof," had become their motto, and for that reason they had no desire to be made aware of what further misery the morrow had in store for them.

After a while Ellison rose and went across to where his companion lay asleep, his arms stretched out and his head several inches lower than his body. He looked down at him with a feeling that would be difficult to analyse. There was something gruesomely pathetic about the man's posture—it betokened a total loss of self–respect, an absence of care for the future, and a general moral abandonment that was not describable in words. Once while Ellison watched he rolled his head over and moaned softly. That was too much for the other; he thought for a moment, and then went across to where he could just discern some tall reeds growing against the sky. Pulling an armful he returned to the spot, and, having made them into a pillow, placed them beneath the sleeper's head. Then, leaving the little plateau, he descended to the shore and commenced a vigorous sentry–go that lasted until dawn. The effect of the liquor he had drunk that evening had now quite departed from him, leaving his brain, so it seemed to him, clearer than it had been for months past. As a result of that clearness, the argument upon which he had been engaging himself before wheeled back upon him. That same mysterious monitor was urging him to bestir himself before it was too late, to emerge from the life of shameful degradation that held him before its toils closed upon him forever. Surely he could do it! It only needed the rousing of that pride he had once boasted he possessed. Then friendless, powerless, backed only by the strength of his complete despair, he would show the world that he had still a little pluck left in him. Yes, with the rising sun he would begin a new life, and having made this last desperate stand, it should go hard with him if he did not succeed in it.

As he made his resolution he espied the first signs of breaking day. The stars were paling in the east; a strange weird light was slowly creeping over the hill from the gateway of the dawn; the waves seemed to break upon the shingle with a sound that was almost a moan; the night–bird fled her tree with a mocking farewell; even the wind sighed through the long grass with a note of sadness he had not before discerned in it. Distant though he was from it, some eighty yards, he could make out Murkard's recumbent figure, huddled up exactly as he had left it. There was even a sort of reproach in that. Yes; he would uprouse

himself, he would prove himself still a fighter. The world should not be able to say that he was beaten. There must surely be chances of employment if only he could find them. He could set about the search at once.

Every moment the light was widening, and with it a thick mist was rising on the lower lands. To escape this he ascended the hill and approached his companion. He was still wrapped in the same heavy sleep, so he did not wake him, but sat down and looked about him. The sea below was pearly in its smoothness, the neighbouring islands seemed to have come closer in this awesome light; a pearling lugger, astir with the day, was drawing slowly through the Pass, and, while he watched, the sun, with a majesty untranslatable, rose in his strength, and day was born.

About seven o'clock Murkard woke and stared about him. He regarded his companion steadily for half a minute, and then sat up. Their location seemed to puzzle him. He looked at Ellison for an explanation.

"What the deuce are we doing up here?"

"I don't know. We came, I'm sure I couldn't tell you why. You were most uncommonly drunk last night, if that could have had anything to do with it."

"I suppose I must have been; at any rate I feel most uncommonly bad this morning. Anything happen?"

"You insulted a man; he hit you, I hit him."

"Result—you?"

"This! And this!"

"He?"

"Broken jaw!"

"I'm obliged to you. This is not the first debt of the kind I owe you. At the same time I suppose I ought to apologise?"

"Pray spare yourself the trouble."

"Thank you, I think I will. I hate being under obligations to any man, particularly a friend. And now, *mon ami*, what are we going to do next? I have a sort of hazy idea that we did not make ourselves as popular as we might have done yesterday."

"I think you managed to openly insult nine–tenths of the population, if that's what you mean."

"Very likely. It's the effect of a public school education, you know. But to return to my question, what are we going to do next?"

"Directly civilization gets up I'm going into the township."

"In search of breakfast?"

"No; in search of employment."

"The deuce! I must indeed have been drunk yesterday not to have noticed this change coming over you. And pray what do you want to work for?"

“Because I have made up my mind to have done with this sort of life; because I want to save myself while there’s time; because I want to be able to look the world in the face again. If you really are so anxious to know, that’s why.”

“You remind me of our old friend the village blacksmith. Hadn’t he some ambition that way, eh?

> “‘He looked the whole world in the face,
> For he owed not any man!’

Wasn’t that it? I always did think him a bad business man. He didn’t seem to realize that credit is the backbone of the commercial anatomy. Anyhow yours is a foolish reasoning—a very foolish reasoning. What possible desire can a man of your training have to look the world in the face? What will you see when you do look there? Only inquiries into your past, a distrust of your present, and a resolve to have no more to do with your future than is absolutely necessary. Personally, I find the world’s back a good deal worthier of cultivation.”

“All the same I intend to try to find something to do.”

“Pray don’t let me stop you. One more question, however: What does your Serene Mightiness intend for me? I doubt if I am a good worker, but I am at liberty to accept any remunerative post within your gift, Chancellorship of one of your Duchies, for instance; Mastership of your Imperial Majesty’s Hounds; Keeper of the Privy Purse; Lord Cham—”

“You can scoff as much as you please; you won’t alter my determination. I am going now. Good–morning!”

“Your majesty will find me still in waiting when you return unsuccessful.”

“Good–morning!”

“If your Majesty has time to think about such mundane matters, your Majesty might endeavour to induce one of your confiding subjects to lend the Imperial kitchen a little flour. If I had it now I might be making a damper during your Majesty’s absence.”

“Good–morning!”

“Good–morning!”

Ellison turned his face in the direction of the settlement and strode off round the hill. He had not the slightest expectation of finding any lucrative employment when he got there, but he was full of the desire to work. If he failed this time it should not be imputed against him as his own fault. He at least was eager, and if society did not give him the wherewithal upon which to spend his energy, then it must be set against his score with society. In the devotion of the present it seemed to him that all his past was atoned for and blotted out. And under the influence of this sudden glow of virtuous resolution he left the hill and entered the township.

Already the sea–front was astir with the business of the new–born day. As he approached the principal store he descried the bulky figure of the proprietor upon the jetty, superintending the unloading of some cases from a boat lying alongside it. Pulling himself together he crossed the road and accosted him.

“Mr. Tugwell, I believe?” he began, raising his tattered cabbage–tree with a touch of his old politeness.

The merchant turned and looked him up and down.

“Yes, that is certainly my name. What can I do for you?”

“I am in search of employment. I thought perhaps you could help me.”

“I don’t seem to remember your face, somehow. You are a stranger in the island?”

“I only arrived yesterday. I am an Englishman. I don’t want to whine, but I might add that I was once an English gentleman.”

“Dear me! You look as if you had been making rough weather of it lately.”

“Very. As a proof, I may tell you that I have not eaten a mouthful since I landed from my boat yesterday morning.”

“What can you do? I am in want of an experienced hand to pack shell. Can you qualify?”

“I have never tried, but I dare say I could soon learn.”

“Ah, that’s a horse of a different colour. I have no time to waste teaching you. It’s a pity, but that’s the only way I can help you. Stay, here’s something that will enable you to get a breakfast.”

He balanced a shilling on the ends of his fingers. The morning sunlight sparkled on its milled edge. For a moment Ellison looked longingly at it, then he turned on his heel.

“I asked you for work, not for charity. Good–morning!”

“You are foolish. Good–morning!”

Leaving the jetty Ellison went on up the beach. But before he had gone a hundred yards a thought struck him. He turned again and hurried back. The merchant was just entering the store.

“I have come back to beg your pardon,” he said hastily; “I acted like a cad. It will go hard with me if I lose my manners as well as my birthright. You will forgive me, I hope?”

“Willingly, on one condition.”

“What is that?”

“That you will let me make the amount half a crown.”

“You are very generous, but I cannot accept alms, thank you.”

With an apology for having so long detained him, Ellison continued his walk down the beach. Hong Kong Joe was in his boat–building yard, laying the keel of a new lugger. Approaching him he came to the point straight away:

“I am in search of work. Have you any to give me?”

The boat–builder straightened himself up, looked his questioner in the face, ran his eye round the tattered shirt, and arrived at the moleskin trousers. When he got higher up the bruised eye seemed to decide him.

“Not with that eye, thank you,” he said. “When I want one, I can get my pick of fighting–men in the settlement without employing a stranger.”

“Then you don’t want me?”

“No, thank you.”

“You can’t put me in the way of finding any employment, I suppose? God knows I want it pretty badly.”

“Try Mah Poo’s store on the Front. I heard him say yesterday he wanted a steady, respectable chap, so you should just about qualify. No harm in trying, anyway.”

Thanking him for his advice, and ignoring the sarcasm contained in it, Ellison walked on to the Chinaman’s shop. The Celestial was even less complimentary than the boat–builder, for without waiting to answer the applicant’s inquiries, he went into his house and slammed the door. At any time it hurts to have a door banged in one’s face, but when it is done by a Chinaman the insult is double–edged. Ellison, however, meekly pocketed the affront and continued his walk. He tried two or three other places, with the same result—nobody wanted him. Those who might have given him work were dissuaded by the bruises; while those who had no intention of doing so, advised him to desist from his endeavours until they had passed away. He groaned at the poverty of his luck, and walked down the hill to the end of the new jetty, to stare into the green water whose colour contrasted so well with the saffron sands and the white wings of the wheeling gulls.

A British India mail–boat was steaming down the bay to her anchorage alongside the hulk, and innumerable small craft were passing to and fro between the islands. He looked at the water, the birds, the steamer, and the islands, without being really conscious that he saw them. Somehow he was filled with a great wonderment at his position, at the obstinate contrariness of his luck. Over and over again in days gone by he had been offered positions of trust, beside which packing pearl shell and assisting boat–builders would have been as nothing. He had refused them because he did not want to work. It was the revenge of Fate that now he had resolved to turn over a new leaf he could hear of nothing. As this thought entered his brain he looked down at the transparent green water rising and falling round the copper–sheathed piles of the pier, and a fit of desperation came over him. Was it any use living? Life had evidently nothing to offer him now in exchange for what his own folly had thrown away. Why should he not drop quietly over the side, disappear into that cool green water, and be done with it forever? The more he considered this way out of his troubles the more he liked it. But then the old doubt came back upon him,—the doubt that had been his undoing in so many previous struggles,—might not the future have something better in store for him? He resolved to test his luck for the last time. But how? After a moment’s thought he decided on a plan.

There was not a soul within a couple of hundred yards of the jetty. He would arrange it thus: if anyone set foot on it before the mail–boat let go her anchor he would give life another chance; if not, well, then he would try and remember some sort of prayer and go quietly over the side, give in without a struggle, and be washed up by the next tide. From every appearance luck favoured the latter chance. So much the better omen, then, if the other came uppermost. He looked at the mail–boat and then at the shore. Not a soul was to be seen. Another five minutes would decide it all for him. Minute after minute went by;

the boat steamed closer to the hulk. He could see the hands forrard on the fo'c'sle–head ready to let go the anchor, he could even make out the thin column of steam issuing from the escape–pipe in the cable range. Another minute, or at most two, would settle everything. And yet there was no sign of excitement in his tired face, only a certain grim and terrible earnestness in the lines about the mouth. The steamer was close enough now for him to hear the order from the bridge and the answer from the officer in charge of the cable. Another two or three seconds and he might reckon the question settled and the game played out. He turned for the last time to look along the jetty, but there was no hope there, not a living being was anywhere near it.

"Well, this settles it, once and forever," he said to himself, following his speech with a little sigh, for which he could not account. Then, as if to carry out his intention, he crossed to the steps leading down to the other side of the jetty. As he did so he almost shouted with surprise, for there, on the outer edge, hidden from his line of sight where he had stood before, lay a little Kanaka boy about ten years of age fast asleep. *He had been there all the time.* Ellison's luck had triumphed in a most unexpected manner! As he realised it he heard the cable on board the mail–boat go tearing through the hawsehole, and next moment the officer's cry, "Anchor gone, sir!" At the same instant the ship's bell struck eight (twelve o'clock).

With the change in his prospects, for he was resolved to consider it a change, he remembered that Murkard was on the hillside waiting for him. Instantly he wheeled about and started back on his tracks for the side of the island he had first come from. The sun was very warm, the path a rough one, and by the time he reached it his bare feet had had about enough of it. He found Murkard sitting in the same spot and almost in the same attitude as when he had left him nearly five hours before. The expression of amusement on the latter's face changed a little as he noticed that his friend carried nothing in his hand.

"And so, my dear fellow, you have come back. Well, do you know, I felt convinced you would. Nothing offered, I suppose?"

"Nothing. But stay, I'm wrong. I was offered a shilling to get myself a breakfast."

"Good for you? So you have eaten your fill."

"No; I refused it. I wanted work, not charity!"

"So it would appear. Well I *must* say I admire your fortitude. Perhaps in better days I might have done the same. Under present circumstances, however, I am inclined to fancy I should have taken the money."

"Possibly. I acted differently, you see."

"You're not angry with me for laughing at you this morning, are you, Ellison?"

"Angry? My dear old fellow, what on earth put that in your head? Why should I be angry? As it happens, you were quite right."

"That's the very reason I thought you might have been angry. We're never so easily put out of temper as when we're proved to be in the wrong. That's what is called the Refining Influence of Civilization."

"And what's to be done now? We can't live up here on this hillside forever. And, as far as

I can see, we stand a very poor show of having anything given us down yonder."

"We must cut our tracks again, that's all. But how we're to get away, and where we're to go to is more than I can say. We've tried Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney, and Brisbane; Rockhampton turned us out, Townsville and Cooktown proved as bad. Now Thursday Island turns its back on us. There's something rotten in the state of Denmark, my friend. Don't get cast–down over it, however; we've succeeded before, we'll do so again. As the proverb has it, '*Le desespoir redouble les forces*.'"

"What do you propose?"

"Something practicable! I've been thinking. Don't laugh. It's a habit of mine. As I think best when I'm hungry, I become a perfect Socrates when I'm starving. Do you see that island over there?"

"Yes—Prince of Wales. What about it?"

"There's a pearling station round the bay. You can just catch a glimpse of it from here—a white roof looking out from among the trees. You see it? Very good! It belongs to an old man, McCartney by name, who is at present away with his boat, somewhere on the other side of New Guinea."

"Well, then, that stops our business right off. If the boss is away, how can it help us?"

"What a chicken it is, to be sure. My boy, that station is run, in the old man's absence, by his daughter Esther—young, winsome, impulsive, and impressionable. A rare combination. We visit it in this way. As near as I can calculate it is half a mile across the strait, so we swim it. I am nearly drowned, you save my life. You leave me on the beach, and go up to the house for assistance. Arriving there you ask to see her, tell your story, touch her heart. She takes us in, nurses me; I sing your praises; we remain until the father returns—after that permanently."

"You don't mean to tell me you think all that humbug is likely to succeed?"

"If it's well enough done, certainly!"

"And hasn't it struck you that so much deception is playing it rather low down upon the girl?"

"It will be playing it still lower down upon us if it doesn't succeed. It's our last chance, remember. We must do it or starve. You've grown very squeamish all of a sudden."

"I don't like acting a lie."

"Since when? Look here, my dear fellow, you're getting altogether too good for this world. You almost take *me* in. Last night, before I grew too drunk to chronicle passing events, I heard you tell one of the most deliberate, cold–blooded lies any man ever gave utterance to—and, what was worse, for no rhyme or reason as far as I could see."

"You have no right to talk to me like this!"

"Very probably that's why I do it. Another of my habits. But forgive me; don't let us quarrel on the eve of an enterprise of such importance. Are you going into it with me or not?"

“Since you are bent on it, of course! You know that.”

“Very good; then let us prepare for the swim. It will be a long one, and I am not in very great trim just now. I have also heard that sharks are numerous. I pity the shark that gets my legs; my upper half would not be so bad, but my lower would be calculated to give even a mummy dyspepsia.”

While speaking, he had rolled his trousers up to his knees. Then, having discarded his jacket, he announced himself ready for the swim. All the time he had been making his preparations Ellison had been standing with his back to him, looking across the strait. He was still brooding on the accusation his companion had a moment before given utterance to. He was aware that he *had* told a lie on the previous night—wilfully and deliberately lied, without hope of gain to himself, or even without any desire of helping himself. He had represented himself to be something he was not, for no earthly reason that he could account for save a craving for exciting interest and sympathy. It was his one sin, his one blemish, this fatal trick of lying, and he could not break himself of it, try how he would. And yet, as I have already insisted, weak as he was in this, in all other matters he was the very soul of honour. It rankled in his mind, as the after–knowledge always did, to think that this man, whom he had learned to fear as well as to despise, should have found him out. He nodded to show that he was ready, and together they set out for the beach. On the way, Murkard placed his hand upon Ellison’s arm, and looked into his face with a queer expression that was almost one of pity.

“Ellison,” he said, “you are thinking over what I said just now. I’m sorry I let it slip. But, believe me, I meant no harm by it. I suppose every man has his one little failing—God knows, I’m conscious enough of mine. Don’t think any the worse of me for having been so candid, will you?”

“The subject is distasteful to me; let’s drop it.”

“By all means. Now we’ve got our swim before us. Talk of Hero and Leander! I don’t suppose there can be much doubt as to which of us is destined to be Leander.”

Side by side they waded out till the water reached their shoulders; then they began their swim. Both were past masters in the art; but it was a long struggle, and they soon discovered that there was a stiff current setting against them. It began to look as if they would be washed past their goal before they could reach it.

When they were three parts of the way across, Ellison was ahead, Murkard some half dozen yards behind him. Suddenly the former heard a cry; he turned his head in time to see Murkard throw up his arms and disappear. Without a moment’s hesitation he swam back to the spot, reaching it just as the other was disappearing for the third and last time. With a strength born of despair he clutched him by the hair and raised his head above the surface. Then, holding him at a safe distance, he continued his swim for the shore. The piece of acting designed to carry out their plot looked as if it were likely to become downright earnest, after all.

It was a long swim, and, being saddled with this additional burden, it taxed Ellison’s strength and endurance to the uttermost. When he touched the beach on the opposite side, it was as much as he could do to carry the unfortunate body up out of the reach of the water. This done, his strength gave way entirely, and he threw himself down exhausted on

the sand.

Chapter II

A Woman—a Recovery—transformations and Two Resolves

When Ellison felt himself able to move again, he rose to his feet and looked about him. He discovered that they had landed on the shore of a little bay, bounded on one side by a miniature cliff and on the other by a dense tropical jungle; through this latter looked out the white roofs of the boat–sheds and houses of the pearling station of which they had come in search. Two columns of palest blue smoke rose above the palms, and after a glance at his still insensible companion he started towards them.

Leaving the white sandy foreshore of the bay, he entered the thicket by what was certainly a well–worn path. This circled round the headland, and eventually brought him out on the hill above the beach. Stepping clear of the undergrowth, he found himself confronted by a number of buildings of all sizes and descriptions. The nearest he settled in his own mind was a store–shed; that adjoining it, to the left, was the Kanakas' hut; that to the left, again, their kitchen; that to the right, rather higher on the hill, with its long low roof, the station house itself. As he approached it, two or three mongrel curs ran out and barked vociferous defiance, but he did not heed them. He passed the store, and made towards the veranda. As he came closer, a strange enough figure in his dripping rags, he saw that he was observed. A young woman, possibly not more than three–and–twenty, was standing on the steps awaiting him. She was, if one may judge by what the world usually denominates beauty, rather handsome than beautiful, but there was also something about her that was calculated to impress the mind far more than mere pink and white prettiness. Her figure was tall and shapely; her features pronounced, but regular; her eyes were the deepest shade of brown; and her wealth of nut–brown hair, upon which a struggling ray of sunlight fell, was carelessly rolled behind her head in a fashion that added to, rather than detracted from, her general appearance.

Ellison lifted his hat as he came towards her. She looked him up and down with the conscious air of a superior, and was the first to speak.

"Well, my man," she said, without embarrassment, "what do you want here?"

"In the first place, I want your help. I tried to swim the straits with a companion; he was nearly drowned, and is now lying unconscious on the shore down yonder."

He pointed in the direction he had come.

"Good gracious! and you're wasting time on words." She picked up a sun–bonnet lying on a chair beside her, and put it on, calling: "Mrs. Fenwick, Mrs. Fenwick!"

In answer, an elderly person wearing a widow's cap appeared from the house.

"Have blankets warmed and put in the hut over yonder. Don't lose a minute." Then turning to the astonished Ellison she said: "I'll be with you in one moment," and departed into the house.

Before he had time to speculate as to her errand, she reappeared with a bottle of brandy in

her hand.

“Now, come along. If he’s as bad as you say, there’s not a moment to lose.”

They set off down the path, and as they passed the Kanakas’ hut, she cried:

“Jimmy Rhotoma!”

A big Kanaka rolled out of the kitchen.

“Man drowned along Alligator Bay. Look sharp!”

Then signing to her companion to follow, she set off at a run across the space between the huts and along the scrub–path towards the sea. Ellison followed close behind her, dimly conscious of the graceful figure twisting and turning through the undergrowth ahead of him. When she reached the open land on the other side of the headland, she paused and looked about her; then, making out the figure stretched upon the sands, she ran towards it. With a swiftness that betokened considerable experience she placed her hand upon his heart. No, he was not dead; it was not too late to save him. As she came to this conclusion, Jimmy Rhotoma appeared, and the trio set to work to restore animation. It was some time before their efforts were rewarded. Then Murkard sighed wearily, half–opened his eyes, and rolled his head over to the other side.

“He’ll do now, poor fellow,” said the woman, still chafing his left hand. “But it was a very close thing. What on earth induced you to try and swim the straits?”

“Despair, I suppose. We’re both of us as nearly done for as it is possible for men to be. We tried the settlement yesterday for work, but nothing offered. Then we heard of your station, and thought we’d swim across on chance.”

“I don’t know that I altogether like the look of either of you. Beach–combers, I fancy, aren’t you?”

“We’re Englishmen who have experienced the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, with a vengeance. I suppose *you* would call us beach–combers, now I come to think of it. However, if you can give us work, I can promise you we’ll do it, and do it faithfully. If you can’t—well, perhaps you’ll give us a meal a piece, just to put strength into us for the swim back.”

“Well, I’ll think about it. In the meantime we must get your mate up to the station. Jimmy, you take his head, you—by the way, what’s your name?”

“Ellison—Cuthbert Ellison.”

“Very well then, Ellison, you take his heels. That’s right, now bring him along.”

Between them, and led by the woman, they carried Murkard up the path to the station. Arriving at a hut, near that from which the Kanaka had been summoned, she stopped, took a key from a bunch in her pocket, unlocked the door, and threw it open. It was small, but scrupulously clean. Two camp bedsteads were ranged beside the wall, furnished with coarse blue blankets; a tin wash–hand basin stood on a box at the far end, alongside it a small wooden table, with a six–inch looking–glass above that again.

“You can occupy this hut for the present. Put him down on that bed, so! Before I take it away give him a drop more brandy. That’s right. I think he’ll do now. If you don’t want a

spell yourself you'd better come with me."

Ellison arranged Murkard's head upon his pillow, glanced almost unconsciously at himself in the square of glass, and then followed her out of the hut, and across the yard to the veranda opposite. Arriving there she seated herself in a hammock, that swung across the corner, and once more looked him up and down.

"I don't think you need have told me you were an Englishman!" she said at length.

"Why not?" he asked, without any real curiosity. He was watching the shapely feet and ankles swinging beneath the hammock.

"Because I could see it for myself. Your voice is the voice of an Englishman, your face is the face of an Englishman, and, if I wanted any further proof, I should convince myself by your walk. Have you ever noticed that your countrymen" (she spoke as if Australians were not Englishmen), "Britishers, I mean, walk in quite a different fashion from our men? You haven't noticed it, I see. Well, I'm afraid, then, you haven't cultivated the faculty of observation."

"I have had things of more importance to think about lately."

"Oh, I beg your pardon! I had quite forgotten. Sit down for one moment."

She pointed to a long cane–chair. He seated himself, and she disappeared inside the house. In less than five minutes she returned with a bundle in her arms.

"Here you are—some clothes for you and your mate. You needn't thank me for them. They belonged to a man from your own country, who went to the bottom six months ago in one of our luggers, a degree east of the D'Entrecasteaux group. Take them over to the hut and change. When you've done that come back here, and I'll have some lunch ready for you."

As soon as she had given him the bundle she turned on her heel and vanished into the house, without giving him an opportunity of uttering an expression of his thanks. He looked after her as if he would like to have said something, but changed his mind and crossed to his hut. Murkard was still asleep, so he did not disturb him. Throwing the bundle on his own bed, he started to examine it. To the man who has lived in rags there is something that is apt to be almost discomposing in the sudden possession of a decent wardrobe. Ellison turned the dead man's effects over with a strange thrill. Ashamed as he was of his sordid rags, there was something to him indescribably beautiful about these neat tweeds, linen shirts, collars, socks, and white canvas shoes. Selecting those which looked nearest his own size, he prepared to make his toilet. A razor lay upon the dressing–table, a shaving brush stood on a tiny bracket above the tin wash–hand basin. A shave was a luxury he had not indulged in for some time. He lathered his face, stropped the razor on his belt, and fell to work. In three minutes the ugly stubble on his cheeks and chin had disappeared. Five minutes later he was dressed and a new man. With the help of water, a well–worn hair–brush, and his fingers, his matted locks were reduced to something like order, his luxuriant brown mustache received an extra twirl, and he was prepared to face the world once more, in outward appearance at least, a gentleman. Esther McCartney watched him cross the path from a window opposite, and noticed that he carried himself with a new swing. She allowed a smile, that was one of half pity, to flicker across her face

as she saw it, and then went into the veranda to receive him.

“They fit you beautifully,” said she, referring to the clothes. “You look like a new man.”

“How can I thank you? I feel almost like my old self once more. I tremble to think what a figure I must have cut half an hour ago.”

“Never mind that. Now come and have something to eat.”

He followed her into the sitting room. It was a pretty place, and showed on all sides evidences of a woman’s controlling hand. The weatherboard walls were nicely stained, a painted canvas cloth took the place of a plaster ceiling; numerous pictures, mostly water–colours, and many of them of considerable merit, hung on either hand, interspersed with curiosities of the deep, native weapons, and other odds and ends accumulated from among the thousand and one islands of the Southern seas. In the furthest corner Ellison noticed an open piano, with a piece of music on the rest. But the thing which fascinated him beyond all others was the meal spread upon the centre–table. Its profusion nearly took his breath away—beef, tomato salad, pickles, cheese, and a bottle of home–brewed beer. At her command he seated himself and ravenously set to work. All the time he was eating she sat in a deep chair by the window and watched him with an amused smile upon her face. When he had taken off the first raw edge, she spoke:

“Do you know, I don’t think that black eye is exactly becoming to you.”

Ellison made as if he would like to cover it up.

“Oh, you can’t hide it now. I noticed it directly you showed yourself this morning. I wonder who gave it you? for of course you’ve been fighting. I don’t like a quarrelsome man!”

“I’m sorry I should appear before you in such a bad light, for naturally I want to stand well with you.”

“I understand. You mean about the billet. Well, will you tell me how you got it—the eye, I mean?”

“Willingly, if you think it will make my case any better.”

“I’m not quite sure that it will, but you’d better go on.”

She laid herself back in the great chair and folded her hands behind her head. Her face struck him in a new light. There was an expression on it he had not expected to find there; its presence harmonised with the pictures and the piano and made him pause before he spoke. In that moment he changed his mind and let the words he was about to speak die unuttered.

“The story is simple enough. I was drawn into a quarrel and obliged to fight a man. I broke his jaw, he gave me this and this.”

He pointed first to his eye and then to his ear. She nodded her head and smiled.

“Do you know that you have come out of that test very well?”

“I’m afraid I don’t quite understand.”

“Well, then, let me tell you. I was trying you. I didn’t really want to know how you got

that bruise, because—well, because, you see, I knew beforehand. I've heard the whole story. You stood up for your deformed friend and thrashed the man who was coward enough to strike him. That is the correct version, I think, isn't it? Ah, I see it is. Well, Paddy the Lasher, the man you fought, is one of our hands. I had only just returned from making inquiries about him when you turned up this morning. I like your modesty, and if you'll let me, I think I'll shake hands with you on it!"

Without knowing exactly why he did it, Ellison rose and gravely shook hands with her. In these good clothes his old manner, in a measure, came back to him, and he felt able to do things with a grace that had long been foreign to his actions. He sat down again, drank off his beer, and turned once more to her.

"How can I thank you enough for your goodness to me? I have never enjoyed a meal so much in my life."

"I am glad of that. I think you look better than you did an hour ago. It must be awful to be so hungry."

"It is, and I am more than grateful to you for relieving it. I hope you will believe that."

"I think I do. And now about your friend. Don't you think you had better go and look after him? I have told the cook to send some food across to the hut. Will you see that he eats it?"

"Of course I will. I'll go at once."

He rose and went towards the door. She had risen too, and now stood with one hand upon the mantelpiece, the other toying with the keys hanging from her belt. The fresh breeze played through the palm fronds beyond the veranda, and whisked the dry sand on to the clean white boards. He wanted to set one matter right before he left.

"As I said just now, I'm afraid I don't appear to very great advantage in your eyes," he remarked.

"I'm not exactly sure that you do," she answered candidly. "But I'll see if I can't let by–gones be by–gones. Remember, however, if I do take you on you must both show me that my trust is not misplaced."

"For myself I will promise that."

"It may surprise you to hear that I am not so much afraid of your mate as of yourself. I have seen his face, and I think I like it."

"I'm certain you're right. I am a weak man; he is not. If either of us fails you, I don't think it will be Murkard."

"I like you better for sticking up for your friend."

"I am sorry for that, because you may think I do it for effect."

"I'll be better able to tell you about that later on. Now go."

He raised his hat and crossed from the veranda to the hut. Murkard was awake and was sitting up on the bed.

"Thank Heaven you've come back, old man. Where the deuce am I, and how did I get

here? My memory's gone all to pieces, and, from the parched condition of my tongue, my interior must be following it. Have I been ill, or what?"

"You've been jolly near drowned, if that's any consolation to you. We were swimming the strait, don't you remember, when you suddenly collapsed. You gave me an awful fright."

"Then you saved my life?"

"I suppose folk would call it by that name."

"All right. That's another nick in the score. I'm obliged to you. You have a big reckoning against me for benefits conferred. Be sure, however, I'll not forget it if ever the opportunity occurs. And now what does this pile of goodly raiment mean? By Jove! methinks I smell food, and it makes me ravenous."

The door opened and Rhotoma Jimmy appeared with a tray.

"Young missis send this longa you."

"All right, old man, put it down over there. I believe I'm famished enough to eat both the victuals and the tray."

"Go ahead, and while you're eating I'll talk. In the first place, your scheme has succeeded admirably. I have spoken to the girl, interested her in us, and I think she'll take us on."

"Good! You're a diplomatist after my own heart."

"But, old man, there must be no hanky–panky over this. If we get the billets we must play fair by her—we must justify her confidence."

"As bad as all that, and in this short time, eh? Well, I suppose it's all right. Yes, we'll play fair."

"Don't run away with any nonsense of that sort. The girl is a decent little thing, but nothing more. She has been very good to us, and I'd rather clear out at once than let any harm come to her from either of us—do you understand?"

"Perfectly." He finished his meal in silence, and then threw himself down upon the bed. "Now let me get to sleep again. I'm utterly played out. Drunk last night and nearly drowned to–day is a pretty fair record, in all conscience."

Ellison left the hut, and that he might not meet his benefactress again so soon, went for a stroll along the beach. The tide was out and the sand was firm walking. He had his own thoughts for company, and they were in the main pleasant ones. He had landed on his feet once more, just when he deemed he had reached the end of his tether. Whatever else it might be, this would probably be his last bid for respectability; it behooved him, therefore, to make the most of it. He seated himself on a rock just above high–water mark and proceeded to think it out.

Murkard slept for another hour, and then set to work to dress himself. Like Ellison, he found the change of raiment very acceptable. When he was ready he looked at himself in the glass with a new interest, which passed off his face in a sneer as his eyes fell upon the reflection of his ungainly, inartistic back.

"Certainly there's devilish little to recommend me in that," he said meditatively. "And yet

there was a time when my society was sought after. I wonder what the end of it all will be?”

He borrowed a pair of scissors from the Kanaka cook, and with them trimmed his beard to a point. Then, selecting a blue silk scarf from among the things sent him, he tied it in a neat bow under his white collar, donned his coat, which accentuated rather than, diminished the angularity of his hump, and went out into the world. Esther McCartney was sitting in the veranda sewing. She looked up on hearing his step and motioned him towards her. He glanced at her with considerable curiosity, and he noticed that under his gaze she drooped her eyes. Her hands were not as white as certain hands he had aforetime seen, but they were well shaped—and one of the nails upon the left hand had a tiny white spot upon it that attracted his attention.

“You had a narrow escape this morning. Your friend only just got you ashore in time.”

“So I believe. I am also in *your* debt for kindnesses received—this change of raiment, and possibly my life. It is a faculty of mine to be always in debt to somebody. I may probably repay you when I can; in the meantime it will be better for us both if I endeavour to forget all about it.”

“Isn’t that rather a strange way of talking?”

“Very possibly. But you see I am a strange man. Nature has ordained that I should not be like other men. I don’t know altogether whether I’m the worse for it. I’m a little weak after my trouble this morning; have you any objection to my sitting down?”

“Take that seat, you’ll find it more comfortable.”

She pointed to a loose canvas–backed chair near the steps. He smiled as he had done in the hut when he had looked at his image in the glass. The other chairs were hard–backed, and it proved that she had been thinking of his deformity when she chose this one. He seated himself and placed his hat on the floor beside him. She took in at a glance his pale, sensitive face, curious eyes, and long white fingers, and as she looked she came to a conclusion.

“Your friend, Mr. Ellison, wants me to give you employment. Until a minute ago I had not made up my mind. Now I think I shall do so.”

“I knew you would.”

“How did you know it?”

“By the way you dropped your hand on the back of that chair just now. Well, I’m very glad. It is good of you. You know nothing about us, however, remember that. Don’t trust us too far until you are more certain of our honesty. Sir Walter Raleigh, I would have you not forget, says, ‘No man is wise or safe but he that is honest.’ It is for you to find our honesty out.”

“You talk as if you were taking me into your employ, instead of its being the other way about.”

“So you noticed it? I was just thinking the same thing myself. It’s a habit of mine. Forgive it.”

“Somehow I think I shall like you. You talk in a way I’m not quite used to, but I fancy we shall hit it off together.”

“I make no promises. I have some big faults, but I’ll do my best to amend them. You have heard of one of them.”

“I have, but how did you know?”

“By your eyes and the way your lips curled when I used the word ‘faults.’ Yes, unhappily I am a drunkard. I need make no secret of it. I have fought against it, how hard you would never guess; but it beats me every time. It killed my first life, and I’m not quite sure it won’t kill my second.”

“Your first life! What do you mean?”

“Exactly what I say. I am a creature of two lives. You don’t surely suppose I was always the beach–comber you see before you now?”

“I did not think about it.”

“Forgive me! That is not quite true. It was one of the first thoughts in your mind when you saw me come out of the hut yonder.”

“How is it you can read my thoughts like this?”

“Practice in the study of faces, that’s all. Another bad habit.”

“But if I take you on you will give up the liquor, won’t you? It seems such a pity that a man should throw himself away like that when there’s so much in the world worth living for.”

“That’s, of course, if there is. Suppose, for the sake of argument, there is nothing? Suppose that a man has forfeited all right to self–respect—suppose he has been kicked out of house and home, deprived of his honour, disowned even by those who once loved him best—would you think it foolish if he attempted to find a City of Refuge in the Land of Alcohol?”

“Are you that man?”

Her face grew very gentle and her voice soft, as she put the question.

“I simply instance an example to confute your argument. May I change the subject? What is my work to be? Much must of course depend on that. Like the elephant, my strength is in my head rather than my hands, certainly not in my legs.”

“Our store–keeper and book–keeper left us a month ago. Since then I have been doing his work. Are you good at figures?”

“Fairly; that sort of work would suit me admirably, and would, I believe, enable me to give you satisfaction. And, my friend—But here he comes to ask for himself.”

Ellison was sauntering slowly up the path. He looked a fine figure of a man in the evening sunlight. His borrowed plumes fitted and suited him admirably. He lifted his hat with the air of a court chamberlain when he came to the veranda steps.

“I am glad to see you about again,” he said to Murkard, who was examining him critically,

“you certainly look better.”

“I am, as I have already said, a different man.”

“You look happier, certainly.”

“I have just received my appointment to a position of trust.”

Ellison glanced at the woman. She laughed and nodded.

“Yes, I have put him on as book–keeper and store–man. It’s a billet worth a pound a week and his keep.”

“It is very generous of you.”

“Oh, but that’s not all. If you care to stay you can do so as general knockabout hand on the same terms. There will be a good deal that will want looking to now that you’ve disabled Paddy the Lasher. You can occupy the hut where you are now, and I’ll tell Rhotoma Jimmy to serve your meals in the barracks across the way.”

“I hope we shall show ourselves worthy of your trust.”

“I hope you will; but no more black eyes, remember. The sooner you get rid of the one you’re wearing the better I shall like you. You’ll find my father, when he returns, will take to you sooner without it. And now you’d better go and get your teas.”

She rose to go inside. They stepped from the veranda. Ellison happened to look round. Her head was half turned, and she was watching him. Their eyes met, and the next moment she had vanished into the house.

The two men walked across to their hut in silence. When they reached it, they sat themselves down on their respective beds and looked at each other. Murkard opened the conversation.

“You were going to say that you cannot imagine why she has done this? Isn’t that so?”

“Yes. I *was* just going to do so. How on earth did you guess it?”

“Never mind that. But you’ve got hold of the wrong end of the stick, my boy. She’s not doing it for the reason you suppose. Would it surprise you very much to be told that in all probability it is done for *my* sake. No, don’t laugh; and yet I really do think it is, and I’ll tell you why. There was uncertainty written in her face and, well, if I must say it, a little bit of distrust of you, until I appeared upon the scene. Then you know my way with women. I told her the plain, unvarnished truth, without any compliments or gilt edging of any sort. Painted myself as a gentleman gone a–mucker, hopeless cripple, etc., etc. Then she dropped that infernal business air, and her womanly side came uppermost. That decided for us—I am appointed Paymaster–General; while you, if you play your cards well, may be anything from Grand Vizier downward. I think you have reason to congratulate yourself.”

“Murkard, you are playing fair, aren’t you?”

Murkard turned white as death.

“Playing fair! you are playing fair, aren’t you? What the devil makes you use those infernal words to me again? My God, man! do you want to send me into hell a raving

lunatic?”

He ran his fingers through his long hair and glared at his companion, who sat too astonished at this sudden outburst to speak. But after a few moments he cooled down and resumed his natural, half–cynical tone:

“I beg your pardon. Hope I didn’t startle you very much. Habit of mine. What beastly things words are. How they bring up like a flash the very things one’s been trying for years to forget. Yes, yes! I intend to do my duty by this girl. I promise you that. By the way, that’s the second time you’ve asked me that question this afternoon.”

“I wanted to make certain, that was all. What are you staring at? Are you mad?”

“No, I think not. I was only wondering.”

Ellison rose and went to the door. Leaning against the post he had an uninterrupted view of the still waters of the bay. Hardly a ripple disturbed its surface. The sun was in the last act of sinking into his crimson bed, and as he went he threw a parting shaft of blood–red light across the deep. Everything stood out with an unusual distinctness. Across the straits, so full of importance to them that day, he could see the settlement of Thursday—count the houses and even distinguish people walking upon the sea–front. The peaceful beauty of the evening soothed his soul like sweetest music. He was happier than he had been for months, nay, years past. It seemed to him that he was in a new world—a world as far removed from that of the morning as is heaven from hell. He almost found it difficult to believe that he, the well–dressed, well–fed man, leaning against the doorpost, was the same being who only that morning had contemplated suicide on the pier–head over yonder, in that abject and black despair engendered of starvation. With this feeling of wonderment still upon him he turned his head in the direction of the station house—a lamp was just lighted in the sitting room, and by moving a step further to the left he could discern the loosely rolled brown hair of a woman’s head. Almost unconsciously he sighed. It was a long time since any woman had manifested so much interest in him. Had he got past the desire to be worthy of it? No, he hoped not! He had told himself repeatedly since midday this was certainly his last chance, and come what might, having obtained it, he would make a struggle to win back the respect he had begun to believe he had lost forever.

The evening drew on. The night wind rose and played through the palm fronds above the hut, rubbing against the thatch with soothing sweep. Murkard was lying on his bed inside, smoking. Esther had brought her work on to the veranda, but had discarded it when the light failed, and now sat looking out across the sea. Ellison made no attempt to speak to her, and she gave no sign to show that she saw him. Some time afterward he heard Murkard put down his pipe, and come out to stand beside him.

“A beautiful night. Look at that last gleam of crimson low down upon the horizon. What are you thinking of, old man?”

Ellison did not make any reply for a minute, and then he said quietly:

“Of a night like this eight years ago! That’s all.”

“You ought not to have let her tell you.”

“I couldn’t help myself. It was done before I knew it. And then I had her guilty secret to

keep as well as my own. Bah! what a fool I was. But what am I saying! How did you come to know anything of her?”

“Another of my guesses, that’s all.”

“Murkard, there’s something devilish uncanny about you.”

“Because you don’t understand me, eh? No, no; don’t be afraid, old man, you will never have cause to fear me. I owe you too much ever to prove myself ungrateful. Bear with my crotchets—for as surely as I stand before you now, the day will come when you will regret any harsh word you have ever spoken to me. My destiny is before me written in letters of fire—I cannot escape it, and God knows I would not if I could.”

“What on earth do you mean?”

“Don’t ask me, or try to find out. When I saw your face for the first time that wet night on the wharf in Sydney, I knew you to be the man for whom I was sent into the world. There is a year of grace before us, let us enjoy it—then—well *then I shall do my duty*.”

Ellison put his hand on the small man’s deformed shoulder.

“Silas, I don’t grasp what you’re driving at!”

“Then, as I say, don’t seek to know. Believe that I’m a dreamer. Believe that I’m a little mad. I shall never speak of it to you again. But to–night I felt as if I must speak out—the hand of the Future was upon me. Good–night!”

“Good–night!”

As Murkard went in the woman rose from her chair, advanced to the veranda rails, and once more stood looking out across the bay. A clock in the Kanakas’ hut struck ten. Then she too turned to go in. But before doing so she looked across at Ellison, and said kindly, “Good–night!”

“Good–night!” he called in return.

And all the silence of the world seemed to echo that “Good–night!”

Chapter III

The World, the Flesh, and the Devil

Long before the first month was ended both men had settled down comfortably to their work–a–day existence. They had arrived at a thorough understanding of their duties, had made friends with their fellow–workers, and found it difficult to believe that they could be the same two men who were the beach–combers of the previous month. As for Murkard he derived the keenest pleasure from the daily, almost monotonous, routine of his office. He discovered abundance of work to keep him busy, his keen instinct detected endless opportunities of creating additional business, and he hoped that, when the owner of the station should return from his pearling venture, he might not only be in a position to convince him that his daughter's appointment was fully justified, but to demonstrate to him that it was likely to prove the stepping–stone to a sound commercial future. To Esther the man himself was a complete and continual mystery. Try how she would, she could not understand him. On one occasion a combination of circumstances led her to attempt to set him right on a certain matter connected with his own department. Much to her surprise and discomfiture she found him not only firmly resolved to assert his own independence, and to resist to the utmost any attempt at interference, but even prepared to instruct if need be. Routed on every side she had fled the field ignominiously, but though mortified at her rebuff, still she could not find it in her heart to quarrel with the man. To tell the truth, she was more than a little afraid of him, as he intended she should be. His sharp tongue and peculiar faculty of quiet ridicule were particularly distasteful to her. She preferred venting her abuse upon his inoffensive companion—who, it would appear, absolutely failed to do anything to her complete satisfaction.

To Ellison, in spite of his joy at having found employment at last, that first month was not altogether one of happiness. He was too keenly conscious of his limited powers to be thoroughly at his ease, and yet he did his work from morning till night with dog–like faithfulness, grudging himself no labour, sparing himself no pains to ensure the faithful discharge of the duties entrusted to him. Not only that, but he often went out of his way to find work. She watched him and invariably found fault. So surely as his hard day's work was ended, would she discover something left undone. This she would never fail to point out to him, and the result well–nigh drove him distracted. And yet there were times when she was more than kind, bright days in his calendar that shone with a greater lustre, perhaps, because they were so few and far between. As instance the following:

His own work being over for the day, he had crossed to the wood pile behind the kitchen and set to work sawing logs for the cook's fire. The wood was tough and the labour hard, but he kept the saw going with endless perseverance. As he came near the end of the supply, Esther chanced upon him. It was the first time he had seen her since the early morning.

"Good afternoon," he said, but did not desist from his labour.

"Good afternoon," she returned, regarding him for a moment, and then seating herself

upon an upturned box beside him. “I think you will remember that I asked you for some screws for a corner bracket this morning.”

“I beg your pardon; I think you asked if I could find any in the boat–house. I remembered having seen some, and offered to procure them. You then determined that you would wait until to–morrow for them.”

“Ah, yes! so I did. I had forgotten that.”

“As you are clearly in the wrong, you might beg my pardon, I think.”

“I don’t see why. It is my duty to keep you up to your work.”

“Very well, then we’ll say no more. The screws shall be on your table on the veranda at ten o’clock to–morrow morning.”

“Without fail?”

“Without fail. I always keep my word.”

He went on with his sawing. She sat and watched him, and for the first time became aware of the elegance and symmetry of his figure.

“Not always, I think. I asked you yesterday to tell me what brought you to Australia; you said you would, but you have evidently forgotten your promise.”

“Again you misinterpreted my speech. I think I said I could not bore you with it until I knew you better.”

“And by that I am to understand that you won’t tell me?”

“Not yet.”

The saw cut through the log with a little whine, and the end dropped to the ground.

“You don’t know me well enough yet to trust me, I suppose?”

“I know you as well as I suppose I ever shall know you. You are not a difficult person to understand.”

“Have you so much experience of my sex, then?”

“More than most men, perhaps. God help me!”

“You don’t seem to realise that that is a dangerous admission to make to a woman.”

“Why? You let me see very plainly yesterday that our ways lie far apart. In fact, that whatever my rank may once have been, I am now only your father’s servant.”

She rose from the box on which she had been sitting and stamped her foot. He looked up and saw that indignant tears stood in her eyes.

“You are very unjust and very unkind. I’m sure I never said or implied anything of the sort.”

“Then I must crave your pardon once more for misunderstanding you. I certainly understood that to be your meaning.”

She sat down again and fell to scraping up the shavings and litter with her foot. He

resumed his sawing. For the space of about three minutes neither spoke. Then she said timidly:

“I notice that you are very patient and persevering.”

He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye suspiciously. This was too novel and satisfactory not to make him a little distrustful.

“And pray what makes you think that?”

“For many reasons. One because you don’t saw wood like most men I have seen. You go right through till the cut is even and the end drops off of its own weight. Most men saw it three parts through, then drive in a wedge, and break off the rest. It saves time, but it means laziness. I think I like your way best.”

“It is very kind of you to say so.”

“Oh, not at all. I thought as I’ve scolded you so often I ought to tell you of something I approve, that’s all.”

Decidedly he was a handsome man. She liked his colour, she liked his glow of health and strength, and she was not quite certain that she did not like his eyes; but she wasn’t going to let him think she had the very smallest grain of admiration for him. He wondered what was coming next.

“All the same, you’re not a very quick worker. I don’t know that it’s quite a profitable occupation for you. One of the boys would have done twice as much in half the time—not so neatly perhaps, but it would have burned just as well.”

That was the way with her. He never made any advance but she drove him back further than he was originally. She saw how her last remark was affecting him, and a smile flickered over her face that was not altogether one of discouragement. He looked up just in time to catch it. The result was disastrous. He missed his thrust—the saw slipped and cut his hand. It was not a deep wound, but it bled profusely—into the white slit of wood, and, drop by drop, down upon the little heap of saw–dust at his feet. She saw it as soon as he did, and gave a little cry of alarm.

“Oh, you have cut yourself, and all through my stupidity! Quick, give me your handkerchief and let me tie it up.”

Before he had properly realised what had happened, she had drawn her own handkerchief from her pocket, taken his hand, and was binding it up.

“I’m so very, very sorry. It was all my fault. I should not have stayed here worrying you with my silly talk. Can you forgive me?”

He looked into her face—with its great brown eyes so close to his—this time without the least embarrassment. And what beautiful eyes they were!

“You are not to blame. It was the result of my own carelessness. I should have looked at the saw instead of your face.”

“Very possibly; but you must not cut any more wood. I forbid it! Do you think you will remember what I say?”

“I’m very much afraid so.”

Not another word passed between them. She went into the house, and he, with a sea of happiness surging at his heart that he would have been puzzled to account for, back to the store.

But that evening all the enjoyment he had got out of the afternoon was destined to be taken away from him. After dinner, Murkard had some work in the office he wished to finish in time for the China mail next day, so Ellison wandered down to the shore alone. The moon was just rising over the headland, and the evening was very still; there was hardly enough wind to stir the palm leaves on the hill–top. Further round the island alligators were numerous, and as he stepped on to the beach Ellison thought he could make out one lying on the sand ahead of him. He stepped across to obtain a closer view, only to find that it was the trunk of a sandal–wood tree washed up by the tide. As he turned to retrace his steps he heard someone coming through the long grass behind him. It was Esther.

“Good–evening!” he said, raising his hat. “What a perfect night for a stroll it is. Just look at the effect of the moonlight on the water yonder.”

“How is your hand?”

“Progressing very satisfactorily, thank you. It is very good of you to take so much interest in my tiny accident.”

“I don’t see why! I should have been just as interested in anyone else. I pity the woman who could fail to be affected by an ugly cut like that. Good–night!”

She resumed her walk, and as he had nothing to say in answer to her speech, he looked across the stretch of water at the twinkling lights of Thursday. He had received a well–merited snub, he told himself—one he would not be likely to forget for a few days to come. He had presumed too much on her kindness of the afternoon. Who was he that he might expect from her anything more than ordinary civility? He was her father’s servant, paid by the week to do odd jobs about the place; a position only found for him out of charity by a kind–hearted girl. With a gesture of anger he went briskly across the sands, plunged into the thicket, and strode back towards the house. He was not of course to know that after leaving him she had stopped in her walk and watched him until he disappeared. When she, in her turn, wended her way homeward, it was, illogically enough, with an equally heavy heart. She did not, perhaps, regret her action, but her mind was torn with doubts.

“If only I could be certain,” she kept repeating to herself. “If only I could be certain!”

But that didn’t mend matters very much. That she had angered him, at least, was certain. Then came the question which was destined to keep her awake half the night. Had she played with him too much? She could see that he was thoroughly angered.

On arriving at the hut Ellison discovered Murkard in the act of going to bed. He was seated on his couch, one boot on, the other in his hand. He looked up as his friend entered, and one glance at his face told him all he wanted to know. Placing the boot he held in his hand carefully on the floor, he removed the other and arranged it beside its fellow. Then, addressing himself to the ceiling cloth, he said:

“I have often noticed that when a man imagines himself happiest he is in reality most miserable, and *vice versa*. Last night my friend was supremely happy,—don’t ask me how I knew I saw it,—and yet he sighed in his sleep half the night. This evening he would have me believe that he is miserable, and yet there’s a look in his eyes that tells me at the bottom he is really happy.”

“You’re quite out of your reckoning, my friend, as far as to–night is concerned. I am miserable, miserable in heart and soul, and for two pins I’d leave the place to–morrow.”

“I should.”

“The devil! and why?”

“Because you’re going deliberately to work to make an ass of yourself, if you want it in plain, unvarnished English. You’re falling head over ears in love with a woman you’ve only known a month, and what’s the result to be?”

“What do you think?”

“Why, that you’ll go a–mucker. Old man, I don’t know your history. I don’t even know your name. You’re no more Ellison, however, than I am. I’ve known that ages. You’re a public school and Oxford man, that’s plain to those with the least discernment, and from those facts and certain others I surmise you belong to that detestable class; miscalled the English aristocracy. I don’t care a jot what brought you to grief—something pretty bad I haven’t a doubt—but believe me, and I’m not joking when I say it, if you marry this girl, without really loving her, you’ll commit the cruellest action of your life, and what’s worse ten thousand times, you’ll never cease to regret it. She’s a nice girl, a very nice girl, I don’t deny that, but if ever you think there’s a chance of your going home, if you ever want to go, or dream of going, you’re in honour bound to give her up. Go away, clear out, forget you ever saw her; but for mercy’s sake don’t drag her down to your hell. Give her a chance, if you won’t give yourself one.”

“You speak pretty plainly.”

“I speak exactly as I feel, knowing both you and the girl. Do you think I haven’t seen all this coming on? Do you fancy I’m blind? Knowing what I know of your face, do you think I haven’t read you like a book. At first you looked at it as an investment. You thought the old man, her father, might have money; you half determined to go in for the girl. But about 8.30 last Thursday week night you had a bout with your conscience. You came into the store and talked politics—Queensland politics, too, of all things in the world—to distract your thoughts. I let you meander on, but I knew of what you were thinking. After that you gave up the mercenary notion and talked vaguely of trying your luck on the mainland. Then she began to snub you, and you to find new beauties in her character. You may remember that we discussed her, sitting on the cliff yonder, for nearly three hours on Wednesday evening. You held some original notions about her intellect, if I remember aright. Now, because you’re afraid of her, you’re imagining yourself over head and ears in love with her. Go away, my boy, go away for a month, on any excuse. I’ll get them to keep your billet open for you if you want to return. You’ll know your own mind by that time. What do you think?”

“I’ll do it. I’ll give her a week and then go.”

“That’s the style. You’ll repent and want to cry off your bargain in the morning, but for the present that’s the style.”

So saying, this guide, philosopher, and friend drew on his boots again and went out into the still hot night. Having reached the store veranda he seated himself on a box and lit his pipe.

“This torture is getting more and more acute every day,” he began, as a sort of apology to himself for coming out, “and yet they must neither of them ever know. If they suspected I should be obliged to go. And why not? What good can it ever do me to stay on here looking at happiness through another man’s eyes. For she loves him. If he were not so blindly wrapped up in his own conceit he would see it himself, and the worst of it is he has no more notion of her worth than I have of heaven. With me it is ‘Mr. Murkard this, and Mr. Murkard that’—kindness and confidence itself—but oh, how widely different from what I would have her say. My God! if you are a God, why do you torture me so? Is my sin not expiated yet? How long am I to drag on in this earthly hell? How long, O Lord, how long?”

The night breeze whispering among the leaves brought back the words in mockery: “How long, how long?”

After an hour’s communion with his own thoughts he returned to the hut. Ellison was in bed sleeping quietly, one strong arm thrown round his head and a faint smile upon his lips. Murkard, lamp in hand, stood and looked down on him, and as he looked, his lips formed a sentence.

“Whatever is before us, old friend, have no fear. Come what may, I make my sacrifice for you. Remember that—for you!”

Then, as if he had shouted his shameless secret to the mocking world, he, too, went hastily to bed.

For a week after that eventful night Ellison saw little of Esther. She hardly ventured near him, and when necessity compelled that she should seek him, it was only to complete her business with all possible dispatch and hurry away again. No more did she enter into conversation with him about his work. No more did she chaff him about his scrupulous care and trouble. Their estrangement seemed complete. Murkard noticed it, and being wise in his generation, thought much but said little.

One evening after dinner, towards the end of the week, Ellison had strolled down to the beach to smoke his after–dinner pipe when he heard his name called. He recognised the voice immediately and, turning, went across to where Esther was standing by the tiny jetty. Her face was very pale, and she spoke with hesitation.

“Are you very busy for a few minutes, Mr. Ellison?”

“Not at all. My day’s work is over. Can I be of any service to you?”

“Would it be too much to ask you to row me across the straits to the township?”

“I will do so with pleasure. Are you ready now?”

“Quite ready.”

Without another word he ran a boat into the water, and with a few strokes of the oar brought it alongside the steps for her to embark. She stepped daintily in and, seating herself in the stern–sheets, assumed possession of the tiller. The expression on his face was one of annoyed embarrassment. She saw it, and her colour came and went across her face like clouds across an April sky.

“I’m afraid I am trespassing on your good–nature,” she remarked at length, feeling she must say something. “I ought to have asked one of the boys to take me over.”

“And have had to visit all the saloons to find him when you wanted to return,” he replied. “No, no! Miss McCartney, I am glad you asked me.”

She looked at him nervously; but his face told her nothing. He appeared to be fully occupied with the management of the boat. She put her hand overboard and played with the water alongside, casting furtive glances at him ever and anon. The silence became more and more embarrassing.

“Mr. Ellison, I am afraid you think very badly of me?” she said, in sheer desperation.

“My dear Miss McCartney, what on earth can have made you imagine such a thing?”

“But I know you do. I’m afraid I was very rude to you the other day. I have never forgiven myself for it. It was very ungrateful of me after all the kind things you have done for me since I have known you.”

“But, I assure you, you are quite mistaken. Your treatment of me may have been a little unkind, but it was certainly not rude. Besides, what I have done for you has all been done out of pure selfishness, because, you see, it gives me pleasure to serve you.”

“Mr. Murkard hinted to me this morning that you are thinking of leaving us. Is that true?”

“I *was* thinking of doing so, but—”

“But you will forgive me before you go, won’t you? Let us be friends again for the little time that is left to us.”

She held out her dry hand towards him; he leaned forward gravely and took it, after which they were silent again for some time. The crisis was passed, but the situation was still sufficiently awkward to deprive them both of conversation. By the time they had recovered enough to resume it, they had passed the hulk and were approaching the township jetty. He brought the boat alongside in a masterly fashion, and held it close to the steps for his companion to disembark.

“Thank you, Mr. Ellison,” she said, as she stepped out. “I have enjoyed myself very much. I hope you will have a pleasant sail back!”

“I am going to wait for you.”

“Indeed you are not. I could not think of such a thing. I shall be sure to find someone who will put me across.”

“I am going to wait for you. It will be very pleasant sitting here; and, remember, we have just made friends. You must not quarrel with me so soon again.”

“Very well, since you wish it. I will try not to be any longer than I can help.”

She tripped up the wooden steps and disappeared along the jetty. He made the boat fast, and seating himself in the place she had just vacated, lit his pipe.

For nearly an hour he sat and smoked. The heavens were bright with stars above him; the sleeping waters rose and fell round the piers with gentle gurgling noises. A number of pearling luggers rode at anchor on either hand of him, and the township lights twinkled merrily ashore. His heart was happier than it had been for some time past, and yet again and again Murkard's words of warning rose upon his recollection. Did the girl love him? And more important still, if she did, did he love her as she deserved to be loved? He asked himself these two questions repeatedly, and each time he could not answer either of them to his satisfaction.

Was his affection for her a sincere one, founded on a genuine admiration? He had been piqued by her behaviour; his vanity (poor remnant of a feeling) had been hurt by it. Since then he had brought himself to believe he loved her. Was he prepared to sacrifice everything for her? Again the torturing doubt. It would be passing sweet to love her; but could he do so with a clear conscience? He knew his failing—could he lie to himself? The night affected him; the moon, just rising blood–red above the hill–top, spoke to him of love. Not the love of a lifetime, not the love that will give and take, bear and forbear, thinking no ill, and enduring for all eternity; but of love–talk, of a woman's face against his, of gratified vanity perhaps, at all events of a love of possession. No, he knew in his inmost heart, his conscience told him, that he did not care for her as, in the event of his making her his wife, he felt she would have a right to expect.

Besides, there was another, and even more important, point to be considered. Was he worthy of a good woman's love? he, until lately an adventurer—a—No, no! If he were a man of honour he would go away; he would go out into the world again, and, in forgetting her, enable her to forget him. And yet the temptation to stay—to hear from her own lips that she loved him—was upon him, calling him in tenderest accents to remain. He sat and thought it out as dispassionately as he was able, and his final resolve was to go. In this case, at least, he would not think of himself, he would think only of what was best for her. Yes, he would go! Suddenly away down the jetty he heard the patter of shoe heels. His heart throbbed painfully. She was coming back. They came closer and closer. She appeared on the sky–line, and, descending the steps, took his hand to jump into the boat.

"I'm afraid you must have grown very tired of waiting for me."

"I'm very glad to see you, certainly; but I don't think I can say I'm tired. It is a beautiful evening. Look at that glorious moon. We shall have a perfect sail home."

He hoisted the canvas, and they pushed off. In spite of the resolve he had just made it was vastly pleasant to be seated beside her, to feel the pressure of her warm soft body against his on the little seat. There was a fair breeze, and the water bubbling under the boat's sharp bows was like tinkling music as they swept from the shadow of the pier into the broad moonlight. Again, for want of something to do, she put her hand into the water; and the drops from her fingers when she lifted them shone like silver. As if in contradiction of her affected unconcern, she was palpably nervous. Once he could almost have sworn he felt her tremble.

"You are not cold, I hope?"

“Oh, dear, no! What could make you think so?”

“I thought I felt you shiver.”

“It was nothing. I am perfectly warm.”

“All the same I shall put this spare sail over your knees—so.”

He took a piece of canvas from behind him, and spread it round her. She made no attempt at resistance. In spite of her show of independence, there was something infinitely pleasant to her in being thus tended and cared for by this great strong man.

In five minutes they were passing close under the nearest point of their own island. High cliffs rose above them, crowned with a wealth of vegetation. She looked up at them, and then turned to her companion.

“Mr. Ellison, do you know the story of that bluff?”

“No. I must plead guilty to not being aware that it possessed one. May I hear it?”

“It has a strange fascination for me—that place. I never pass it without thinking of the romance connected with it. Do you see that tall palm to the right there?”

“Yes.”

“Well, under that palm is a grave; the resting–place of a man whom I can remember seeing very often when I was only a little child.”

“What sort of a man?”

“Ah, that’s a question a good many would have liked to have answered. Though it’s years ago, I can see him now as plainly as if it were but yesterday. He was very tall and very handsome. Possibly forty years old, though at first sight he looked more than that, for the reason that his hair and moustache were as white as snow. He lived in a hut on that bluff far away from everybody. In all the years he was there he was never known to cross the straits to the settlement, but once every three months he used to come down to our store for rations and two English letters. I believe we were the only souls he ever spoke to, and then he never said any more than was absolutely necessary. The pearlers used to call him the Hermit of the Bluff.”

“Do you think he was quite sane?”

“I’m sure of it. I think now he must have been the victim of some great sorrow, or, perhaps, some man of family exiled from his country for no fault of his own.”

“What makes you imagine that?”

“Why, because it was my father who found him lying lifeless on the floor of his hut. He had been dead some days and nobody any the wiser. Hoping to find something to tell him who he was, my father searched the hut, but without success. But when, however, he lifted the poor body, he caught a glimpse of something fastened round his neck. It was a large gold locket, with a crown or coronet upon the cover. Inside it was a photograph of some great lady—but though he recognised her, my father would never tell me her name—and a little slip of paper, on which was written these words: ‘Semper fidelis: Thank God, I can forgive. It is our fate. Good–bye.’ They buried him under the palm yonder and the locket

with him.”

“Poor wretch! Another victim of fate! I wonder who he could have been.”

“That is more than anyone will ever know, until the last great Judgment Day. But, believe me, he is not the only one of that class out here. I could tell you of half a dozen others that I remember. There was Bombay Pete; it was said he was a fashionable preacher in London, and was nearly made a bishop. He died—bewitched, he said—in a Kanaka’s hut over yonder behind the settlement. Then there was the Gray Apollo—but who *he* was nobody ever knew; at any rate he was the handsomest and most reckless man on the island until he was knifed in the Phillipines; and the man from New Guinea; and Sacramento Dick; and the Scholar; and John Garfitt, who turned out to be a lord. Oh, I could tell you of dozens of others. Poor miserable, miserable men.”

“You have a sympathy for them, then?”

“Who could help it? I pity them from the bottom of my heart. Fancy their degradation. Fancy having been brought up in the enjoyment of every luxury, started with every advantage in life, and then to come out here to consort with all the riff–raff of the world and to die, cut off from kith and kin, in some hovel over yonder. It is too awful.”

Ellison sighed. She looked at him, and then said very softly:

“Mr. Ellison, I do not want to pry into your secret, but is there no hope for you?”

He appeared not to have heard her. A great temptation was upon him. He was going away to–morrow: she would never see him again. She had evidently a romantic interest in these shattered lives—could he not allow himself the enjoyment of that sympathy just for a few brief hours? Why not? Ah, yes, why not?

“Miss McCartney,” he said, after a long pause, “do you know, while you were away to–night, and I was sitting waiting for you, I subjected myself to a severe cross–examination?”

“On what subject?”

“Partly yourself, partly myself.”

“What sort of cross–examination do you mean, Mr. Ellison?”

“Well, that is rather a difficult question to answer, and for the following reason: In the first place, to tell you would necessitate my doing a thing I had made up my mind never to do again.”

“What is that?”

“To unlock the coffers of my memory and to take out the history of my past. Eight years ago I swore that I would forget certain things—the first was my real name, the second was the life I had once led, and the third was the reason that induced me to give up both.”

“Well?”

“I have tried to remember that you have only known me a month, that you really know nothing of myself, my disposition, or my history.”

“But I think I do know.”

“I fear that is impossible. But, Miss McCartney, since I see your sympathy for others, I have a good mind to tell you everything, and let you judge for yourself. You are a woman whose word I would take against all the world. You will swear that whatever I reveal to you shall never pass your lips.”

“I swear!”

She was trembling in real earnest now. To prolong their interview he put the boat over on another tack, one that would bring her close under the headland by the station. Esther raised no objection, but sat looking before her with parted lips and rather startled eyes. She noticed that his voice, when he spoke, took another tone. She attributed it to nervousness, when in reality it was only unconscious acting.

“Miss McCartney, living here in this out–of–the–way part of the world, you can have no idea what my life has been. Thrown into temptation as a child, is it to be wondered at that I fell? Brought up to consider myself heir to untold wealth, is it to be wondered that I became extravagant? Courted by everybody, can you be surprised that I thought my own attractions irresistible? My father was a proud and headstrong man, who allowed me to gang my own gait without let or hindrance. When I left Eton, I left it a prig; when I left Oxford, I left it a man of pleasure, useless to the world and hurtful to myself and everybody with whom I fell in contact. But not absolutely and wholly bad with it all, you must understand. Mind you, Miss McCartney, I do not attempt to spare myself in the telling; I want you to judge fairly of my character.”

“I promise you I will. Go on.”

“With a supreme disregard for consequences, I plunged into absurd speculations, incurred enormous liabilities, and when my creditors came down upon me for them I went to my father for relief. He laughed in my face and told me he was ruined; that I was a pauper and must help myself; sneered in my face, in fact, and told me to go to the devil my own way as fast as I was able. I went to my brothers, who jeered at me. I went to all my great friends, who politely but firmly showed me their doors. I went to men who at other times had lent me money, but they had heard of my father’s embarrassments, and refused to throw good money after bad. Checkmated at every turn, I became desperate. Then to crown it all a woman came to me, a titled lady, in the dead of night; she told me a story, so base, so shameful, that I almost blush now to think of it. She said she had heard I was going to fly the country. My name was talked of with her—I alone could save her. In a moment of recklessness I agreed to take her shame upon myself. What was my good name to me? At least I could help her. It was the one and only good action of my life. The next day I left England a pauper, and what is worse, a defaulter, doomed never to return to it, and never to bear my own name again. That is how I came to be a loafer, the dead–beat, the beach–comber I was when you took compassion upon me.”

“And—and your name?”

“I—I am the Marquis of St. Burden; my father is the Duke of Avonturn.”

“You—you—Mr. Ellison, a—marquis!”

“Heaven help me—yes! But why do you look at me like that? You surely do not hate me now that you have heard my wretched story?”

“Hate you! Oh, no, no! I only pity you from the bottom of my heart.”

Her voice was very low and infinitely, hopelessly sad. He was looking out to sea. Suddenly he bowed his head and seemed to gasp for breath. Then, turning to her again, he seized her hand with a gesture that was almost one of despair.

“Esther, Esther! My God, what have I done? Forget what I have said. Blot it out from your memory forever. I was mad to have told you. Oh, Heavens, how can I make you forget the mischief my treacherous tongue has dragged me into!”

“Your secret is safe with me, never fear. No mortal shall ever dream that I know your history. But, my lord, you will go back some day?”

Instantly his voice came back to him clear and strong:

“Never! never! Living or dead, I will never go back to England again. That is my irrevocable determination.”

“Then may God help you!”

“Esther, can’t you guess now why I must go away from here, why I must leave to–morrow?”

He could hardly recognise the voice that answered.

“Yes, yes, I see. It is impossible for you to be my father’s servant any longer.”

“That was not what I meant. I meant because I am afraid to stay with you, lest my evil life should contaminate yours.”

“That is impossible! How can you hurt me?”

He pressed the hand he held in his almost savagely.

“I mean that I love you. You must have known it long since. I mean that you are dearer to me than all the world.”

“Oh, let me go! I cannot listen to you!”

“But you must! you must!”

“Oh, let me go!”

“You do not love me, then?”

“Oh, let me go, let me go!”

But he held her fast, pressing her closer and closer to him.

“I will not let you go until you tell me!”

“Oh, I can’t tell you! Can’t you see that what you have told me makes all the difference in the world?”

“I beg your pardon. I should have expected this. Forgive me and forget me; I will go away to–morrow.”

Her only reply was a choking sob. He put the boat back on her course, and in five minutes they had grounded on the beach; having helped her to disembark, he turned to pull the

boat up out of reach of the tide. This done, he looked to find her waiting for him, but she was gone. He could see her white dress flitting up the path towards the house. Without attempting to follow her, he left the beach and strode away round the hill into the interior of the island. When he had gone about a mile he came to an abrupt halt and looked towards the sea.

“Again, again!” he cried, with a great and exceeding bitter cry. “Oh, God! I was tempted and I fell; forgive me, for I can never forgive myself!”

As if in answer to his cry a night–hawk hooted among the rocks. He wheeled about and strode off in a different direction. In that instant he seemed to have learned a secret he had never even guessed at before.

The sun was in the act of making his appearance above the horizon when he reached the station again. He was utterly worn–out, both mentally and physically. Without undressing he threw himself upon his bed, and slept a dreamless sleep for an hour. Then he got up and looked out upon the world. It was the beginning of his last day at the station.

Chapter IV

Destiny—an Accident—and a Betrothal

Early as it was, Ellison discovered that Murkard was out before him. Pulling himself together as well as he was able, he took his towel and went down to the beach to bathe. It was an exquisite morning, a fresh breeze played among the palms and shrubs; the blue sea danced and glistened in the sunshine; columns of palest blue smoke rose, curling and twisting, into the sweet morning air. Ellison alone was sad. Even a swim failed to raise his spirits. He dressed himself and went back to breakfast with a face that was like that of a doomed man. So far he had seen no sign of Esther, nor had he any expectation of doing so until he went in to say good–bye to her. As the clanging bell called to breakfast, Murkard made his appearance. *He* also seemed out of sorts, and nodded to Ellison without a word as he seated himself at the table. The other was hardly prepared for this treatment of his trouble.

“Why, what on earth’s wrong with you this morning?” Ellison asked irritably. “Has the whole world gone dismal mad?”

“I’m very worried about something. Don’t ask me what, old man. I’m trying to fight it down, and if you leave me alone I shall be all right directly.”

“I’m afraid I shan’t be here to see it, then. I’m leaving in an hour’s time—for good and all.”

Murkard sprang to his feet with a new face.

“Then that puts me right at once. God bless you, Ellison, you could not have given me better news! I knew you’d do what was right!”

“Have you been fretting about me, then?”

“A little. But more about that girl over yonder. Of course, whatever happened, I should stand by you—you know that, don’t you? But—well, the long and the short of it is, I couldn’t bear to see the poor child getting to care for you more and more every day, when I knew that your affection was not the kind to satisfy her craving. Poor little thing, it will be hard on her, devilish hard, but all the same I believe you’re doing what is best and happiest for both of you.”

“Do you think so, honour bright?”

“I don’t think, I’m sure of it!”

“Then I’ll go. But you don’t know, old man, what a bitter fight it has been. Since you laughed at me a week ago I’ve been arguing it over, and the result is, I’m beginning to think I *do* care for her, after all.”

“If you only *think*, you’re still on the wrong side of the stream. No, no; we must go. There is no question about that. I’ll put our few traps together after breakfast, and then we’ll say farewell and adieu to respectability once more.”

“But you are not coming too. I could never allow that!”

“You’ll have no option. Of course I must come! Didn’t I tell you the other day that we’re bound up together? My destiny is in your hands. I must never leave you. I had an idea the end would have come here, but it seems I’m mistaken.”

“I wish you’d be a little more explicit sometimes.”

“It would probably amuse you if I were, and though I’m not the sort of man who fears ridicule, as a general rule, I could not bear to have you laugh at this.”

“I should not laugh; it seems to me I shall never laugh again. Tell me, Murkard, what you mean.”

“I will tell you.”

He rose and walked up and down the little room for some minutes. Then he stopped, and leaning against the smoke–coloured mantelpiece, spoke.

“In the first place, I suppose you will admit that there are some men in this extraordinary world of ours more delicately constructed than others. You agree to that. Very good. Well, that being so, I am perhaps more sensitive than you—possibly, though I don’t say absolutely, accounted for by my deformity. I look at commonplace things in a different way; my brain receives different impressions from passing events. I don’t say whether my impressions are right or wrong. At any rate, they are there. Directly I set eyes on you, that first night of our meeting, I knew you were my fate. Don’t ask me how I knew it. It is sufficient that I *did* know it. Something inside here seemed to tell me that our lives were bound up together; in fact, that you were the man for whose sake I was sent into the world. You remember we were starving at the time, and that we slept under a Moreton Bay fig in the Domain. Well, perhaps as the result of that hunger, I dreamed a dream. Something came to me and bade me to go with you, bade me be by your side continually because I was necessary to your life, and because my death would be by your hands.”

“Good gracious, Murkard, think what you’re saying!”

“I have thought, and I know. I don’t mean that you will murder me, but I *do* mean that it will be in connection with you that I shall meet my death. The same dream told me that a chance would be given us. That chance has come. Also the dream told me that my only hope of heaven lay in saving you by laying down my own life. That time has not come yet—but it will come as surely as we are now located in this hut. In the meantime there is another life between us. That life we have not met yet; what or whose it is I have no notion, but I dread it night and day.”

“You don’t mean to tell me you believe all that you’re telling me?”

“As implicitly as I believe that I am standing before you now. And so will you when it is too late—not before.”

“But think, man, think! How can such a thing be contemplated for a moment? Your life by my hands! No, no!”

“Let it drop. Forget that I ever told you. We shall see whether it turns out as I say. Moreover, something tells me that although we are preparing to leave this place, we shall

not go!”

Without further argument he opened the door and went out. Ellison in his turn began to pace the room.

“He is mad, the man is undoubtedly mad. And yet God knows why he should be. If vileness has anything to do with it, I am despicable enough to do anything he might dream! Surely there never was so miserable a wretch as I! But we will go from here. Of that I am determined.”

He began feverishly to put together the few little odds and ends he had collected during the past month. It was not a lengthy business, but it cut him to the heart to have to do it. If he left this place, where for a month he had been so happy, what would his future be? Turned out to seek employment again, would he drift back into the old vagabond life or not? And if he did, he asked himself, what would it matter? Who was there in the world to care? He tied up his bundle, threw it on the bed, and then in his turn left the hut. Esther was on the veranda of her own house. He crossed the path to speak to her.

“Miss McCartney,” he said, “have you been able to find it in your heart to forgive me for my rudeness last night?”

Her hand shook and her voice trembled as she answered, with downcast eyes, “There is nothing to forgive, my lord.”

“No, no; you must not call me that!”

He raised his hand as if to ward off a blow. She noticed the look of pain that leaped into his eyes.

“Forgive me in your turn. I am sorry I hurt you.”

“Do you think it matters? My life will be all one long pain now. I am going away; I have come to say good–bye to you.”

“You are—really—going—away?”

“Yes; I cannot live here after what I told you last night. It is impossible for both of us. I must go out into the world again and try to win back the self–respect I have lost. But before I go I want to thank you for all you have done for me; for a month you have enabled me to shake hands with happiness. I can never be sufficiently grateful to you.”

“Where—where shall you go when you leave here?”

“I haven’t the remotest notion. On to the mainland most probably; out to some station in the far West, where I can forget and be forgotten. What does it matter where I go?”

“Does—does it never strike you that in thus dooming yourself to hopeless misery you are being very cruel to me?”

“It is only to be kind. God knows I have thought of you before myself, and the only conclusion I can come to is that it would be worse for you if I stayed.”

“Then good–bye, and may God bless you and protect you always!”

He looked into her face; it was pale as death. She held out her hand, and he raised it to his lips. The knowledge that had come to him the previous night was confirmed now. In that

second he learned how much he loved her.

“Good–bye—good–bye!”

He watched her pass into the house, and was in the act of leaving the spot himself when he heard a heavy fall within. In an instant he had divined its meaning, and was inside the room, to find Esther upon the floor in a dead faint. Raising her in his arms he carried her to a sofa and laid her on it; then, procuring water, he bathed her forehead and chafed her hands till she returned to consciousness. When her eyes opened she looked at him with a frightened stare.

“Oh, what has happened?”

“The sun was too much for you out there. You fainted; fortunately I heard you fall and carried you here. Are you better?”

“Yes, thank you. I am almost all right again.”

“You are quite sure?”

“Quite.”

He took up his hat and left the house. As he crossed the veranda he noticed a stir in the station. The Kanakas had turned out of their hut and were staring in the direction of the bay. From the place where he stood he could see two luggers approaching the jetty.

“Her father has returned,” he said to himself, almost without interest, and went down to the shore. His supposition proved correct. But from the way the last of the boats manoeuvred there was evidently something wrong. He waited until it got alongside, and then walked down the jetty to find out what this peculiarity might mean. A little crowd was collected on the second boat; those Kanakas who knew him made way for him to step on board. The crew of the boat itself regarded him with some surprise.

“What is the matter?” he asked.

“The boss has met with an accident,” explained the oldest of the men, “and we don’t know how to let his daughter know.”

“Where is he?”

“In the cabin aft. Step below and see him for yourself.”

Ellison did as he was directed, and went down the companion into the box of a cabin. An elderly man, with gray hair and beard, bearing an unmistakable likeness to Esther, lay on a roughly constructed bed placed on the port side. He looked up as Ellison entered.

“And who may you be?” he asked faintly.

“My name is Ellison,” the other replied. “I have been a month in your employ—your daughter took me on as a carpenter and general hand in place of Paddy the Lasher, discharged.”

“You talk like a gentleman.”

“I was considered one once.”

“Then you may be able to do me a good turn. I have met with a serious accident—slipped

on those steps there and injured my back. From the numbness of my lower half, I'm almost afraid it's a hopeless case; but I don't want to frighten my daughter without need. Will you go up and break the news to her?"

"If you wish it. But surely it's not as bad as you say. Perhaps it's only a severe sprain."

"I fear not. As I tell you, I'm dead below the waist."

"Will you stay here till I come back, or shall we carry you up now?"

"I'll stay here. But don't be longer than you can help, and break the news as gently as you can to her."

"You may trust me."

Ellison went up the steps again, passed through the little crowd, and made his way back towards the house. He was only just in time, for Esther had seen the boats come in, and was on her way to meet her father. She was surprised to see the man to whom she had just said "Good–bye" coming along the path towards her. Something in his face must have warned her that he was the bearer of evil tidings, for she stopped, and he heard her catch her breath with a little convulsive sob.

"My father has returned, and you have bad news for me?"

"That of course depends upon how you take it. Yes, your father has returned, but—well, the long and short of it is, he is *not* very well."

"My father—not well! He was never ill in his life. It must be something serious, or he would not have sent you to tell me."

"He has met with a bit of an accident—a fall. He asked me to come on in advance and let you know, lest you should be frightened when you saw them carrying him up."

"That is not all; he is worse than you say. Oh, Mr. Ellison, for Heaven's sake, don't deceive me—tell me all! I can bear it, believe me."

"I am not deceiving you. God knows I would be the last to do that. You shall see him for yourself in a minute or two. But had you not better first run back and have a bed prepared for him. I will go down and help them carry him up."

"How good you are to me!"

She went back to the house, while he returned to the boat. Before he arrived Murkard had put in an appearance, and with his usual foresight had set to work upon a rough litter in which to carry the sick man up to the house. This constructed, he was placed upon it, and between them they bore him up the hill. Ellison and Murkard carried him across the veranda into the room his daughter had prepared for him. She received him with greater bravery than Ellison had expected. The father's courage was wonderful.

"This is a nice way to come home, my girl!" he said, with an attempt at cheerfulness. "You're not accustomed to seeing your father carried, are you?"

With her eyes full of tears she stooped and kissed him. Perhaps the coldness of his forehead told her something of the truth, for she started and looked at Ellison in terrified surprise. The two men laid him on the bed, and while she was in another room removed

his clothes. It was a difficult business, but once it was accomplished the patient felt infinitely relieved. As they were leaving the house Esther met them. She drew Ellison aside.

“Someone must cross to the settlement for the doctor immediately. It is useless to attempt to blind me as to his condition. I can see it for myself.”

“I will go over, and bring him back with me.”

“God bless you! I feel so terribly lonely now; it is good to know that I have a friend in you.”

“A friend faithful to the death. Esther, will you answer me one question? Would it make you happier if I stayed with you a little longer—say, till your father is able to get about again?”

She hung her head, but his eager ears caught the timid little “Yes” that escaped her lips.

“Then so be it. Now I will go for the doctor.”

She held out her hand; he took it, and for the second time that morning raised it to his lips. Then he strode away in the direction of the store. Murkard was not surprised at the news. He accompanied him to the beach, and helped him to push his boat into the water. When Ellison was past the jetty he returned to his work, muttering:

“I knew something would happen to prevent it. This is the hand of Destiny again.”

Ellison pulled swiftly across to the township, beached his boat opposite the Chinese quarter, and after inquiring the direction of the doctor’s house, set off for it without a moment’s delay. He discovered the medico smoking on his veranda, and in less than three minutes had given him a complete summary of the case. They returned to the boat together, and Ellison, after pulling him across, conducted him straightway to the sick man’s bedroom. He did not go in himself, but waited on the veranda. In half an hour the doctor emerged and beckoned him out of hearing of the house. Ellison read the worst in his face.

“Is there no hope?”

“Not a scrap. I tell you this straightforwardly. Of course I presume, from your anxiety, you are an interested party, and as such have a right to know. The man’s spine is fatally injured. Paralysis has already set in in the lower limbs. It is only a matter of time with him now.”

“How long do you think he may live?”

“It is impossible to say—six hours, possibly eight, certainly not more. If you have any business to consult him upon, I advise you to do it at once; he may not be conscious very long.”

“You have not told his daughter?”

“Only that the case is serious. I have told him, and I think he will tell her.”

“Thank you for being so candid. It is really no business of mine, but I must try and help that poor girl to bear her sorrow. Shall you see him again?”

“I think so, though I am convinced it is hopeless. Still, I shall look over in the course of the afternoon. Who will put me across?”

“I will.”

They got into the boat and pushed off. When he had landed the doctor, Ellison pulled slowly back. His brain was staggering under a multitude of thoughts. What was he to do? What must his duty be now? Should he go away and leave this girl to bear her sorrow alone? Or should he take the bull by the horns, ask her father to be allowed to make her his wife, and trust to Providence for the rest? He didn’t know, he couldn’t tell—both seemed equally impossible. He resolved to leave it, as he had done before, to the decision of blind Fate. In the meantime he pulled back to the jetty, secured the boat, and went up to the house. Esther saw him pass the window, and came quietly out on the veranda.

“He is sleeping now,” she almost whispered; “but it doesn’t seem a natural sleep. I cannot tell you how terrified I am about him.”

“Poor girl! what can I say to you save that you have my sincerest, my most heartfelt sympathy? If you should want any assistance, remember that I am here to give it you, come what may.”

Her only answer was to press the hand that rested on the veranda rail with her soft fingers. Her touch thrilled him through and through, and he went into the hut for lunch with a look in his face that had never been there before. He was beginning to understand his position more clearly now.

Towards the middle of the afternoon he was employing himself among the boats, when he saw her coming breathlessly towards him. He dropped the adze he held in his hand and went to meet her.

“He wants you to come to him,” she managed to gasp. “Oh, I don’t know how to tell you the agony of fear I’m suffering. He seems so much weaker. Come at once.”

She accompanied him into the house, and to the door of her father’s chamber. The change in the patient’s face staggered him. It was ghastly white and drawn; approaching dissolution was staring from the restless eyes.

“Mr. Ellison,” he said faintly, “I have sent for you, and I must be quick with what I have to say, for the end is near. Though I only saw you for the first time this morning, I seem to know you thoroughly. My daughter has told me of the kindness you and your friend have shown to her. She has also informed me that you told her last night of your love for her. Is that true, on your oath to a dying man?”

“Yes. It is true! I know now that I do love her.”

“With your whole heart and soul, so help you God!”

“With my whole heart and soul, so help me God!”

“Is there anything to prevent you making her your wife?”

“In a legal sense, nothing. In a moral—well, perhaps I have not led the sort of life I might have done; but if you will trust her to me I swear before God, as I hope for heaven, that I will do my duty to her all the days of my life. I will endeavour to make her life happy at

any cost to myself."

"She will be poor, remember. There is nothing for me to leave her save a few hundred pounds, this station, and the boats. You will have to work hard to support her."

"I will work my hands to the bone."

"Then as you deal with my motherless and fatherless girl, so may God deal with you. He has sent you to take my place, in her hour of need. If you stand firm by her he will not desert you in yours. As a dying man I trust you; that is enough. Now send her to me."

Ellison went to the door and called the girl. She came in, and the dying man gave them his blessing. After which he told them he would rather sleep.

When the doctor reached the house half an hour later Ellison met him on the threshold.

"How is he now?"

"You have come too late, doctor. He is dead!"

CHAPTER V

A Wedding—a Conversation—and an Episode

Towards sundown the following afternoon the remains of Alexander McCartney were conveyed across the straits and interred in the little cemetery above the township of Port Kennedy. A week later his daughter became Cuthbert Ellison's wife. It had been the dead man's wish that there should be no delay in the marriage. He was anxious to have his daughter's safety assured within as short a time of his demise as possible. Nor had either of them any objection to raise. The wedding took place in the little church on the hill–side, and Silas Murkard acted as his friend's best man. After the ceremony they sailed quietly home in one of their own boats to receive the congratulations of Mrs. Fenwick and the station, and to take up the old life once more.

As Ellison lifted his wife out of the boat on to the little jetty he looked into her eyes. There was only pure happiness and unutterable trust written there. He lowered his own before her gaze and heaved a heavy sigh.

When she had passed into the house, proudly escorted by Mrs. Fenwick, Murkard came up to him and took his hand.

"Cuthbert, I have waited my chance to congratulate you. We are alone now, and from the bottom of my heart I wish you happiness."

"Thank you. You have been a good friend to me, Silas."

"There is no question of *friendship* between us. It is more than that. But there is one thing I want to say to you."

"Say on."

"You will not be offended with me?"

"Never. I don't think it is in your power to do that, old friend."

"Very well, then I will say it. Cuthbert Ellison, you think you know the woman who has this day become your wife?"

Ellison nodded. He wondered what was coming.

"You would be surprised and perhaps angry if I told you that I know her a thousand times better than you do or ever will know her. I can read her nature as I can read yours. And for this reason I warn you. That woman has one of the purest and most beautiful minds ever given by God to any human being. Beware how you act towards her, beware of what you say! Remember, though you may mean nothing by what you say, she will never forget one single word. You have only to look into her eyes to see what she thinks of you *now*. She believes in you heart and soul, she worships the very ground you walk on; it remains with you to say whether she shall retain that trust or not. What you have said to her already cling to as a shipwrecked man clings to a spar; what you say in the future must be your own concern. I will help you if ever help be needed, but in the meantime watch yourself,

and if there is a God watching over us may he bless and keep you both. I have spoken!”

Having said this he turned on his heel and walked quickly away in the direction of his own solitary hut. He entered and closed the door.

The evening meal finished, Ellison and Esther passed out to the veranda together. The day had been fine, but the night was dark and stormy; thick clouds obscured the heavens, big waves broke on the beach with ominous grumblings, and now and again swift streaks of lightning flashed across the sky. Husband and wife sat side by side. The man was reviewing in his mind the events of the day, and wondering at the strange conversation he had had with Murkard that evening. In spite of his supreme happiness a vague feeling of sadness was upon him that would not be dispelled. Esther was all content. Woman–like she derived an intense pleasure from mere personal contact with the being she adored. She could just see the outline of his face against the sky, and she wondered at its sadness. At last she spoke:

“Of what are you thinking, husband mine?”

He started as if she had stung him, and hastened to reply:

“Can’t you guess? I was thinking of you and of all you have done for me.”

“Perhaps a little of me, but not altogether, I fear. Cuthbert, do you believe you will ever regret?”

“No, no! ten thousand times, no! Would a man ever regret having been given a chance of heaven?”

“You are begging the question! I mean, my husband,”—her voice dwelt with infinite tenderness upon the name,—“do you think you will ever have cause to wish you had never seen me, when you see what other cleverer and prettier women you might have married?”

“I should never have married any other. You are my destiny. I was born into the world to marry you, and no one else. How could it possibly have been otherwise?”

“You are very silly. I want to talk seriously.”

“That *is* talking seriously.”

“It is nonsense. But listen, dear. You must forgive me for bringing up the subject on this night, of all others, but I cannot let it rest. I will never speak of it again if you wish it. But you must answer me truthfully for the last time.”

He bit his lip to keep back the cry of fear that almost escaped him. He knew what was coming, and dreaded it like the cutting of a flashing knife.

“Go on!”

“Cuthbert, if you ever went back to your old world and saw women, as I say, cleverer and more beautiful than I am, you might wish you had never seen me. You would not tell me so, and you would not, if you could help it, let me guess it, but my woman’s instinct would warn me—and then what should I do? I should be chained to you, and you would be chained to me. I should be a drag upon you—a curse—instead of the help I wish to be. I should love you just the same, because I could never love anyone else; but think what the depth of my despair would be!”

A large tear fell on the back of his hand. He drew her to him with almost a fierceness.

“I told you the other day I should never go back to my old world. I am dead to it, and it is dead to me. I am Cuthbert Ellison, the pearler, your husband, and I wish to be no other. Forget, for mercy’s sake, that I ever had a past; let us live only for my present and the future. Let me be to you the husband I would wish to be; let me work, toil, knowing no weariness in what is done for you; let me build up a new life of honour for your sake, and let the dead past bury its dead. I love you, and I want no world that has not you in it. Let us never speak on this subject again.”

“You are not angry with me for saying what I did.”

“Angry, no! I am sorry, full of remorse that I ever told you that story. God must help me to atone for it. I shall never be able to rid myself of the fear that you will hate me for it.”

“You are unjust to yourself, and even, I think, a little unjust to me. Had you not told me, there would always have been a barrier between us. Now I know everything, and, believe me, I do not honour you the less for telling me.”

She raised his hand to her mouth and imprinted a kiss upon it. That kiss stung him to the quick. Like the look of trust upon her face when he had helped her from the boat, it was almost a reproach. It was the beginning of his punishment. He made shift to change the course of the conversation.

“Darling,” he said, “have you thought seriously yet of what our marriage means to us? Have you thought what you have made of the man who only a month ago stood before you in this very veranda, in rags and tatters, asking for employment to keep body and soul together? That man is now your husband. Linked to you not for to–day or to–morrow, next week or next month, but for all time, for all eternity. Your husband—part of your own self: surely that should be sufficient passport for me into heaven itself. My interests are to be your interests, your hopes my hopes—in fact, your life is mine, and my life yours. There is an awful solemnity about it. If I could only grasp the drift of it all!”

“Grasp the drift? You are the drift. You must help me to make my life, I must help you to make yours; that is what it means. If we do our duty to each other, surely we ought, then, to pull through?”

“I am afraid of myself, Esther. Not afraid of my love for you, but afraid of the slowness of Time, of the gradual development of things.”

“Are we not getting a little out of our depth, love? I want to know nothing but your love for me, that is all. Let us leave the subject. See how vivid the lightning is getting. I fear we are in for a storm.”

And in truth the flashes were growing almost alarming. Heavy thunder echoed among the islands, and the wind was every moment increasing in violence. Suddenly an awful flash seemed to tear the very heavens asunder. In that brief instant Ellison made out the figure of a man standing in the open before them, not more than forty yards from the veranda steps. His back was towards them, and his hands were uplifted above his head. Esther saw him too, and uttered a little cry.

“Who can it be?” she exclaimed in alarm. “Cuthbert, call him in! He will be struck by the

lightning!”

She had hardly spoken before another flash rent the darkness. Still the figure stood before them exactly where they had first seen it. But this time his identity was unmistakable. *It was Murkard!* When the next flash came he was gone.

“What could he have been doing?” Esther asked, as the thunder rolled away. To her Murkard’s ways were always a matter of much mystery.

“I can’t think. Thank goodness, he doesn’t often act in that fashion.”

“I am afraid of him, Cuthbert. I have never been able to make myself take to him as I took to you.”

“He is a difficult man to know, that is why, little woman. But he is as good as gold! A queer fish, perhaps a little mad, but with it all a better man than I am.”

“That I will never believe.”

“God grant you may never have reason to think otherwise. But don’t worry yourself about Murkard. He is and always has been my truest friend.”

“And what am I, my lord and master?”

“You are my wife—part of myself!”

She nestled lovingly against his side.

“Part of yourself! How sweet that sounds! I wonder if any other woman was ever so happy as I?”

Once more Ellison sighed. At that moment the lightning flashed out again, just in time to show them the same mysterious figure emerging from the group of palms and moving towards the hut, Esther saw it, and gave another little cry. Ellison rose.

“I must go and find out what he means by it. Don’t be afraid, I’ll be back in a minute.”

As he left the veranda the storm broke, and the rain came pouring down. Presently he was running back. For a moment he could hardly speak. His face was as pale as death.

“Well, what did he say?”

“Nothing; he is fast asleep! I never knew he was a somnambulist before.”

“But you are trembling, and you are as white as a sheet. Something is troubling you, Cuthbert. Tell me what it is.”

“It is nothing, dearest, believe me. I was only a little frightened at the risk he had run. He might have been struck by lightning at any moment. Poor Murkard!”

A few minutes later she went inside and turned up the lamp. The rain was still pouring on the roof. But, though he was looking straight before him into the night, he hardly noticed it. He was saying to himself over and over again a sentence he had heard Murkard mutter in his sleep. It was an old Bible warning, one with which he had been familiar from his youth up, but to–night it had the power to shake him to his very core. It ran as follows:

”*Be sure your sin will find you out!*”

CHAPTER VI

A Temptation—a Fall—and a Series of Emotions

Six months had elapsed since the wedding—six months of *almost* perfect happiness for Ellison. I am compelled to say almost, for the reason that an influx of business worries during that period had caused him a very considerable amount of anxiety, and had, in a measure, necessarily detracted from his domestic peace. The pearling season had not turned out as well as had been expected of it. Continual stormy weather had militated against the boats at sea, and a gradual but appreciable decline in the price of shell had had the same effect on shore. As he could only regard himself in the light of a trustee of his wife's estate, this run of bad luck struck him in a tender place. But through it all Esther proved herself a most perfect wife. He found it an inestimable boon after a long and hard day's work to be able to go to her for sympathy and advice, both of which she was quite competent to give. She was, by long experience, a past mistress of all the details of the business, and her shrewd common sense and womanly penetration enabled her to grasp things and advise on them long before her more matter–of–fact husband had mastered their first general elements. His respect for her talents became almost enthusiastic. She was now no longer the old Esther of the past, but a new and glorious womanhood, figuring in his eyes more as a leader than a wife.

As the year advanced, instead of bettering themselves things grew steadily worse. Acting on the advice of his wife and Murkard, he had curtailed expenses in every direction, forced himself to do without many things that at other times would have been classed as absolute necessaries, and discharged as many hands as could possibly be spared. This lightened the load for a while; but it soon became painfully evident that, unless more capital was soon forthcoming, the pearling station must inevitably close its doors. But in what direction could they look for such assistance? The banks were already dropping hints as to long–standing overdrafts, and, seeing the losses they were daily sustaining, it would be impossible to expect any mercy from them. On all sides companies were abandoning stations, or transferring their business elsewhere. It was a time of serious financial danger, and night and day Ellison worried himself to know how it was all to end. It was not for himself he cared; it was for Esther—only for Esther. Indeed, the anxiety was telling seriously upon his health. He could not sleep for its weight upon his mind. If only he could raise a couple of thousand pounds, he continually argued, he might place the station in a position by which it might not only weather the storm, but enable it to do even a larger business than before when the reaction set in. Again and again he discussed the matter with his wife and Murkard, but without arriving at any satisfactory conclusion.

One night after dinner, just as he was going out to the veranda for his customary smoke, Murkard called him outside.

"Come over to the store with me for a little while," he said. "I want a serious conversation with you."

Ellison followed him into the hut, and shut the door.

“Look here,” said the smaller man, perching himself on the high stool behind his desk, and taking a letter from a pigeon–hole above him, “things have come to a climax. But there, you know that perhaps even better than I do.”

“God help us! I think I do, and the anxiety is almost killing me. What we are to do I can’t for the life of me see.”

“There is a lot of bills coming due next month, and we’ve got an even smaller return for that last shell than I expected. To cap it all, here’s a letter from the bank over the way. It came before dinner, but you looked so precious miserable then that I thought I’d keep it till after you’d had your meal. It’s a facer, and no mistake.”

“Read it.”

Murkard spread the paper out on the desk, and, clearing his throat in an effort to gain time, did as he was commanded.

In plain English, it was to the effect that unless the overdraft could be reduced by one–half within an absurdly short space of time, the bank would be compelled to realise upon its security, which would mean that the station would be closed, and Ellison and his wife thrown upon the world.

Ellison sank his head upon his hands, and groaned like a wounded bull.

“If only I could raise two thousand pounds,” he sighed for the thousandth time.

“That’s exactly what we must do at once. And why not? Is it so very impossible?”

“Of course; you must know that it is. Haven’t we discussed the question over and over again, in all its lights, for the last six weeks?”

“I know that as well as you do. But I’ve been thinking on a different tack these last two days.”

“With what result? For mercy’s sake don’t play with me! I believe I’d kill you if you did. What have you been thinking?”

“Why, look here, Ellison, the position’s just this: You are a married man, and you are likely soon to be more than that. Must you think of yourself just now, or are you bound to think of your wife?”

“To think of my wife, of course. Have I thought of myself at all since I’ve been married?”

“No, I’ll grant you’ve been wonderfully unselfish. Well, this is the crux of it all. Are you prepared to make a big sacrifice for her sake? Are you prepared to make a sacrifice that will humble your pride to the very ground, but will probably be the means of saving the life you love? Are you prepared to do this, I say?”

“Of course I am. There is nothing in the world I would not do to save her. Surely you know me well enough by this time to know that!”

“Very good. That being so, we will proceed to business.” He took up a pen and fell to tracing circles on the blotting–pad in front of him. “In the first place, do you remember the night you rowed her to the township and brought her back by moonlight?”

Ellison’s face became suddenly pale. He shifted on his seat uneasily.

“Yes, I remember. What about it?”

“I was lonely that evening and went for a walk. I strolled down to Alligator Point and sat on the rocks above the water.”

“Well?”

“The sea was as calm as a mill–pond, and the night was so still that I could almost hear people talking across the strait. I saw you leave the township, and I watched you sail towards where I sat. Your voices were plainly audible to me, and, forgive me, Ellison, but —I heard—”

“Say no more—I know what you heard, you cursed, eavesdropping spy—I know what you heard!”

“You are hardly just to me, but under the circumstances I will forgive your harshness. And what did I hear?”

“You heard the wretched story I told the woman I loved!”

“I did. And—ever since—that moment—I have known your secret.”

There was complete silence between them for some minutes—Murkard went on tracing circles on the blotting–paper as if his life depended on it, while Ellison rose from his seat and went over to the door. His hand trembled so that he could hardly control its movements. Murkard looked at him with a queer expression, half sympathy, half contempt upon his face. Suddenly Ellison wheeled round and confronted him.

“Plainly, Murkard, what is your object in telling me that you heard it?”

“Because I want to save you. That is why!”

“How can that save me? You mean because you want to damn me, body and soul. But you shan’t! by God, you shan’t! I’m desperate, I tell you that, desperate!”

“Hush, hush! She’ll hear you if you shout like that. Come back and let us talk quietly. Good Heavens, Ellison, can’t you see how great my love for you is? Haven’t I shown it to you times out of number? Do you think, then, that I should turn on you in your hour of need? Surely you know me better than that?”

Ellison regarded him in silence for a minute. Then he went across and held out his hand.

“Forgive me, Silas. I am not myself to–night; I hardly know what I say. You don’t know how much I have upon my mind. Don’t you see how everything seems to be coming to a climax with me? But for her sake, and that of the child that is coming, I would willingly be dead. And yet I can’t alarm her, and I can’t let anything happen that would deprive her of a home—now. At any cost I must keep a roof over her head.”

He went back to his seat by the counter and sat staring before him with a face drawn and haggard almost out of recognition.

“I am trying to save both for you,” said Murkard quietly.

Ellison seized at the hope as a drowning man would catch at a life–buoy.

“I know you are, Murkard. I know it, and trust you to the bottom of my heart. What are

you thinking of? What can I do? For mercy's sake, tell me; don't wait to weigh words."

"Steady, steady, old man. Be quiet and I will tell you. You are the Marquis of St. Burden. I heard you say so—there is no getting away from that. Believe me, your secret will never pass my lips. Your father is the Duke of Avonturn!"

Ellison said not a word, but it seemed to him that the beating of his heart must soon choke him. Murkard eyed him curiously.

"Well?"

"Well, what I propose is, that you shall communicate with your father; tell him that you have settled down out here to a steady, honest, respectable life, tell him that difficulties beset you, and ask him for five thousand pounds."

"Never!"

Again there was a pause; try as he would, Ellison could not even bring his mind to think.

"And pray why not?"

"Because I refuse, once and for all; absolutely and implicitly I refuse, and you shall never make me budge from it."

"I shall not let you. You cannot help yourself."

"I can and will help myself. I refuse to do what you wish. I refuse—I refuse!"

His voice rose almost to a shriek in his excitement. He got up and looked towards the door as if he would settle the question by leaving the hut. Murkard sprang from his seat and held him by the arm. Both were grimly in earnest.

"Ellison, I believe in you. Your wife believes in you. You told her your history, you cannot draw back now if you would. It would kill her if she thought you had lied to her. She would never honour or trust you again. But you haven't. It is only your stiff–necked pride that brings you to this decision; but you must put it aside, I tell you; you must, man, to save her life."

"But I cannot; it is impossible! Don't you hear me? I cannot!"

"You both can and must. I intend to make you. Do you love your wife? I know you do. Then do you wish to be responsible for her death, and do you wish to kill the child as well? Is not one murder enough for you, for I tell you plainly if she has to leave this place, and you and she are thrown penniless upon the world, as you certainly will be within the next two months unless you find this money somewhere, so certainly will it kill her, and the unborn child too. And you will have only your stubborn, obstinate, guilty pride to thank for it."

"But I cannot do it; you don't know all."

"I know quite enough to be certain that it is your duty to save your wife's life at any cost to yourself."

"At whatever cost to myself—do you mean that? On your word of honour—may God strike you dead if you lie?"

“I do mean it. At whatever cost to yourself it is your duty to save your wife’s life.”

“You will remember what you have just said, ‘*At any cost to myself!*’”

“I will remember.”

“But there, what is the use of our talking like this. The duke will pay no attention to my appeal.”

“You are wrong, he will pay every attention.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because I have a scheme in my brain that will make him.”

“Will you tell me what it is?”

“Later on, perhaps, not now; you must trust to my honour.”

“Very good. Then it shall be done. I will put aside all thought of myself. I will do what you wish. I will sin—for, remember, it is a sin—to save the woman I love. And remember also, that whatever happens in the future, whatever comes of it, misery to me, or to her, it is your doing.”

“I will remember, and if any thing *does* come of it I will not only take the blame, but I will stand the punishment. Will you shake hands with me on it?”

“No, I will not. You have tempted me and I have fallen. God help me! After to–night we shall be no longer friends.”

“Ellison!”

“I mean what I say. I have sinned before, perhaps in a worse way than this. But when I married I swore that nothing should ever tempt me to do so again. I have kept my word until to–night. To–night I sin deliberately, and in cold blood, for my wife’s sake, God bless her!”

He raised his hat reverently as he spoke the last words. Then he sat down with the air of a man who had signed his own death–warrant, and asked:

“What am I to do?”

“Leave it all to me. To–morrow morning I will go across to the island, call upon the Government Resident, who knows me well enough by this time, tell him your story under pledge of secrecy, and get him to cable to your father for the money.”

“He will refuse.”

“I think not. He believes in my honour. Have you any objection to my doing so?”

“I object to nothing. I am past that. Only make it as certain of success as you can. The end will come soon enough in any case.”

“You take it in a curious way. Ellison, is there anything you are hiding from me?”

“Only—only the pain you are giving me. But I suppose that hardly enters into your calculations.”

“Ellison, I forgive you; but a day will come when you will never forgive yourself for what

you are saying now. Remember, I am doing this only for your sake. As I promised you just now, so I promise again, whatever blame is to be taken for this I will take, whatever punishment is meted out—if any—I will bear. I only ask in return that you will believe in the honesty of my affection for you."

"Do you wish me to write any letter?"

"No. Leave everything to me."

"You do not want me any more to–night?"

"No. That is all. But, Ellison, you are not going to leave me like this?"

"In what way would you have me leave you? If I dared I would tell you everything, but I am too great a coward even for that. Good–night!"

Murkard only answered with a sigh. Ellison went out, closing the door after him. Once in the fresh air he looked up at the stars, then at the sea, then at the lamp–lit windows of his own house. Esther was seated at the table, sewing. He knew upon what work she was engaged, and a spasm of terror swept over him at the knowledge that even that little life, not yet born into the world, might some day be tempted to despise him. Instinctively he turned upon his heel, and for the second time since his arrival at the station strode away into the heart of the island, in an endeavour to dispel his own gloomy thoughts. On and on he walked, regardless of pace or destination. His whole being was consumed with horror at what he was doing. What did it mean? What would it mean? What had induced him to do it? Was it blind Fate, or what reason could be assigned to it? No! It was none of these things—it was to save his wife! Bitterly he upbraided himself for the first folly that had occasioned it, but it was too late now, too late, too late! If he went to his wife and confessed all, confessed that he had lied to her, that he was not the man he pretended to be, that he was only a common swindler and cheat, she would forgive him, because she was a good woman and loved him, but she would never trust him or believe in him again. In that case their ruin would be complete! If he persisted in the present course, and Murkard's plan proved successful, they would be saved for a little time, but the inevitable result would be worse than the first destruction. On neither side was there such a thing as safety. On one side was his wife's life, on the other her trust in him; there was no middle course. He was between the devil and the deep sea with a vengeance. God help him for a miserable man!

By the time he arrived at this conclusion he was on the headland above the station. A thrill of superstitious terror swept over him as he realised that the spot on which he was standing was the site of the Hermit's hut. In the glorious moonlight he could plainly discern the ruins of the blackened hearth, the boundary walls, and under the tall palm, nearer the cliff edge, the grave of the mysterious Unknown himself. What had led him in that direction on the one night of all others he would most have desired to avoid it? It seemed to him that the dead man's ghost was moving about the place taunting him with his sin, and pointing to a similar abandoned end in the inglorious future. Down on the shore below him he could hear the roll of the surf, but up here all was ghostly still. At last, unable to control himself any longer, he took to his heels and fled down the hill towards the station, craving to be with his kind once more. To his surprise he could see the light still burning in the sitting room. Late though it was, his wife had not yet gone to bed.

Could she be sitting up for him?

As he entered the room she rose to meet him.

“My poor boy,” she said, “how tired you look!”

“I have been worried nearly past endurance,” he replied, “and went for a walk to try and think my difficulties out. I would not have gone had I thought you would sit up for me.”

“I went over to the store when you did not come in, to see if you were there. Mr. Murkard said you had said good–night to him nearly two hours before, so I knew you had gone for a walk. You are very tired, I can see.”

She leaned over his chair and ran her hand through his curly hair. Her touch, soft as it was, seemed to tear his very heart–strings. He could hardly bear to look her in the face. He left his seat and went across to the fireplace.

“Esther,” he said, “difficulties are surrounding us on every side. If things don’t change soon, goodness only knows what will happen to us.”

“But they will change. God will help us, husband mine. Come what may, let us put our trust in him. He has not deserted us hitherto, and I am not afraid that he ever will.”

“If only I had your faith. Oh, Esther, my own dear wife, I wonder if you will ever come to think badly of me.”

“Never, Cuthbert, never! I shall believe in your honesty and goodness until my life’s end.”

She pulled his head down and kissed him on the forehead. Before he could answer she had left the room. He went out to the veranda and leaned against the rails, saying slowly to himself, over and over again:

“‘I shall believe in your honesty and goodness until my life’s end!’”

CHAPTER VII

Satisfaction—dissatisfaction—and a Contemplated Arrival

First thing next morning Murkard went off to the township. He was gone about an hour, and during that time Ellison seemed to live a lifetime. Fearing that his face might frighten his wife, he found work for himself in the store and among the boats. Everything seemed to conspire to remind him of his position, and every few moments the inevitable result would rise before him in a new light and fairly take his breath away. Times out of number his patience got the better of him, and he went down to the shore to see if there were any sign of the boat's return. When at last he did make it out, his heart seemed first to stand still and then to throb until it felt as if it would burst his chest asunder. Nearer and nearer came the white sail, gleaming like a flake of ivory on the warm sunlit sea. When she drew alongside the jetty one glimpse of Murkard's face told him that the errand had been satisfactorily accomplished. He waited for him to beach the boat, and then they set off together for the store.

"Well," asked Ellison anxiously, as soon as they were inside and had shut the door, "how have you succeeded?"

"Admirably, so far. I have dispatched the cablegram, and by this time to–morrow we shall know our fate."

"But what proof have you that they will believe your tale?"

"The Government Resident's word. He has guaranteed the truth of my statement."

Not another syllable did Ellison utter. His lips moved, but no sound came from them. Then suddenly, with a little cry, he stretched out his arms towards the counter as if to sustain himself, and missing that, fell prone in a dead faint upon the floor.

In a minute or two Murkard had brought him back to consciousness.

"What on earth's the matter with you, Ellison?" he cried. "You're surely not going to give way now that the business is accomplished?"

"I don't know," the other replied shamefacedly, as soon as he was sufficiently recovered to talk. "I suppose the anxiety has been too much for me. My wife must know nothing of this, remember."

"Trust me. And now I shall advise you to keep very quiet until the answer comes. There is nothing to be gained by knocking yourself up, and everything, whichever way you look at it, by being calm."

"But, Murkard, for the life of me I don't understand how you managed it. No family in the world would advance such a sum without full and strict inquiry."

"Can you trust me, Ellison?"

"Implicitly—but—"

“There must be no ‘buts,’ I have taken the matter in hand. The Government Resident, who believes in me, strangely enough, has guaranteed the authenticity of what I have said. I have put the matter clearly before your family, and I leave it to their sense of justice to do what we ask. Remember if, as I said last night, there is any blame to be incurred by anyone, I take it.”

“Murkard, I am not fit to look you in the face. I am a cur of the worst kind.”

“Hush! hush! you mustn’t say such things of yourself.”

“But I mean it! I mean every word I say! I am not fit to—”

“Whatever you are, Cuthbert, I don’t want to know it. I have told you before, and I tell you again, our destinies, yours and mine, are one. Come what may, I *must* help you.”

“You have been the truest friend that mortal man ever had.”

“And I shall continue to be until the day of my death. Whatever you may do, right or wrong, I shall stand by you. Never doubt that.”

“Silas, I have a good mind to make a clean breast of everything to you.”

“No, no! Don’t tell me anything. I would rather not hear. All I want to know, I know. The rest lies outside the pale, and is no concern of mine.”

“But it *does* concern you. It concerns you very vitally, more vitally than you think.”

“Then I refuse to hear it. If you attempt to make me, I shall be compelled to leave the place, to go away from the island.”

“You are very obstinate.”

“No, old friend. It is only kindness to you and your wife that makes me do it. Now I must get to my books. If this money is to arrive, we must be prepared for it. I see a golden future ahead of us.”

Ellison passed out of the door saying to himself, “And I only ruin and disgrace.”

He spent the rest of that day as one in a dream. He went about his work unconsciously, a great fear hanging over him like a suspended sword. Again and again he argued the case with himself. In a moment of sudden mental aberration—vanity, perhaps, at any rate, he could hardly say what—he had represented himself to be someone he was not. He had intended to leave the place next day; he had no intention or wish to deceive for any criminal or base purpose of his own. He had simply craved the girl’s interest and sympathy, and then the deed was done. What could he do now? As he had told himself last night, if he went to his wife and confessed everything, she would loathe and despise him for the rest of his existence. He would be a detected liar and cheat without excuse of any kind. Now that Murkard had taken this course, the same inevitable result would ensue, only increased by the fact that his crime would be known to the whole world, and he would suffer the penalty, thereby bringing ruin and disgrace unspeakable upon those who loved him best. But, on the other hand, his wife had to be saved, and he had done it with his eyes open. It was too late to draw back now, and the blow might fall at any time. Yet, come what might, he could not tell Esther while she was in this critical condition. Small wonder, then, that he hung his head and looked as if all joy had passed out of his existence

forever.

Next morning Murkard again set off for the township. In an hour he returned jubilant. Ellison saw his boat approach, from the store veranda, and hastened down to meet him, his heart beating wildly. Murkard waved to him from the boat.

“It is done!” he cried, as he stepped ashore, his usually pale face aglow with excitement. “The cable arrived last night! A thousand pounds is placed to your credit in the bank. The rest will follow in a month. Good Heaven, Cuthbert, what is the matter?”

Ellison had thrown himself upon the sand, and was sobbing like a little child.

“Poor old chap!” said Murkard, seating himself beside him. “You’re overwrought. The waiting has been too much for you. Never mind, now we are safe. The money is here, our credit is restored. Shell has gone up in the London market, and now we’ll begin to make up for lost time. Come, come, you mustn’t behave like this. Supposing any of the hands should see you?”

“It must all be repaid,” Ellison answered almost fiercely, as soon as he recovered his composure, “every penny of it! I shall never rest until I have done that. Tell me everything, from first to last. Don’t hide a word or detail from me. I must know everything!”

“You will know nothing more than I have already told you. Cuthbert, you must trust me. You have known me a long time now. Is your trust in my fidelity strong enough to convince you that I would do nothing that could bring you to any harm?”

“I am sure of that. But it is not enough to satisfy my fears for myself. I am making myself responsible for all this money. I must know exactly how you obtained it from—from my people, and on what terms. I *must* know it!”

“I got it from them on the plea that you had settled down to a respectable, honest, reputable business out here. That you had married a quiet, ladylike girl. That times were bad, and unless you could raise the amount of money asked for, you would be thrown upon the world again, and all your good resolutions scattered to the winds. The Government Resident and Blake the banker corroborated my assertions, and I made myself a surety, a poor one perhaps, but still a surety for the amount. Your father, the duke, cabled through his bankers to Blake that you might draw on him to the extent of one thousand pounds, and that the rest of the money would be dispatched during the present week. I have the papers for the one thousand pounds in my pocket now. You must sign them. In the meantime I have taken the liberty of cabling your thanks home.”

“It was to save her—only to save her. Whatever happens, remember that!”

“What do you mean? You look as glum as a man about to be hanged. Come, come, Cuthbert, put a happier face on it, if only out of compliment to me. You are saved now! You can improve your business; you can send out more boats and do what you have been hankering after for a long time now, establish a floating station for your fleet.”

“Yes, yes; we can certainly do more. But at what a cost?”

“My dear fellow, the cost will be nothing to the gains. Besides, you can always repay.”

“I was not thinking of that cost. You don’t know what an awful business this has been to me. The agony I have been through these past two days has made me an old man.”

“Eating humble–pie, you mean? I can understand your feelings. But still it’s done now, and what is better, well done. Now come to the store with me and sign those papers.”

They went up the hill together, and with a trembling hand Ellison signed what was asked of him. This done, he tottered rather than walked out of the store towards his own abode. He went into the dining room and filled himself half a tumbler of whiskey, which he drank almost neat. The spirit pulled him together, and he departed in search of his wife. By the time he found her the liquor had begun to take effect. He became almost excited. She was sewing in the shade of the back veranda. He seated himself beside her, and with his left hand smoothed her soft brown hair.

“Little woman,” he said, “I have great news for you. The happiest of happy news. We are saved; the overdraft will be paid off, and we are in smooth water again. In other words, the money has arrived.”

“From your father, Cuthbert? Oh, you don’t mean that?”

“But I do. The good Murkard was worked it admirably. A cablegram arrived this morning authorising me to draw on him for a thousand pounds. A draft for four thousand more will leave London this week.”

“Thank God for his mercy! Oh, Cuthbert, what can I say to show you how pleased I am? And you deserve it too, you poor, hard–working boy. Your face has been so long and solemn lately that I have been more than anxious about you.”

“You need not be so any longer then, my sweet. The crisis is past. Now we will begin to put the money to practical use. I have all sorts of schemes in my mind. Dearie, you must say something nice to Murkard about it. For it is his cleverness that has brought it all about.”

“You are very generous to that man, my husband.”

“And I fear, forgive my saying so, that you are not generous enough to him. That man, as you call him would cut off his own right hand if he thought that by so doing he could help me.”

“I know it, and perhaps that is why I am a little jealous of him. I am selfish enough to think I should like to be the only person in the whole world who could do anything for you.”

“You are part of myself, little wife. It is for your sake I work. It was for your sake I—”

“What? What else have you done for my sake that you suddenly look so glum about it?”

He sank his voice almost to a whisper, when he replied:

“For your sake I have done in this business what I have done. Whatever comes of it, never lose sight of that. It is the only bright spot in the whole miserable affair.”

“I shall never forget that; you need not be afraid of it.”

He stroked her hair for a moment, and then once more went down the garden path towards

the store. Murkard was not there. On inquiring of the Kanakas, he discovered that he had gone across to the settlement in his boat.

In order to have something to distract his thoughts Ellison went down to the carpenter's shed, and set to work upon some business he had long neglected. It was a relief to him to have something to do, and he derived a peculiar peace from the chirrup of the plane, and a restfulness from the trailing shavings that had been a stranger to him for longer than he cared to remember. As he worked his thoughts took in all that had happened to him since his arrival in the settlement. He remembered that first night in the Hotel of All Nations; the fight and his curious resolve upon the hill–side; his search for work the following morning—their swim across the strait, and his first introduction to the girl who was now his wife. The death of her father came next; then their marriage; the difficulties and disasters of their business, and—But here his recollections came to an abrupt halt. He did not dare think of what had followed after. Oh, how bitterly he cursed himself for that one false step, and to the cowardice to which it had given birth! If only he had had the moral courage to own himself a liar at once, what awful after misery he might have saved himself. But, no! it was not to be—not to be. The saddest of all sad words—not to be. Now even if he managed to repay every farthing, there would always be the remembrance of his sin to haunt him. He put down the tools he was using, and turned to look across the straits. The afternoon's sun was hardly a hand's breadth above the horizon. A little fleet of luggers was tacking down, under a light breeze, towards the anchorage, their white sails gleaming picturesquely in the warm sunlight. The ripple of the waves on the beach came up to him like softest music, and he was just thinking how fair it all was when he heard footsteps hurrying on the hard–beaten path outside. Next moment old Mrs. Fenwick stood before him, hardly able to speak with excitement. In a flash Ellison divined her errand. Seizing her by the arm, he shook her almost savagely.

"What is it? What do you want? Is he wanted? Quick, quick!"

She nodded emphatically, unable to find breath to speak.

"Out of my way! I will go at once!"

He picked up his hat, dashed through the door and down the path towards the jetty. A boat lay moored alongside a lugger. He sprang into it, had cast her loose, and was sculling madly in the direction of the township before Mrs. Fenwick had time to wonder what had become of him. In a quarter of an hour he was ringing the medico's bell, and in half an hour they were back together at the station. As they approached the house the doctor stopped and looked at his companion.

"My friend," said he, "if I were you I should go for a long walk or a row. Don't come back for at least two hours. You can do nothing here, and you will only be in the way. If you stay I shall have you on my hands next."

Ellison looked at him as if he would like to argue the point with him.

"Man, man!" he said viciously, "you don't know the state I'm in. If anything happens to that woman it will kill me."

"I know, I know! I've had the same feeling myself. It's very commendable—very. But—"

"Oh, d— your sentimental twaddle! No! no! Forgive my rudeness, you can see I'm not

myself at all."

"That's why I order you to go for a row. Now be off, and don't let me see your face again for hours. Your wife will be quite safe in my hands."

"God grant she may be!"

He picked his hat up from where it had fallen, and without another protest walked back to the shore. Again he embarked aboard his boat, and once more he set sail, this time down the Pass in the opposite direction, and out into the open sea.

Chapter VIII

A Vision and a Reality

If Cuthbert Ellison ever forgets any portion of his eventful career, it will certainly not be the part connected with his sail that evening. The sun lay like a disc of fire upon the horizon's edge as he left the bay; his ruddy glare lit up the sea, the islands, and the cloudless heavens, and the effect grew even more weird and wonderful the further he sank into his crimson bed. Ellison put his boat about and steered directly for the sinking orb, the water churning into foam under the little vessel's bows as he progressed. He seemed hardly conscious of his actions. He sat in the stern–sheets staring straight ahead of him, seeing little or nothing of the sea around him, looking only through his mind's–eye at his home and the momentous event that was occurring there. His own sin and its consequences seemed as nothing to him now in the white light of his new and greater anxiety. If anything disastrous should befall his wife in his absence, if she should die before he could get back to her, what would happen to him then? In that case the sooner he himself died the better. The very idea of such a thing set him trembling like a leaf. He knew now exactly how much he cared for his wife, and in his present state that knowledge was not a soothing one. He realised what the world, his world, would be to him without her.

The sun sank lower and lower until only a flake of gold remained to show where he was taking his departure. With his total disappearance the wind dropped entirely, and the boat stood pulseless upon the pearly levels of the deep. Then from the corners of the world great shadows stole out to meet him. The evening star trembled in its place, and one by one her sisters came to watch with her. Sometimes a big fish rose near the boat, and disappeared again with a sullen splash, awed perhaps by the silence and solemnity of the world upon the surface. Far away to starboard he could discern the dim outline of the land, but all around him was only water—water—water. He furled the sail, and, to defend himself against the terror of his own thoughts, took to the oars. It was a heavy boat to pull, but he found comfort in thus tiring himself.

For nearly an hour he rowed on and on, the night closing in around him as he went. At last, thoroughly wearied, he drew in his oars, and again took his place in the stern. By this time it was quite dark. The stars shone now, not by ones or twos, but in their countless thousands. They were not, however, to shine for long, for in the east a curious trembling faintness foretold the rising of the moon. Little by little this indistinctness spread across the sky, and one by one the stars fell under its subtle influence and went back to their coffers in the treasure house of night. Then, with a beauty indescribable, a rim of gold looked up above the edge of the world, and grew every moment larger. It was the moon—the great round glorious tropic moon, and with her coming a broad track of silver was thrown by a giant hand across the ocean. On this the boat seemed but a tiny speck, a frail atom in that immensity of water. Not a sign of land was now to be seen anywhere, and to Ellison it seemed as if, in his anxiety, he had said good–bye to it forever. He stood up and looked around him. Still to right and left, before him and behind, was only water slowly

heaving in the moonlight.

It had a curious effect upon his overstrung nerves, this expanse of moonlit water. A peculiar giddiness seized him. He sat down again and buried his face in his hands. Then suddenly something inside his head seemed to give way, and he looked up again. Whether he was mad for the time being, and really thought he saw the things he describes so vividly now, or whether he was dreaming, is a matter only for conjecture. At any rate, it seemed to him that from the place where he was, far removed from all the influences of the world, he saw a vision, the vision of the world's dead rising up to meet him. Sitting in the stern of his tiny boat, grasping the thwarts with either hand and looking out across the water, he watched and trembled. He saw the greatness of the deep opened as by a mighty hand. And from the void thus made, he witnessed a procession of the world's dead troop forth upon the silent waters like men walking on a silver road. There was no sound with them, not a footfall, neither a voice nor a rustle of garments. They came out of the east a mighty army, such as no man could number. They passed him where he sat and marched on again, still without a sound, towards the west. Every age and every nationality—semi–humans from the prehistoric ages, Israelites, Egyptians, Ethiopians, Medes, Persians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Goths, Greeks, Romans, Huns, and Norsemen; every race and every colour from the world's first death to the tiniest child giving up its little life at the moment that he looked was represented there. There were old men bowed down with the weight of years, young men in all the pride of manly strength, aged women, gentle matrons and young girls, children, and even tiny babes. Men slain in battle with their wounds still gaping on their shattered bodies; men drowned at sea, with the weeds of ocean twined about them; kings and nobles in their robes of state, priests in their sacred vestments, and peasants in their homespun; holy men in flowing garments, martyrs and those who fought with beasts at Ephesus; English wives and dark skinned African mothers —all were there. They approached him, looked at him, and then passed upon their way. Some had hope written in their faces, some despair, some ineffable peace, some the imprint of everlasting remorse. Not one but bore some mark to witness to the life he or she had pursued on earth. On and on they passed; already the procession seemed to stretch from pole to pole, and every moment was adding to their number. But there was no sound at all with them.

Suddenly an intense fear and dread came over Ellison, such as he had never experienced in his life before. Had this vision been sent to prepare him for some great sorrow? Was it possible that Esther could be among them? Surely if she were she would come to him. Hardly conscious of what he was doing, he clambered forrard in the boat, and resting his hands upon the gunwale, stared at the passing multitude. There were mothers in plenty with infants in their arms—but Esther was not among them. He searched and searched, and still the relentless march went on—still they stretched out across the seas. All the dead of the earth, century and century and bygone ages; all the dead of the sea and under the sea paraded before him, and still the march went on. From every quarter of the globe the army was recruited, and everyone paused to look at this distracted man. In sheer weariness of movement he called upon them to stop—to stop if only for a minute. His voice rang out across the deep, again and again. But there was no change; there could be no halting in that march of death. As fast as the last ranks appeared thousands more came from all quarters to carry it on again. At first he had been all dumb, senseless wonderment. Then

suddenly his ears were opened, and a second awful terror seized and held him spell–bound. He tried to shut his eyes to them, but they would not be shut out; he tried to stop his ears, but now the tramp of that mighty army could not be prevented. On and on and on it went, clashing and clanging, rolling and thundering, coming out of the east and disappearing into the west. And over it all the moon shone down pitiless and cold as steel. He tried to cry for mercy, but this time his voice refused to answer to his call. He stretched out his hands in feeble, despairing supplication, but still the march went on. At last he could hold out no longer; he stood up, raised his arms to Heaven, and pleaded piteously. As if in answer his senses deserted him, and he fell back into the bottom of his boat in a dead faint.

When he recovered himself the sky was overcast with clouds. He looked about him half expecting to see the procession still parading past his boat, but it was gone. He was alone once more upon the waters, and, to add to his feeling of desolation, a soft rain was wetting him to the skin. How long he had lain there unconscious he could not tell. He looked at his watch, but it had stopped at half–past eight—the moment of his fall. A smart breeze was blowing, and, in a frenzy of recollection, he turned the boat's head for home, resolved to know the worst. In a moment he was tearing through the water like a thing possessed. This sense of rapid movement was just what his spirits needed; he could not go fast enough. A brisk sea was running, but over it his craft dashed like a flying stag. He could not be more than a dozen miles from the station at the very most—an hour's smart sailing. He shook out the reef he had taken in the canvas and let the boat do her best.

With a heart like this tiny cockle–shell borne upon the tossing, tumbling sea, one moment uplifted by hope, and the next falling deep down into the trough of despair, he sailed on and on. Every second was bringing him nearer and nearer to his home. Already through the haze he could make out the bold outline of the island. Ten minutes later he was abreast of it, skimming safely along out of reach of that white line of dashing breakers. Rounding the point, he caught a glimpse of the lights of the station. With a rush his fear gripped hold of him again, not to leave him till he knew the best or worst. Like a drunken man he drove his boat ashore, leaped out on the sands, and commenced to haul her up. It was only when he had done this that he became aware of something lying on the sand just above high–water mark. It was the body of a man stretched out at full length. Wondering whether he could be still under the influence of the nightmare that had held him so at sea, he approached it. To his intense surprise it was Murkard—*dead drunk*. Kneeling by his side, he shook him vigorously, but without result. He was insensible, and from all appearances likely to remain so for some hours to come. But even this did not strike Ellison as it would have done at any other time; it appeared to him to be part and parcel of the nightmare under the influence of which he had so long been labouring. Rising to his feet he bent over the man, took him in his arms, and bore him up the hill to the hut.

No sound came from his own dwelling; indeed, had it not been for the light burning in the little sitting room window it might have been uninhabited. Having laid his burden on the bed, he retraced his steps and went across to know his fate. As he approached the house he became conscious of a figure sitting in the veranda. When it rose, and came softly out to meet him, he recognised his friend the doctor. Ellison's tongue refused its office, his throat was like a lime–kiln. The other saw his state, and in a whisper said:

“I have waited here to congratulate you. You ought to be a happy man. Your wife *and son* are doing excellently well.”

Ellison reeled as if he had received a blow.

“Mother and son!” he managed to gasp. “Oh, my God, you’re not deceiving me?”

As if in answer a little thin wail stole out from the house into the darkness, a little cry that went straight and plump to the very centre of the father’s heart. It was true, then? There could be no deception about that!

“Oh, thank God! thank God!”

Again that feeble little voice came out to them, and again Ellison’s nature was stirred to its lowest depths. All the world seemed centred in that tiny wail.

“And how is she? There is no danger? For mercy’s sake tell me candidly. You don’t know what I’ve suffered these last few hours.”

“Your wife is doing wonderfully well. You need have no fear now. The old woman who is with her is an excellent nurse, and I shall come across first thing in the morning. I only waited to have the pleasure of telling you this myself.”

“How can I thank you? And you have been sitting here so long in the dark without anyone to look after you. You must think me inhospitable to the last degree. Come inside now.”

They went into the room, and Ellison set refreshment before the doctor. He would, however, not touch a drop himself.

“I dare not,” he said, in reply to the other’s look of astonishment. “In the state I’m in I should be dead drunk if I drank a thimbleful. I can tell you I wouldn’t live this night again for something.”

“I wouldn’t be answerable for your brain if you did,” the doctor replied, glancing at the haggard face before him. “What on earth have you been doing with yourself! You look as if you’d been communing with the Legions of the Dead.”

“So I have—so I have. You’ve just hit it. That’s what I *have* been doing. I’ve seen the dead of all the world troop past me to–night.”

“Give me your wrist.”

He spoke in a tone of command, and almost unconsciously Ellison extended one arm. The doctor placed his finger on the pulse.

“Nothing much the matter there. You only want a good night’s sleep now the anxiety’s over, and I prophesy you’ll be as fit as a fiddle to–morrow. I shouldn’t be at all surprised if you tell me you’re the proudest father in the hemisphere. Bless you, I know your sort!”

Ellison laughed softly, but for all that it was a mirthless laugh. He had not recovered yet from the shock of all he had undergone that evening.

“When may I see her?”

“She is asleep now. When she wakes, perhaps. The nurse, however, will settle that point. You must abide strictly by what she says for a week or two. Above all you must not

frighten your wife with that face. Make that more cheerful before you go in, or I'll keep you away from her for a month."

"I'd break your neck if you did. And I'm pretty muscular even now."

"I'll take that assertion on trust. Now I must be going."

"I'll see you down to your boat."

They walked to the shore together. One of the Kanaka hands was in waiting to put the doctor across. When the little craft had disappeared from view, Ellison went back to the house. He was bathing in a sea of happiness. His fondest dream was realised. He went into the sitting room and threw himself upon the sofa. He had hardly been there a minute before the door opened, and Mrs. Fenwick appeared bearing in her arms a bundle. He sprang to his feet once more, trembling in every limb.

"I'm sure I wish you joy, sir," she began, as she came towards him. "He's the noblest boy I've seen these many years; I ought to know, for I've nursed a–many."

She parted the blankets that enshrined the treasure, and Ellison looked down on the little face.

"Take him in your own arms, sir. It's a proud father you ought to be."

For the first time in his life Ellison held his son in his arms. How sweet and desirable the world seemed to him then. In spite of everything that had gone before he would not have changed places with any man who breathed. But he was not to be permitted the honour of holding the infant long.

"When may I see my wife?" he asked, as he laid the babe back in his nurse's arms.

"I'll call you when she wakes, sir."

For nearly an hour he was left alone. The little clock on the mantelpiece ticked off the score. Not a sound came from the outer world save the monotonous thunder of the surf upon the reef. He contrasted this night with that when, after the fight at the Hotel of All Nations, he had waited on the side of the hill, wondering what the morrow would bring forth, and whether it was too late for him to pull up and save himself. But he had pulled up, and now he—

Again a knock came to the door, and once more Mrs. Fenwick entered the room.

"She is awake now, sir. If you would like to see her for a moment, you can do so. But you must be careful not to excite her."

Ellison gave his promise, and followed the woman into his wife's room. Esther looked very white and thin; but it was evident she was glad to see him. Her pretty hair straggled across the pillow, and her great eyes looked into his with a love that nothing could ever quench. One hand lay on the coverlet; he took it softly in his, and raised it to his lips. A little smile of intense happiness hovered round her mouth. Suddenly he seemed to remember. Turning to the nurse, he whispered:

"Give me the child."

Without a word she did as she was ordered, and again Cuthbert Ellison held his new–born

son in his arms. Then stooping, with all the tenderness his nature was capable of, he laid the sleeping babe within the hollow of the mother’s arm. And bending over her, he kissed her on the lips.

“God bless and keep you both,” he said, and softly hurried from the room, his heart overflowing with joy and thankfulness.

CHAPTER IX

Happiness—unhappiness—and a Man of the World

The birth of his son opened up to Ellison a new world. For the first month of that baby life everything connected with his own past was forgotten in one intense joy of possession. He began to understand that hitherto he had only vegetated; now he lived the life of a man who was not only a husband but a parent. The thread of his existence was a continuous one, woven and drawn in by the pink tenderness of a baby fingers. And as he noticed the growth of intelligence in those little eyes—the first faint dawning of the human soul within—his pleasure and delight increased a thousand–fold. He could hardly believe that the child was his own, his very own, bound to him by all the ties of flesh and blood—a veritable human, with a soul to be lost or to be saved by his influence. On the strength of his happiness he began to build gigantic castles in the air, and, what was more, to handsomely furnish them.

As for Esther, the motherhood that had come to her added a charm to her sweetness that her husband, much as he loved her, had neither known nor guessed that she possessed. The child was a perpetual mystery to her, and a never–ending charm. And yet with it all her husband was always the chiefest in her eyes. There was a difference in the love she felt for them—a difference that she could hardly account for or understand. One was *of* the other, yet not *the* other. One was a love she had in a measure created for herself; the other was nothing more nor less than herself. Indeed, their home life was now almost as perfect as it was possible for it to be. With a substantial banking account—how obtained Ellison never allowed himself to think; the new pearling season approaching with glowing prospects; a tender, loving wife to care for and protect; a son and heir to bind them closer to each other, he might indeed esteem himself a lucky man. Murkard found occasion, one morning, to tell him so in the store.

“Everything seems to prosper with you now, Ellison. If I had such a wife and son to work for, there’d be nothing I couldn’t do.”

“There shall be nothing *I* can’t do. If things *have* changed, so much the better. I will make hay while the sun shines, and you must help me.”

“There is nothing I would do more willingly. You know you may always count on my hearty cooperation.”

Ellison shook him warmly by the hand.

“I know,” he said. “You have been a good friend to me, Murkard.”

“And you will forget it all in a moment.”

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing. I’m only looking ahead. A habit of mine. Forget it.” He turned to the desk at which he had been writing, and took up some papers. “Now let us talk business. The season is beginning, as you know. Are you ready for it?”

“Quite. The boats are in first–class trim; the two new divers will be here to–morrow; we shall get to sea on Thursday morning, all being well.”

“And you still intend going with them?”

“On this particular trip—yes! I want to see how things work out yonder, and what chances there are for a floating station.”

A floating station, in pearling parlance, is a larger vessel than the ordinary diving lugger, capable of anchoring in the vicinity of the fleet, of carrying stores sufficient to supply the boats during their operations, and of taking over their cargoes of shell when obtained. By this means the time which would otherwise be occupied in sailing the distance backward and forward to the land station, not unfrequently a distance of some hundreds of miles, would be saved, and the luggers enabled to go on working uninterruptedly. A floating station is also capable of meeting ships in the open sea, and of transhipping to them her cargo of shell, packed and addressed direct to the London markets, by this means again saving agents’ fees, storage, wharfage, etc., etc., in Thursday Island. The advantages to be gained by employing such a vessel must be obvious.

“I wonder you like to tear yourself away just at present,” said Murkard, after a little pause.

“I don’t like it. I am dreading it like the coward I am; but it’s got to be done, Murkard. Try as I will I can’t blink that fact. As I told you a month ago, I intend to put my shoulder to the wheel now with a vengeance. I think I’ve proved since we came here that I’m made of the right sort of stuff. Well, I’m going to do twice as much now in support of that assertion. I have made one firm resolve?”

“And that is?”

“That save for the purposes of my business, in the strictest sense of the word, I will not touch a penny of that five thousand pounds. And I will deny myself no toil and no thrift that can help me to repay every farthing of what I *do* take, and with interest. Then it shall go back to England.”

“But, man, you must be mad! It’s your own money. As much yours as the child in yonder.”

“Not the two in the same breath, as you love your life, Murkard. No! When I took the money I took it as a loan, and only as a loan. By God’s help I will repay every farthing of it, and with interest. So only can I hope to satisfy my conscience.”

Murkard looked at him. There was determination in every line of Ellison’s face. He lifted his hand from the desk, and put it on the other’s shoulder.

“Ellison, you’re a brave man, and I respect you for it.”

“That’s because you don’t know everything.”

“I know quite enough to convince me of the justice of what I have just said. If there’s any more at the back of it—I’ll respect you the more for that too.”

“Well, at any rate, that’s enough on the subject for the present. Of course, while I’m away you will be in charge here. You understand that, don’t you? I leave everything in your hands, including the safety of my wife and child. I need not say I trust you.”

“You need have no fears on that score. I will guard them as if they were my own. How

long do you expect to be away?”

“At least a month. It is no use going so far for less. If we have much luck I may stay longer; but it is very doubtful.”

“Very doubtful, I should think.”

Ellison picked up his hat and left the store. On returning to the house he found Esther seated on the veranda, the baby sleeping in a cradle by her side. He took the hammock and stretched himself out. Without speaking she signed to him, by taking his hand, to look; then stooping she drew the mosquito netting back from the cradle head, and showed him the child lying fast asleep. Hand in hand they looked down upon the little pink face; and the one little arm outside the quilt, with its tiny fist tight clenched, seemed to draw the father’s and mother’s hearts if possible closer even than before. Then she dropped the net again, and turned towards her husband. She saw that his face was preternaturally solemn.

“You have something to tell me,” she said.

“Something rather unpleasant, I’m afraid,” he murmured in reply. “And yet, after all, looked straight in the face, it is not very much. I meant to have told you before, but I’ve been putting it off from day to day. The fact is, Esther, I’m going away with the luggers the day after to–morrow for a month.”

“You—going—away—and—for—a month! Oh, Cuthbert!”

It was the first real parting since their marriage, and the news came as an unpleasant shock to her. But Esther knew she must be brave, and not try to hinder him from what was evidently his duty. Calling Mrs. Fenwick out to the veranda, she gave the child to her; then, taking her husband’s arm, she went with him down the path towards the shore.

“It is weak of me to think I can expect to keep you with me always,” she said, when they had gone a little way. “But baby and I will miss you dreadfully.”

“It must be, darling. You see, I must work now even harder than before.”

“Why must you? We are doing well enough as it is, surely?”

“Yes, things have improved, certainly; but while that loan hangs over me I shall know no peace. It haunts me night and day. You would not have me idle my time away here on the strength of that money, would you?”

“Of course not. But I fear whatever you did, I should think right.”

“Forgive my doubting that assertion. I’m certain, darling, if you saw me idle, even your love would not be above telling me so.”

“But I should only tell you because I loved you.”

“That is precisely why I am going away. I want to work hard, that I may prevent your ever being called upon to tell me.”

“We are getting a little out of our depths, are we not?”

They had reached a little clearing in the jungle. Here she stopped, and taking his great brown hand in hers, stroked it with her own white fingers. Then, looking up into his face with a faint little smile, through which the tears threatened at any moment to burst, she

said:

“Go, and may God prosper your labours!”

That was the last of her opposition.

Two days later Ellison gave the signal for departure, and the three luggers weighed anchor and stood out of the bay. His own boat was the last to leave, and until the headland shut her from his sight, Ellison waved a farewell to the white figure standing in the veranda. Then the sea took him into her arms, and for a month the station knew him no more.

* * * * *

It was sundown on the twenty–third day at sea. Work was almost over. The sun was little more than a hand’s breadth above the horizon, and another hour would find him gone. Hardly a ripple disturbed the pearly serenity of the ocean; the only spot of land to be seen was a tiny island just peeping up on the sky–line away to starboard. Ellison sat upon the combing of the main hatch, holding the diver’s life–line in his hand, watching the movements of the other boats, and listening to the throbbing of the air–pump on the deck beside him. It was nearly time for the diver to ascend.

Suddenly the line he held twitched violently in his hand. It was a signal to haul up the canvas bag containing the oysters gathered. He hauled in, and having emptied the contents on the deck, lowered the bag to be re–filled. Then with his knife he set to work to open the oysters. The first and second were valuable shells, but destitute of pearls; the third contained an almost insignificant gem; the fourth he opened carefully, with a sort of premonition that it would be found to contain something valuable. If the truth were known, he was thinking more of Esther than the work upon which he was engaged. When he did look inside, he almost dropped the shell in amazement. Tangled among the beard, and half hidden from his sight, was an enormous black pearl, perfect, so far as he could make out, in symmetry, and larger than a hazel–nut. Trembling with eagerness, yet without allowing a sign to escape him to show his crew that he had made a find out of the ordinary, he disentangled the gem from its bearded setting, and with exquisite care removed it altogether from the shell. He could hardly believe his good fortune. Perfect in shape, of enormous size, and, as far as he could tell, without a flaw, it was a jewel fit for a royal crown. He was afraid to think of its value, but from what he knew of pearls, five thousand pounds would hardly buy it.

He had barely time to conceal it in his pocket and order one of the Kanakas to stow the shells in their proper places, when the diver signalled that he was coming up. As soon as he had seen him disrobed he descended to his cabin, and after another careful examination of the gem, put it away in a place of safety. If his calculation of its value proved anything like correct, he would now be able to pay off his debt, relieve his mind of its weight of anxiety, and start again with a fresh sheet. But even without this marvellous bit of good fortune their trip had been phenomenally successful; now, with this additional piece of good luck, he felt that he was justified in weighing anchor the following morning and setting sail for home.

And what a home–coming it was, to be sure! What questions had to be asked and answered; how every change in the son and heir had to be described and noted. And indeed, as Ellison was only too glad to admit to himself, he was indeed a bonny boy. His

heart throbbed with joy and pride as he held him in his arms.

And who shall paint Esther's delight in having her husband with her again? She could hardly bear him out of her sight.

When luncheon was over, and they had adjourned to the veranda, she came to business.

"You have not yet told me what success you met with, Cuthbert? I have prayed that you might be fortunate—night and morning."

"Then your prayers have been answered, darling, as any prayers of yours would be."

He led her back into the sitting room, and having made certain that no one was near to spy upon them, took from his pocket the little box which contained the pearl. In her soft white hand the gem looked as black as night.

"Oh, Cuthbert!" she cried, in supreme astonishment; "a black pearl! and such a large one. Oh, this is the greatest luck that could possibly befall us. Have you any idea what it is worth!"

"I hardly know, but at least I should think enough to liquidate that debt, and lay the foundation of our future fortunes."

"As much as that? Oh, husband mine, it is indeed an answer to my prayers. And now you will be quite free?"

"Yes, free—quite free."

His voice took a fuller tone as he said it. He threw his head back and laughed like his old happy self. Then, seating himself beside her, he began to question her on other subjects.

"It's a funny thing that Murkard should have chanced to be away just when I arrived. What time did he cross to the township?"

"About eleven o'clock, I think. Cuthbert, I want to talk to you about him."

"Well," he said, looking at her laughingly, "what has the old fellow been up to while I've been away? Making love to you? I'll certainly break his head for him if he has."

"Don't be silly! I want to talk to you seriously; I am alarmed about him. He frightens me terribly at times."

"Come, come, you mustn't be silly. There's nothing but what's honest about Murkard, I'll stake my life on that. He wouldn't willing hurt a fly. But in what way does he frighten you?"

"He looks so queer, and once or twice when I've sent for him he hasn't been able to come. I have serious suspicions that he has been drinking heavily lately."

"Is that so? Well, I'll soon stop that. And yet we must not be too hard on him, poor fellow, he has much to put up with. Hark! that sounds like his voice."

He rose and looked out across the veranda. Murkard was standing at his hut door, calling to a Kanaka on the beach. Ellison put on his hat and went across to him. Hearing steps behind him, Murkard turned round, and the other saw his face. It was of a whitey–gray colour, almost that of zinc; the pouches under his eyes were dark and swollen, while the

eyes themselves had a shifty trick of roaming about as he talked. His hair was now almost entirely gray over the temples. His hands shook violently. He seemed to have aged years in that one month.

“Why, Murkard, how’s it with you?” Ellison began briskly, resolved not to show that he noticed the queerness of his greeting. “But you’re not looking well, man.”

“I am quite well—quite well. I’ve had a touch of fever lately, but I’m better now. I’m glad to see you back. I hope you think I’ve taken proper care of your wife and child in your absence.”

“I’m sure you have, old man. And now take my arm and come in here for a chat. I’ve great news for you.”

They went into the store together, and Ellison seated himself on a bale of rope. Murkard picked idly at the edge of the counter with nervous, trembling hands. A figure passed the door, but neither of them saw it.

“Murkard, this has been a wonderful month for me.”

“How—how? Why don’t you speak out? Why do you keep me in suspense?”

“Nerves,” said Ellison to himself. “I must stop this as soon as possible.” Then aloud he continued, taking out the gem and placing it on the counter: “Three hundred pounds’ worth of shell in the luggers, and that beauty.”

Murkard picked up and turned the great black pearl over and over without answering. Finally he said:

“I suppose you will be a rich man now?”

“I shall be able, at least, to square that debt and start afresh, if that’s what you mean. It’s the greatest luck that ever came to a man. Congratulate me, old chap.”

“I do congratulate you, from the bottom of my heart. You’ll be able to square that debt, you say? Well, well, perhaps so—perhaps so.”

“I feel as if a new life had been given me.”

“Nonsense, nonsense, nonsense! We want no new lives. What should we do with new lives, when we don’t know how to make use of those we’ve got? It’s hell–fire for some of us, I tell you—hell–fire.”

“Steady, old man, steady!”

“Listen to me, Cuthbert Ellison.” He leaned over the counter, and dropped his voice to a whisper. “What’s the worth of money when your immortal soul’s in danger? Look at me and answer me that; look at me, I say. Stung with empoisonment and robed in fire, as somebody says:

> “‘What was their tale of someone on a summit?
> Looking, I think, upon the endless sea;
> One with a fate, and sworn to overcome it,
> One who was fettered and who should be free.’”

He sawed the air with his hands, while Ellison gazed at him in complete astonishment.

“My dear fellow, what on earth’s the matter with you?”

Murkard laughed nervously, and tried to pull himself together.

“Nothing—nothing; why should there be? I’m not very well to–day, that’s all. Glad to see you home again—can’t you understand?”

“I understand that. But I know also that you must go steady, old man. You’re trembling like a day–old kitten. This won’t do at all, you know.”

“I shall be better to–morrow. It’s only transi—trans—what the devil word do I want?—transitory.”

“And now about this beauty,” Ellison tapped the pocket containing the pearl. “We must put it away somewhere where it will be safe. In the meantime, ‘mum’s’ the word; do you understand?”

Murkard nodded, and moved towards the safe standing in a corner of the office. Again the figure passed the door unnoticed.

“You’d better put it in here,” suggested Murkard, placing the key in the lock, and swinging the heavy door open. Suddenly he jumped back as if he had been shot, and stood trembling against the counter.

“What’s wrong with you now, man?” Ellison cried almost angrily.

“Can’t you see? can’t you see? For Heaven’s sake, come back!” He seized Ellison by the shoulder, and pulled him back towards the other side of the hut. “Can’t you see that the floor’s giving way, and if we’re not careful we shall both fall into the pit? The sea washes under it, and it’s over two thousand feet deep!”

His face was the colour of note–paper, and great beads of perspiration stood upon his forehead.

“Nonsense!” said Ellison. “The floor’s as strong as I am, and there’s no pit to fall into, even if it did give way. Murkard, my friend, I don’t like the look of this at all. I shall have to put you to bed.”

“Stuff! I’m as well as you are. I see my mistake now; it was the shadow that frightened me. But for the moment I really did think the floor was giving way. My nerves are not quite the thing. It’s overwork. I must have a tonic.”

Ellison put the pearl in the lower drawer of the safe, and then securely locked the door again. Both he and Murkard held keys, and for the moment he was in some doubt as to whether he should give the duplicate back to the other in his present state. Yet he hardly liked to refuse, for fear of offending him.

“Are you afraid to trust me with my key again, *Mr.* Ellison?” snarled Murkard.

“Afraid to trust *you*—what are you thinking about? Of course not; there’s your key? Now you just come along with me, and I’ll put you to bed.”

“Bosh! I’m not going to bed; I’ve got my work to do, and I’ll thank you to mind your own business. When I want your sympathy I’ll ask you for it. In the meantime, be so good as to

spare me the indignity of offering it."

"It is certainly time I looked after him," said Ellison to himself. "This is the liquor again, with a vengeance!"

But in spite of his first refusal, Murkard allowed himself to be led to his hut. Once there, he threw himself on his bed, and announced his intention of going to sleep.

"The best thing you can possibly do. I'll come back in a little while and have a look at you."

He left him picking at the pattern on his counterpane, and went back to the house. When he got there, to his surprise he discovered his wife sitting in the veranda talking to a stranger—a tall man about thirty years of age, neatly dressed, and boasting a handsome, aristocratic face.

As Ellison approached he heard his wife say:

"This is my husband."

The stranger rose, and came across the veranda to meet him. He lifted his hat politely, and smiled in a most bewitching manner.

Ellison thought he had seldom seen a pleasanter face.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Ellison. I have the pleasure of bearing a letter of introduction to you from the Government Resident over yonder."

He took a letter from the breast–pocket of his coat, and gave it to Ellison. On the envelope was written, "Introducing the Hon. George Merton."

"Won't you sit down, Mr. Merton? I am very pleased to have the opportunity of making your acquaintance. Have you been long in the settlement?"

"I arrived in the China boat last week. I am globe–trotting, I may as well tell you—though it will probably prejudice you against me. I have been three months in Japan, and am now on my way to Melbourne."

"Don't you find your stay in Thursday Island rather uninteresting?"

"On the contrary, I am so far interested that I am thinking of spending another month here. I want to see all I can of the pearling industry in that time."

"Then perhaps I can help you."

"The Resident was kind enough to say he felt sure you would."

"If you will give us the pleasure of your company, my wife and I will try to make your stay as pleasant as possible."

"I am vastly obliged to you. You are really a most hospitable people. I hope, if ever you visit England, you'll let me return the compliment."

"Thank you. We're rough and ready, but we're always glad to see folk from the outside world. Our intellectual circle, you see, is rather limited."

Esther rose to go into the house. She turned to their guest:

“You will hear a great deal about shell, copra, bêche–de–mer, etc., before you leave us. But I hope it won’t bore you. Now I will go and prepare your room for you. Cuthbert, will you send one of the boys across to the settlement for Mr. Merton’s bag?”

“With pleasure.”

“It’s really very good of you to take me in like this,” said Mr. Merton, when they were alone.

Ellison replied in suitable terms. Hospitality was one of his strong points, and the stranger was evidently a cultivated man. He looked forward to a week or so of very pleasant intercourse. It was years since he had enjoyed an intellectual conversation.

“You have a pretty place here, Mr. Ellison,” said the other, after a brief stroll. “The jungle on the hill, and the cluster of houses among the palms at the foot, present a charming effect.”

“I hope you will be able to say you like it when you have seen more of it. It is pretty, but one is apt to find it a little quiet.”

“How many men do you employ?”

“About a dozen; mostly Kanakas.”

“But surely I saw you walking with a white man just now. Rather afflicted, I think.”

“Ah, yes; my storekeeper, Mr. Murkard. A very old friend. I’m sorry to say he’s not well enough to assist in welcoming you. By the same token, I think if you’ll excuse me for a few minutes, I’ll go across and see how he is. I’m rather anxious about him.”

“Do, by all means. I’ll walk back to the house.” Ellison went down the path to the hut. He listened for a moment at the door, but only the sound of heavy breathing came from within. He went in, to find Murkard lying prone upon the floor insensible. The hut reeked of brandy, and Ellison was not surprised when he found an empty bottle underneath the bed.

“This is getting to be too much of a good thing, my friend,” he said, addressing the recumbent figure. “I shall have to keep a sharper eye on you for the future, I can see.”

He lifted him up, and placed him on the bed. Then he began his search for concealed spirit. At the end of five minutes he was almost convinced that the bottle he had discovered was the only one. And yet it seemed hardly likely that it could be so. Suddenly his eye lighted on a hole in the palm leaf thatch. Standing on a box he could thrust his hand into it. He did so, and felt the smooth cold side of a bottle. He drew it out—an unopened bottle of Hennessey’s Cognac. Again he inserted his hand, and again he drew out a bottle—another—and still another. There was enough concealed there to kill a man in Murkard’s present state. He wrapped them up in a towel, so that none of the hands should suspect, and conveyed them across to his own room. Once there, he sat down to think.

“He’ll not move for an hour or two, then he’ll wake and look for these. When he can’t find ‘em he’ll probably go off his head right away, and we shall have to watch him in grim earnest. Poor old Murkard! Poor old chap!”

Fortunately for his spirits that evening, Merton proved a most sympathetic and agreeable companion. He ingratiated himself with Ellison by praising his wife, and he won Esther to his side by the interest and admiration he displayed for the baby. He was a fluent and clever conversationalist, and by the time dinner was over both husband and wife had agreed that he was a very pleasant addition to their party. But the triumph of the stranger was yet to come. They sat smoking in the veranda, watching the wonderful southern stars and listening to the murmur of the wavelets on the beach. Only their pipes showed their whereabouts, and when Esther joined them she could hardly distinguish between her husband and their guest.

“Won’t you play us something, Mrs. Ellison?” Merton said, after a few moments. “I feel sure you are a musician. Indeed, I saw a pile of music by the piano.”

“Do you play or sing, Mr. Merton?” she said, as she turned to comply with his request.

“A little,” he replied. “If you will perform first, I will do my best to follow you.”

“A bargain,” said Ellison. And his wife sat down to the piano.

When she had finished both men thanked her, and Merton rose from his chair and went in to fulfil his promise.

Esther seated herself by her husband’s side and her hand found his. Merton struck a few chords and then began to sing. The attention of the couple in the veranda was riveted immediately. Few men could sing as Merton sang; his voice was a tenor of the richest quality, his execution faultless. He sang as one inspired, and the song he chose suited him exactly; it was “Si j’etais Roi!” When he had finished not a sound came from the veranda; he smiled to himself. That silence was greater praise than any thanks. He knew his power, and he had discovered by intuition that the man and woman were in sympathy with him. He began to play again; this time the song was an English one. The music was his own, the words some of the most beautiful Tennyson ever wrote:

> “Sweet is true Love tho’ given in vain, in vain;
> And sweet is Death who puts an end to pain:
> I know not which is sweeter, no, not I.
>
> “Love, art thou sweet? Then bitter Death must be:
> Love, thou art bitter; sweet is Death to me.
> Oh, Love, if Death be sweeter, let me die.
>
> “Sweet Love, that seems not made to fade away,
> Sweet Death, that seems to make us loveless clay,
> I know not which is sweeter, no, not I.
>
> “I fain would follow Love, if that could be;
> I needs must follow Death, who calls for me;
> Call and I follow, I follow! Let me die.”

His voice sank almost to a whisper as he uttered the last words. They seemed to hang and

tremble upon the silent air for some seconds after he had finished; the effect was complete upon his audience. He left the piano and came out again to the veranda.

“Thank you. You are a wonderful singer,” said Esther, tears still wet upon her eyelashes. “I have never heard anything like your voice before, and yet we have had many well–known singers among the pearlers in the settlement.”

Ellison was silent. The influence of the music and the wail of the song were still upon him, and he could not shake them off. They seemed in some mysterious fashion to remind him of his dead but not forgotten past.

Merton seated himself, and turned the conversation into another channel. He had created the effect he desired, and that was sufficient for the present. He did not want to appear conceited.

“Hark!” said Esther suddenly, holding up her hand. “I thought I heard someone calling.”

They all listened, but no sound rewarded their attention.

“The sea,” said her husband, “or a night–bird in the scrub.”

“Where is Mr. Murkard to–night?” asked Esther. “I have not seen him since you returned.”

Merton suddenly leaned forward, and then as suddenly sat back. Ellison noticed his action, but attached no importance to it.

“He’s not at all well, dear. As I’m rather anxious about him, I induced him to go to bed.”

Merton sat suddenly upright.

“You were quite right, Mrs. Ellison. *I* heard someone call then. Who can it be?”

Again they listened, this time with more success. It was the voice of a man in deadly terror, and it came from the hut opposite. Ellison sprang to his feet.

“Murkard!” he cried. “I must go to him.”

He dashed across the veranda and down the path to the hut. On the threshold, and before opening the door, he paused to light a match. When he entered, the room was in total darkness. He knew a candle stood on the table near the door, and having found it, he lit it; then holding it aloft, he looked about him. The bed was disordered, half the clothes were lying on the floor. A moment later he sighted the man of whom he was in search. He was crouched in the furthest corner, staring wildly before him. His long legs were drawn up close to his chin—his broad shoulders seemed to overlap his body. But his eyes were his chief horror; they seemed to be starting from their sockets. Streams of perspiration—the perspiration of living fear—rolled down his cheeks, and every now and then he uttered a cry of abject terror.

“Hold me back—hold me back!” he yelled. “I’m falling—falling—falling! Is there no help —my God—no help! Help! Help! Help!”

Ellison put down the candle and ran towards him.

“Murkard, what on earth does this mean? Pull yourself together! You’re all right!”

But the man took no notice. He only drew himself further into his corner and clutched at

the woodwork of the wall.

“Don’t come near me,” he cried; “for pity’s sake, don’t come near me! You’re shaking me, you’re loosening my hold, and I shall fall!” His voice went up to a shriek again. “I shall fall! I’m falling, falling, falling! Help! Help! Help!”

Again and again he shrieked. Then he suddenly sprang to his feet, tottered to and fro, and next moment fell forward unconscious. At the same moment Ellison heard a footstep behind him. Looking round he saw Merton standing in the doorway.

“What is the matter with him?” he asked. “Can I be of any assistance?”

“D. T., I’m afraid. And a pretty bad case, I think. What can we do?”

“Get him on to his bed, I should say, and send for the doctor.”

“Well, let’s try.”

Between them they picked him up and carried him to his bed. Having laid him there, Ellison said:

“Would you mind staying with him for a minute while I send a hand across to the settlement for the medico?”

“Go ahead, I’ll watch him.”

Ellison went out and left them alone together. As soon as the door had closed upon him Merton leaned over the bed and looked fixedly at the man stretched upon it.

“Yes,” he said, when he had finished his scrutiny, “I thought I couldn’t be mistaken. It’s the very man himself. This is getting interesting. My friend,—what do you call yourself? Oh, Murkard—when you recover your wits again you’ll have a little surprise in store for you. In the meantime I’ve got to play my cards carefully, or that fool may suspect.”

Five minutes later Ellison returned. Merton turned to him.

“What are you going to do now?”

“Watch him till the doctor comes. Don’t you stay. Go to bed and try to forget all about him.”

“Sure I can be of no use?”

“Certain.”

“Then I think I will take your advice and say good–night!”

“Good–night!”

As he went across to the house Merton smiled to himself.

“Forget him? When I forget him may my right hand forget its cunning. No, no, my friend, you and I have a score to settle before we can forget! In the meantime Diplomacy must be my watchword.”

CHAPTER X

Delirium—a Recognition—a Departure and a Return

Many times during Murkard's illness Ellison found cause to bless Merton's coming. Not only was his cheerful nature calculated to counteract the horrors of the patient's delirium, but without being asked he took upon himself the invalid's work and made himself invaluable in the store. He was a clever fellow, able to turn his hand to anything; and before he had been a week in the house he had brought himself to be looked upon as quite a member of the family. His singing was a great source of delight to both his host and hostess. Esther, in particular, seemed never tired of listening to him, and it was noticeable that when she was in his audience he sang his best. But he was more than a talented musician, he was a clever talker, had read everything that was worth reading, and boasted a most capacious memory. He could recite, conjure, and ventriloquise better than most professionals, and however hard he might have been working during the day, when evening came he always exerted his talents to please. Once or twice he had volunteered to sit with Murkard, but Ellison could not be brought to permit it. He was afraid to leave them alone together, lest by any chance Murkard should let slip something which it would be inadvisable the other should know. He need not have worried himself, however, for even in his worst delirium Murkard was singularly reticent about the station affairs. Once or twice he spoke of his own past history, but only in the vaguest fashion. His main delusion seemed to be that he had done somebody a grievous wrong by not speaking out on a certain subject, and on this he harped continually.

"You *must* tell him!" he would reiterate times out of number. "He will never find it out otherwise. You *must* tell him!" A pause. "Oh, coward! coward! coward! Have you fallen so low?"

Ellison racked his brains to discover the meaning of this constant self–accusation, but in vain. At times he thought it referred to himself, but what had Murkard to tell him that could cause him so much pain. Then he would ascribe it to some detail of his past, but it was too real and recent for that. In the silence of the night, with only the moan of the waves on the beach, the monotonous voice would cry:

"You *must* tell him! He is suffering so. He will never find out otherwise. Oh, coward! coward! coward! Have you fallen so low?"

Once or twice Ellison tried to question him. But it was of little or no use. Only on one occasion could he get anything approaching a clear response from him.

"What is it, old man," he asked, directly the sick man had completed his customary speech, "that you must tell? Can I help you?"

Murkard leaned out of his bed and took his friend by the wrist. His eyes were still strangely bright, and his face was hard set as flint.

"Tell him," he almost hissed, "tell him at once and save his soul. D'you think I haven't

watched—aye, watched day and night. The man must be saved, I tell you, and for her sake! For her sake, don't you hear, you fool, you dolt, you ninny? Can't you understand Queen's English when you hear it?" He dropped his voice to a whisper. "The man must be saved for the woman's sake, and the woman for the man's, and both for the child's. Three in one, and one in three. Isn't that plain enough? God help you if you can't see it as plainly as I can!"

Ellison put the next question with almost a tremble in his voice:

"Who is the man, old friend? Tell me, and let me help you with your trouble."

Murkard picked at the counterpane with quivering fingers.

"In the Hebrew he is called Abaddon, but the Greek hath it Apollyon, ribbed with chains of fire and hung about with chains of gold, silver, and ivory. I wish you could see it as I see it.

> "'Her folded wings as of a mighty eagle,
> But all too impotent to lift the regal
> Robustness of her earth–born strength and pride.'

It's a pity that you don't understand Queen's English. I don't know exactly that I do myself, because you see my head's a little queer. When I want to think I have to pull my brains round from the back of my head, so to speak. And that's very painful,"—a pause, —"painful for you, dear love, but total extinction for me. I must go away for your honour's sake, don't you see, out into the lonely world. But it really can make no possible difference. *Ich hab' Dich geliebt und liebe Dich noch.*

> "'I loved thee once, I love thee still,
> And, fell this world asunder,
> My love's eternal flame would rise
> 'Midst chaos, crash, and thunder.'

'Chaos, crash, and thunder!' Cuthbert, you fool, why didn't you trust me from the very beginning?"

"Trust you about what, old friend?"

Murkard lay back on the pillows again with a sigh.

"You'll excuse me, sir, but I don't think I have the pleasure of your acquaintance…. My lord, I grant you circumstances are against me, but I give you my word—Bah, what's my word worth? I tell you I am not a thief. Guilty, or not guilty? If I plead not guilty it must all come out, and her reputation will be gone forever." He sat up in bed and called with a loud voice: "Guilty, my lord!"

From across the road, in the dead silence that followed, Ellison could hear Merton singing. The song he had chosen was, "Come, live with me and be my love." Evidently Murkard was listening too.

"That voice!" he said slowly. "Now, where the devil have I heard that voice?"

“Lie down, old chap, and try and get some sleep. That’ll do you more good than any singing.”

Like a little child Murkard did as he was ordered, and in five minutes was fast asleep again. Ellison made everything safe in the hut, and then went quietly back to his own house. Merton had stopped singing, and was now holding a skein of wool for Esther to wind. There was a look on her face that Ellison could not quite understand. It troubled him, and yet he could not exactly tell why.

“Thanks for your music, Merton,” he said, as he seated himself in a chair; “I could hear it across the way.”

“How is your patient to–night?”

“Asleep now, but he’s been very restless.”

Merton removed one of his hands to disentangle the wool.

“I suppose you will get rid of the man when he’s well enough to go? In my opinion it’s hardly safe for Mrs. Ellison to have such a fellow about the place.”

Ellison frowned. It was a curious speech for a stranger to make. But then, of course, the other was unaware of the position in which the two men stood to each other. He was about to reply in sharp terms, in spite of the look of fear in Esther’s face, when Merton broke in again:

“Forgive me. I know it’s like my impertinence to intrude on your affairs. I was only thinking of Mrs. Ellison’s safety.”

“You may be sure I will take good care of that. I can quite understand your feelings, but you see the trouble is that you don’t know all about us. There is a tie between that man and myself that nothing can ever loose.”

“I beg your pardon, then, for speaking about it at all.”

Esther had risen, and now said “Good–night.” She did not look at Merton, merely gave him her hand and then passed from the room. A few moments later Merton wished his host good–night and in his turn departed. Ellison lit his pipe at the lamp, and went into the veranda, preparatory to crossing to the hut, where he had been sleeping of late. Esther was waiting there to say good–night to him. She was leaning against the veranda rails gazing down on the star–lit sea. Ellison stationed himself beside her.

“I thought you had gone to bed, dearie.”

“I intended to go, but the house is so hot. I thought I would come out and get cool first.”

“I’m afraid you’re not very well to–night, little woman?”

“What makes you think that? Yes, I am quite well, thank you. A little tired, perhaps, but quite well.”

He passed his arm round her waist. She started as if with surprise.

“Why, what’s the matter?” he asked anxiously.

“I did not know what it was,” she answered. “You frightened me.”

“That makes me certain you’re not very well. I must have the doctor over to see you to–morrow morning, if you don’t feel better.”

“I shall be all right in the morning. I think I am over–tired to–night.”

“Perhaps Merton’s music has given you a headache. I think he thumps a little hard for my taste.”

This was scarcely the truth. He had never really thought so, but he wanted to find some reason for her downcast demeanour. She did not answer. Then suddenly, and without any apparent reason, she turned to him, and throwing her arms round his neck, sobbed upon his shoulder as if her heart were breaking.

“Why, Esther, my darling,” he cried, this time in real alarm, “what on earth does this all mean? You frighten me, dearest. Try and tell me what is the matter with you.” He led her to a chair, placed her in it, and seated himself beside her. “Come, try and tell me what it is, and let me help you. You frighten me dreadfully.”

“It is nothing, nothing, nothing; Oh, Cuthbert, my husband, bear with me to–night. Don’t be angry with me, I beseech you. You don’t know how the memory of this night will always remain with me.”

“You are very mysterious to–night. I can’t think what you mean.”

“Don’t ask to be told. Indeed, I could not tell you. I don’t know myself. I only know that I am more miserable to–night than I have ever been in my life before.”

“And you can’t tell me why? Esther, that puts us such a long way apart. I thought we were to be everything to each other, in sorrow as well as happiness!”

“It is ungenerous of you to taunt me with that now, just because I will not gratify your curiosity.”

She rose with an offended air, and made as if she would go to her room. He caught her by the wrist and held her. She turned on him almost fiercely!

“You are hurting me! Let me go!”

“Esther, you are very cruel to me to–night. Do you know that?”

“Have you been so kind that you can bring that accusation against me? But there, I won’t quarrel with you, even though you seem to want to make me.”

“I want to make you quarrel with me, Esther? You know that is not true. You wrong me, on my soul, you do!”

She began to cry again, and fell back into the chair.

“I know I do, I know I do! I cannot do anything right to–night. I can’t even think, my brain seems asleep. Oh, forgive me, forgive me!”

He smoothed back her hair and kissed her on the forehead.

“There is nothing to forgive, darling. It was altogether my fault. I wanted to sympathise with you, and I did it in my usual clumsy fashion. It is you who must forgive me.”

She still hung her head. Suddenly she raised it and looked him in the face.

“Some day you will hate and despise me, I know. You will curse my name. But before God to–night I swear that—that—that—No, I can’t say it. It must go through eternity unsaid, one little word unspoken.”

“Dear girl, do you know what you are saying? Don’t you think you had better go to bed?”

Without another word she rose and went down the veranda to her room. He sat like a man dazed, turning and twisting her behaviour this way and that in an endeavour to pierce the cloud that seemed to be settling on him. What did she mean by her last speech? What was to be the upshot of all these vague allusions? What was it she had intended to say, and then thought better of? He racked his brains for a solution of the problem, but without success. He could hit on nothing feasible. In a state of perfect bewilderment he went across to the hut and spent a miserable night, only to find at breakfast next morning that she had quite recovered and was her old self once more.

After that night Murkard might be considered convalescent. Like a shadow of the man he used to be, he managed to creep out into the sunshine of the beach, to sit there for hours every day. The bout had been a severe one, and it would be some time before he could be himself again. All this time Ellison allowed no word of reproach to fall from his lips, nor did Murkard offer any apology. But there was a wistfulness in his eyes when they lighted on the other that told a tale of gratitude and of devotion that was plainer than anything words could have uttered. On the third morning of his convalescence he was sitting in his usual spot just below the headland, looking across the blue straits dotted here and there with the sails of luggers, and at the white roofs of the township, when he heard steps approaching. The pedestrian, whoever he might be, was evidently in merry pin, for he was whistling a gay *chanson*, and seemed to be in the best conceit, not only with himself, but with all the world. Turning the corner, he came directly upon Murkard, who looked up full and fair into his face. It was Merton. If the latter seemed surprised, the effect upon Murkard was doubly so. His eyes almost started from his head, his mouth opened, and his jaw dropped, his colour became ashen in its pallor.

“You—you here!” he cried. “Oh, my God! Is this a horrible dream? I thought you were dead long since.”

The other was also a little pale, but he managed to laugh with a pretence of merriment.

“My dear boy, this is the most delightful surprise I have ever experienced. I hope you’re not sorry to see me. May I sit down? Well, what a funny thing this is, to be sure. To think that we should meet like this, and here of all places in the world. You’ve been seriously ill, I’m sorry to hear.”

“How long have you been in this place?”

“Nearly a fortnight now. I’ve seen you a good many times, but you never knew me!”

“I wish I could say that I don’t know you now. And what devil’s business are you up to here?”

“Amusing myself, as usual. Studying men and manners. Your friends here are very entertaining, the woman particularly so.”

“Do they know who you are?”

“George Merton of Brankforth Manor, near Exeter, County Devon, at your service.”

He threw himself down on the sands with another merry laugh.

“It’s extraordinary, isn’t it? our meeting like this. I’ve often laughed over it. And so your name’s Murkard? Silas too, if I’m not mistaken. What a rum beggar you are, to be sure. Do you still take life as seriously as you used to in the old days?”

“You’re evidently as cold–blooded a devil as when I last found you out.”

“Found me out? My dear fellow, aren’t you rather confusing things? Wasn’t it the other way round? But seriously, Bur—”

“Silence! My name is Murkard.”

“What did I say? Oh, I forgot; pray forgive me. It shan’t occur again. Seriously, Murkard, I want you to believe that I have never ceased to regret that terrible business. You must remember you put me in such a position that, though it cut me to the heart to do it, I had no option but to expose you.”

“If you had told all you knew you might have saved me. As it was, I had to take the course I did. I could not help myself.”

“‘Pon my honour, I knew nothing more. The stones were lost. I happened to stumble quite by accident on the baggage and found them there. The baggage was yours—what could I do?”

“Very well. I have at least paid the penalty; we need not discuss the subject further. But one thing must be settled now and forever. What are you going to do?”

“When? Now, do you mean? Well, I think I shall stay here for a month or so longer; and then—well, then I don’t quite know what I shall do.”

“You will leave here at once—in an hour’s time.”

“My dear fellow, impossible. Not to be thought of, I assure you.”

“Either you or I must go. We cannot both remain.”

“Still taking life seriously, I see. Well, I fear in that case it will have to be you. I’m sorry, but it can’t be helped. I have reasons for staying on. A holiday will do you no harm.”

“Supposing I tell Ellison all I know of you.”

“He *might* believe you, but I should think it extremely doubtful. On the other hand, what if I tell him all I know about you? Who you are, for instance, and what drove you out of England?”

Murkard turned, if possible, even paler than before.

“You could not, surely, blackguard as you are, be villain enough for that!”

“My dear fellow, I would do it in an instant if it suited me—and I rather think it would. You see, I have a game to play here, and, by Jove! come what may, I intend to play it. Your presence is detrimental to my interests. I may have to rid myself of you.”

“I shall go to Ellison at once, and tell him all.”

“You will spike your own guns then, I promise you, and without doing yourself a hap’orth of good. Besides, you will in all probability be putting me to the unpleasant necessity of—but there, you won’t—you can’t do it.”

“Have you let him suspect who I am?”

“Not by one single word or deed. As far as I am concerned, he knows nothing.”

“On your honour?—but there, I forget; you have no honour.”

“What an extraordinary little chap it is, to be sure! Of course I’ve no honour. In this commercial age nobody outside the covers of books has. But all the same, I am not in the humour just now to be trifled with. As I say, he knows nothing, and he *shall* know nothing if you do as I wish. Why not go away for a holiday? you need a change. Come back in a month; I shall be gone then. There’s a compact for you. Give me a clear field for a month, and I’ll give you my promise not to reveal the fact that I know anything of your past. Will you agree?”

“I must think it over. But what devilry are you up to here? I must know that before I decide. Do you think I’m going to leave him to your mercy? If you do, you’re mistaken.”

“I am up to no devilry, as you term it. I’ve got a speculation on hand, and I must watch it. I see a chance of doing a big stroke of business in the pearl market, that was what brought me out here; if you don’t interfere I shall make my fortune; if you do I shall take steps to rid myself of you, as I have said. Can’t you see you haven’t a card in your hand worth playing. If you’re a sensible man you’ll adopt my suggestion and go away for a day or two, regain your health, then come back, take up your old life again, and everything will go on as before. It’s not a very difficult course to steer, surely?”

“If I could only be certain that you are speaking the truth.”

“I can’t give you my word, because as I am a man without honour you wouldn’t accept it as evidence. But if you want proof as to my business—see here.”

He took from his pocket a number of letters. Selecting one that bore an English postage stamp, he tossed it across to Murkard. It was from a well–known firm of London pearl merchants, and notified the fact, to whom it might concern, that the bearer, Mr. Merton, was authorised to conduct certain negotiations on their behalf.

“Well,” said Murkard, when he had perused the document, “this looks genuine enough. But I don’t see that it makes your position here any plainer.”

“You surely don’t expect me to enter into particulars, do you? At any rate, that’s my offer, and consider it well, for it’s the last I’ll make. If you don’t decide to–night, I must tell your employer everything I know about you to–morrow morning. Make no mistake about that.”

“I will give you my decision by sundown.”

“Very good. In the meantime, let me offer you a cigarette. No? Don’t you smoke? A pity! Well, I have the honour to wish you a very good–day.”

He raised his hat with ironical politeness, and resumed his walk along the beach, humming as before.

Murkard lay where he was, trying to pull his thoughts together. This was the last straw. He

saw all the plans he had formed, all the honourable future he had built up for himself, shattered at one blow. His past had risen and struck him in the face. What was to be done now? Could he trust this man whom he had always known to be unfaithful? He had no option—no option at all. He *must* go away, or Ellison would discover everything, and then all would be irretrievably lost.

And so the afternoon wore on. The sun sank lower and lower, until he disappeared entirely beneath the horizon. As he sank from view, Murkard made up his mind and rose to his feet. Merton was coming back along the beach. He signalled to him, and they passed together into the shelter of the trees that ran down to the shore. Once there, Murkard turned on him.

“I have been thinking over what you said to me just now.”

The other bowed and smiled.

“And with what result?”

“I don’t quite know. First and foremost I want you to tell me, in the event of my declining to leave the island, what you will tell my friend about me?”

“Shall I really tell you? You mean it? Very well, then, I will. I’m not going to let you know how I became aware of things—you must guess that for yourself.”

“Not so many words. Answer my question.”

“In the first place, answer me this: Who is your friend? He calls himself Cuthbert Ellison, but who is he?”

Murkard looked away. This was what he had dreaded.

“How should I know?”

“Well, I’ll tell you at least who he is *not*. He is *not* the Marquis of St. Burden. When he told his wife that he *was* he lied to her, as he has lied before, and as he will probably lie again.”

“How do you know that he told his wife he was? At least, she has not told you.”

“Very probably not. But still I know. Perhaps I learned it from you in your delirium.”

Murkard groaned. The man’s possession of this secret was the very thing he had feared.

“Now, supposing in addition to telling Ellison who *you* are, I tell her who he is not—what would you say?”

“I should say you were the most inhuman wretch that ever trod God’s earth, and it would be the truth. Don’t you know—haven’t you seen that that woman worships the very ground he treads on, that she believes every word that falls from his lips? Would you shatter her happiness and trust forever, at one blow, and only to gratify your own miserable ends?”

“Yes, do you know, now I think of it, I even believe I should. But you seem to forget that it would be you who had driven me to it. If you go away it will be to my interest not to tell her. I wish to remain on good terms with both of them until my business here is accomplished. Will you go?”

“Yes; I will go.”

“When?”

“To–night. At once. You need have no fear.”

“I have none, I assure you. I thought just now you were going to make a fool of yourself. I’m glad you can see reason. And look here, my—Oh, very well, if you would rather not, I won’t say it. I shall be at home in three months. If I chance upon any members of your family, shall I tell them where they can find you?”

“You need not trouble yourself. They know.”

“Very good. Then our business is accomplished. Now let us part.”

“Go on. I will follow you. I decline to be seen in your company.”

“My dear boy, that is rude, for you will not have another opportunity.”

Without going back to his hut, Murkard walked down to the beach, and asked one of the Kanakas he found there to row him across to the settlement. The man did so, and on his return to the station reported the fact to Ellison, who marvelled, but said nothing. He was expecting that night an important visitor in the shape of a globe–trotting pearl dealer, to whom he had written regarding the black pearl, and he had, therefore, small concern for Murkard’s doings. The mail boat had arrived that afternoon, and as she was to go on the same night, their appointment was for six o’clock. Even as the fact of Murkard’s absence was reported to him by the native, the dealer’s boat was to be seen making its way across the straits. He went down to the beach to receive him.

The newcomer was a tall, gray–haired man, with quick, penetrating eyes, and a general air of shrewdness that his business capabilities did not belie. He greeted Ellison with considerable cordiality, and they walked up to the house together. Merton was lying in the hammock in the veranda, smoking and reading an ancient English newspaper. He got up as the men approached, and Ellison introduced him to the stranger. They then entered the house together. After a little refreshment and conversation Ellison proposed going down to the store. This they accordingly did, leaving Merton to resume his literary studies. He looked after them and smiled, then throwing the paper down he went into the house, where Esther joined him.

When they were alone in the store, Ellison unlocked the safe, and took out the box containing the pearl.

“Your ventures seem to have prospered, Mr. Ellison,” said the stranger, as he watched him undo the box containing his treasure. “A black pearl of the size you describe yours to be is indeed a gem worth having.”

“Yes, and it could not have come at a better time,” replied Ellison. “Things have been very bad here, I can assure you, within the last twelve or fourteen months.”

The first box undone, he came upon a second; this was full of cotton wool, but in the centre of it, carefully wrapped up, was the treasure he sought. With obvious care and pride he took it out, and placed it on a sheet of white note–paper upon the counter. It lay there full and black, staring them in the face, as large a pearl as had ever been found in those

seas. The dealer was enchanted.

“A wonder—a monster—a marvel!” was all he could say. He took it up, and looked at it from every light; put it down again, and stood off to test its beauty from another standpoint. Then taking it in his hands, he carried it to the door, the better to appraise its value. The light was failing inside the building, but Ellison watched him with an eager face. So much depended on the sale of this pearl. Suddenly the dealer coughed in a peculiar manner, took off, dusted, and put on his glasses again. His mouth went down at one corner, and he scratched his right cheek with the forefinger of his right hand. Still Ellison watched him. He was growing anxious. Was there a flaw in it that he had failed to notice? Finally the stranger walked back to the counter, and put the pearl in its box.

“Well?” said Ellison at last, unable to contain himself any longer, “what do you think is its value?”

The stranger paused before replying. Then he spoke; his tone made Ellison stare harder than before.

“As a jewel or as a curiosity?”

“As a jewel, of course.”

“Nothing; absolutely nothing! As a curiosity, possibly half a crown. Mr. Ellison, you will, I hope, forgive a little natural irritation on my part, but I cannot help feeling sorry that one of our most trusted customers should play us such a trick.”

“What do you mean? Good God, man! what are you insinuating?”

“I am not insinuating anything. If you wish me to state my meaning in a clearer way, I can only say that I marvel at your impudence in trying to palm off an imitation on us—a good imitation, I’ll grant you, for it deceived me for a moment, but nevertheless an imitation.”

Ellison fell back against the counter ashen to the lips. “An imitation!” he, cried. “You tell me that that pearl is an imitation? Why I opened the oyster with my own hands!”

The dealer smiled incredulously.

“I’m afraid I must be getting back to the settlement. My boat sails to–night, you know.”

“D— your boat! Oh, my gracious! can it be possible that you are right?”

His breath came from him in great jerks, the veins on his temples stood out like whipcord. The dealer glanced at him curiously. His did not look like the face of a guilty man.

“Mr. Ellison, either you have attempted to deceive us or you have been the victim of a heartless swindle. I cannot say which, but by the look of your face I incline to the latter belief. That pearl—at least that imitation—is remarkably clever. If the gem you found was anything like it in size, shape, and colour, I would willingly have given you a very large sum for it. As it is, that is worthless. But I must really be going now.”

Ellison was too stunned to reply. The dealer walked back to his boat alone. He did not quite know what to make of it.

“At any rate,” he said to himself, “if he’s the guilty party he won’t try that game on us again.”

Meanwhile, Ellison sat in the store too dazed and sick to be conscious of anything but his loss. He had been grossly and cruelly swindled by somebody. He had yet to find out who that somebody was. As it was, he was now unable to pay off that loan, that guilt had come back upon his soul to roost. And every day the time was coming closer. He was—But there, he could not think of it now. He must try and pull himself together, or his reason would go as well. He had no thought of time, no thought of anything but his loss. He began to pace the hut with feverish impatience. What should he do first? To whom should he turn for advice and help? Why had Murkard not been there to assist him? As he thought this, he heard steps on the path outside. It was Merton. As usual, he was in the best of spirits.

“My dear old fellow, are you in here in the dark? Mrs. Ellison and I have been wondering what on earth had become of you. Dinner has been on the table this half hour. Where’s your mysterious friend? Wouldn’t he like to come to my room to wash his hands?”

“He’s gone, Merton. And I’m in awful trouble.”

“I’m sorry to hear it. I began to fancy something was up when you didn’t make your appearance. Here, let’s have a light on the scene.”

He struck a match and lit the office lamp. Having done so, he looked at Ellison. His surprise found vent in a little cry.

“My dear chap, you do looked hipped indeed. Hold on a second.”

He fled the scene, to return two minutes later with the whiskey bottle and a glass. Having given him a strong dose of the spirit, he said:

“Sit yourself down and try and tell me all about it. Who knows but what I may be in a position to help you?”

Thereupon Ellison told him everything.

“By Jove!” was the rejoinder, “I don’t like the look of things at all. It’s a bad business—a very bad business. Somebody has evidently found out about the pearl, got a duplicate made, and palmed it off on you. Is it possible to have one made here, d’you think?”

“Nothing easier. Any of the Cinghalese over the way could make one.”

“Then he must have got one there, taken the real one, and substituted this in place of it. Now whom have you told about it? Think well.”

“Nobody—bar Murkard, and of course he does not count. Why, I have never even told you.”

“I’m precious glad you haven’t, or you might have fancied I had purloined it. Well, we must dismiss Murkard from our minds; he is like Cæsar’s wife, above suspicion. Now who had admittance to that safe? Any duplicate keys?”

“Only one.”

“And who has that?”

“Murkard. It is necessary that he should have one, as I am so often away.”

“Humph! This is certainly a tangled skein. Has anyone been away from the island within

the last few days?”

“Not a soul.”

“Well, we must roust out Murkard, and see if he can help us.”

“He’s not here.”

“Not here—what d’ye mean? I saw him here this afternoon.”

“He went across to the township at sundown, just before the dealer came.”

Merton whistled.

“Look here, Ellison, you believe, though I’ve only known you a short time, that I’m a firm friend of yours, don’t you?”

“Of course I do. You need not ask that.”

“Well, I’m going to hit you pretty hard on a soft spot. You’ll hate me for it, but as things are now I can’t help that. This is not a time for half measures.”

“What are you driving at?”

“Hold on, and you’ll see. How long have you known Murkard?”

“No, no! it won’t do, Merton. That dog won’t fight. You needn’t bring Murkard into the business at all. He knows nothing of it, I’ll stake my life.”

“Don’t be foolish. I only ask you how long you’ve known him?”

“About three years.”

“What was he when you knew him first?”

“Well, to tell the truth, he was in very much the same condition as myself.”

“A dead–beat—beach–comber?”

“Well, if you put it like that—yes!”

“You know nothing of his history?”

“Nothing. He’s not the sort of man to talk of his past.”

“I believe you. Well, look here, Ellison, I’m going to tell you his past.”

“How do you know it?”

“Never mind, it is enough that I do know it.”

“Well, I don’t want to hear it. You’ll never make me think him guilty, so don’t waste your breath trying.”

“Perhaps not, but you *must* know his career. You owe it to yourself, and, pardon my saying so, you owe it to your wife to hear it.”

“We’ll leave my wife out of the question, thank you.”

“Very good. That is of course your own affair. I will be as brief as I can. You must put two and two together yourself. In the first place, Murkard is not his name—what it is, does not

matter. I'm an old friend of his family, so I dare not tell you. He started life with everything in his favour, consequently his fall was the greater."

"How did he fall?"

"He was deeply in debt. To get out of his difficulties he appropriated—I won't use a stronger term—some diamonds belonging to a lady in whose house he was staying. She was reluctantly compelled to prosecute, and he received a sentence of five years' penal servitude. He served his time, and then vanished from England and the ken of all those who knew him."

"Is this true, or are you lying to me?"

"Ellison, if you were not a little off your balance, I should resent that question. I am a man of honour, and I don't tell lies."

"I beg your pardon. I am not myself by a great deal to–night. Forgive me. Poor Murkard!"

"Poor devil! Yes, you may well say that. But don't you see, Ellison, if that happened once it might happen again. What is the evidence? You would not cheat yourself out of a valuable pearl, would you? What else could get at the safe? Only Murkard. He has been ill—delirious. Perhaps the value of the thing preyed upon his mind, and he may have taken it out of the safe while off his head. That is the charitable conclusion to come to. At any rate, his disappearance to–day is a point against him, you must admit that. If I were you I would certainly not believe him guilty till I had proved it, but just as certainly I should try to find him and see if he knows anything about it. D'you know, I rather think you owe as much, in common fairness, to him. If he denies any knowledge of the affair—well, in that case you must decide for yourself whether you know him well enough to believe him. Don't you think I'm right?"

"I do. Honestly, I do."

"Very well then. Pack your traps, pull yourself together, and go across and see if you can find him. You'll know the truth the sooner—or, perhaps, what would be better, let me go."

"No, no! that's not to be thought of. I'll go at once. But may I be forgiven for entertaining a doubt of him."

He picked up his hat, which had fallen from his head in his excitement, and went out of the store and down the hill towards the boats. Springing into one he shoved off and set to work to pull himself across to the settlement. It was quite dark, but the lights from the houses guided him, and before he had made up his mind where first to look for Murkard he was alongside the jetty. His thoughts flew back across the year to the night when he had waited there at those self–same steps for Esther. How his life had changed since then!

Tying up the boat, he set off for the Hotel of All Nations, expecting to find Murkard there. But he had left the place, and it was said had gone along the beach in the direction of the Pearlers' Rest. He followed and inquired in the bar, but again without success. He had not been seen there. From that hostelry he passed on to another and yet another, but with no greater result. Murkard was not to be found. At last, on the sea–front again, he chanced upon a pearler who had met him heading round the hill–side. This was a clue, and throwing new energy into his walk he set off after him. It was the same road they had

followed together the evening of the famous fight, and it looked as if he should find Murkard at the self–same spot where they had camped that night. Nor was he disappointed. As he turned the bend of the hill he caught sight of a figure outlined against the starlight. There was no mistaking that angular back. He pushed on the faster, calling "Murkard!" As he came towards it, the figure turned and said:

"What do you want with me?"

"My dear old fellow, what a chase you have given me. What is the matter with you? What on earth made you leave us as you did? I can tell you I have been quite anxious about you."

Murkard came towards him and placed his hand upon his shoulder.

"That is not the reason you are here, Ellison. You cannot deceive me. There is something behind it all. What is the matter? Nothing wrong with your wife?"

He spoke with feverish eagerness.

"No, there is nothing the matter with my wife. But, my gracious, something else is terribly wrong!"

Murkard clutched him by the arm and looked into his face.

"Well—well—why don't you go on? Why don't you tell me all?"

"Because I can't, old friend, I can't. I despise myself enough as it is for having listened to such a thing."

"I can see something pretty bad has happened, and Merton has suggested to you that I am the guilty party. Good! Now tell me with what I am charged? Don't be afraid. I shall not think the worse of you."

"The Black Pearl!"

"Gone? Yes, gone! I can read it in your face. The thief, oh, the infernal, lying, traitorous thief! I see it all now. Oh, Ellison! you have been trapped—cruelly, heartlessly trapped! But, please God, it is not too late to set it right, whatever the cost may be."

"How? Speak out. What do you mean? What fresh villainy am I to discover now?"

"Listen to me. Has that man told you my history?"

"Yes."

"Who I really am?"

"No. But he told me that you were convicted of a theft in England, and received five years' penal servitude. Forgive me, Murkard, for listening to him—but I could not help it."

"You were right to listen, and he told the truth. I was convicted, and I served the sentence, but now you shall know everything. I ought to have warned you months ago, but I thought you would never find it out. For pity's sake, don't think too harshly of me—but—but—well, I am the man you pretended to be. I—am—the—Marquis of St. Burdan!"

Ellison did not speak, but he made a noise as if he were choking. Murkard again put his hand on his shoulder.

“You were a true friend to me. I heard you tell the lie, and I saw how the woman who is now your wife worshipped and trusted you. I knew it would kill her faith in you if she found you out, so I resolved not to betray myself or you. When you wanted money I forgot the pride that had made me swear never to take anything from my family’s hands again, and cabled through the Government Resident for assistance. Why I made you take that step I cannot tell you—you must only guess, at any rate! That money I placed to your credit in the bank, and day by day, knowing your secret, I have watched and loved you for your repentance and for the brave way you slaved to repay it. Then this man came and somehow learned your secret. He ordered me to leave the station, or he would tell your wife that you had—had lied to her, and were not the man she believed you to be. To–night, for your sake, I came away, and walked here to think out what course I should pursue. Enlightenment has come. I see everything now. While I was ill that man, who must have found out about the pearl, stole my key, unlocked the safe, had a counterfeit made, and intends to bolt with the real one. Are you aware that he has been making love to your wife?”

“I know that now. While you have been speaking I, too, have had my eyes opened. It is not necessary to say I believe what you have told me, Murkard; but from the bottom of my heart I thank you. I will go back now and deal with him.”

“You forgive me, Cuthbert?”

“Forgive you? No, no! It must be the other way about, it is for you to forgive me!”

“Freely, freely, if I have anything to forgive. Now what do you intend to do?”

“Go home and turn him off the place. That’s what I shall do.”

“No! You must do nothing of the kind. Somebody must watch him, and I will do it. Possibly we may find out what he has done with the pearl. Then we shall catch him in his own toils, and I shall be even with him for his treachery to me.”

“What did he once do to you?”

“I cannot tell you the real shame, but it was on his evidence that I was condemned. He was staying in the house at the time.”

“Murkard, I could give my oath you were not guilty.”

“And you would be right. I was not. But I had to plead guilty all the same to save what a worthless woman miscalled her honour. That man knew my secret, and traded on it to my ruin.”

“Come, let us get back to the station. I cannot breathe freely until I have rid myself of him.”

“When we get there—you must not let my presence be known. I shall hide and watch him.”

“I agree. Let us be going.”

They went back round the hill and by a circuitous track to the jetty. In less than a quarter of an hour they were back at the station and walking up the path towards the house.

CHAPTER XI

Battle and Murder

A warm flood of lamplight streamed from the sitting room window out on the path as Ellison approached the house. He could make out Merton's voice inside raised in argument, and at intervals his wife's replying in tones that were as unnatural to her as they were terrible to him to hear. He drew into the shadow of the veranda and watched and listened. Esther was seated on the sofa near the fireplace, Merton was kneeling by her side holding her hand. She had turned her head away from him, but as it was in the direction of the place where her husband lay concealed, he could see that big tears were coursing down her cheeks. He ground his teeth with rage as he noticed the look upon Merton's face. For the first time he saw the man's real nature written in plain and unmistakable characters.

"Esther, you cannot mean it. You cannot be so cruel to me as to persist in your refusal. Think what you are to me, and think what you may be in the days before us. True, I have only known you a little while, but in that little while I have learned to love you as no other man could ever do. Body and soul I am yours, and you are mine. You love me—I know it—I am certain of it. Then you will not draw back now?"

She tried to rise but he held her down.

"Mr. Merton, I have told you before, and I tell you again, that I cannot, and will not listen to you. If you love me as you say, and I pray with my whole miserable heart that it may not be true, you will not drive me to desperation. Think of what you would make of my life, think of the awful wrong you would do to your friend, my husband."

"Your husband was only my friend before I learned to love you. Now he is my bitterest foe. No man can be a friend of mine who loves you. I must have your love, and I alone. Oh, Esther, remember what I said to you last night. You were not so cold and hard to me then!"

"I was the wickedest and weakest woman on earth to let you say it. You have a stronger will than I have, and you made me do it. It may make you understand something of how I feel towards you when I tell you that I have not ceased for a single instant to hate and upbraid myself for listening to it. Do you know, Mr. Merton, what you have done? Do you know that by listening to you for that one moment, I can never look my husband or child truthfully in the face again? And my husband trusted me so! Oh, God, have mercy upon me!"

"You say you cannot look your husband in the face again. No; but you shall look one in the face, Esther, who loves you ten thousand times more than your husband is even capable of loving you; one who worships the very ground you walk on, whose only wish is to be your humble servant to the death. Come, Esther, there is time yet, the mail–boat does not sail till midnight. You can pack a few things together, I know, in a minute or two. Do that, and let us escape to the township before your husband returns. By morning we shall be on board the steamer, and hundreds of miles away. We will leave her in Batavia.

They will never trace us. You can surely have no fear of the future when you know that I will give you such love as man never gave to woman yet! Isn't it worth it, Esther?"

He passed one arm round her waist, and tried to draw her towards him. Again she attempted to rise, and again he forced her to retain her seat.

"Let me go, Mr. Merton, let me go! How dare you hold me like this? Let me go!"

"Not until you have promised, Esther. Quickly make up your mind; there is not a moment to lose. Come, I can see it written in your face that you will not disappoint me."

"I refuse!—I refuse!—I refuse! Let me go, sir, you have done me wrong enough already! Do you call yourself a man, that you can treat a wretched woman so? Take your arm from round my waist before I strike you. Oh, you cur! you dastard! you coward! Isn't it enough for you that you should cut me off from a man whose shoes you are not worthy to unlace? Isn't it enough that you should drive me from my happy home? Isn't it enough that you should make me an unworthy mother to my child? Must you kill my soul as well as my heart? Let me go, I say, let me go! or, as I live, I'll strike you!"

"Hush, hush, Esther! for mercy's sake, be calm. Do you want to rouse the whole station?"

"I don't care what I do; I am desperate—I am mad with shame and loathing of you!"

"And you will go back to this lying traitor of a husband, I suppose, this great man, who won you by a lie, who has only deceived you as he has deceived others, a common fraud and trickster—you will go back to him, I suppose, and fawn on him, and tell him that you love him, when I have—"

With her right hand she struck him a blow upon the mouth.

"There, that is my answer to you; now go before I call for help and have you thrashed off the island!"

He sprang to his feet, his face black with rage. Ellison rose too, and approached the French window which led into the room. Merton's voice quivered with passion.

"You have struck me—good; you have fooled me—better! Now you shall understand me properly; I will have such vengeance for that blow, for that fooling, as never man had before. You little know my power, my lady; but I tell you this, that I will crush you to the earth, and that worm, your husband, with you, till you groan for mercy. In the meantime—"

He stopped and looked up to discover Ellison standing in the doorway.

"In the meantime," said Ellison, advancing into the room, "as there is a God above me, I intend to kill you."

Esther stood paralysed with fear, unable to move hand or foot, unable even to speak. Once she tried to find her voice, but the words she strove to utter died away unspoken in her throat. Merton glared from one to the other like a wild beast.

"It may interest you to know, Mr. Merton, that I have overheard all your conversation. Out in this part of the world, so far removed, as you were good enough to observe the other day, from the cramping influences of older civilisation, when we find centipedes in our houses we crush them under heel to prevent them doing mischief. You are more

treacherous even than a centipede, and I intend to kill you without delay."

As he spoke, he took off his coat and threw it from him. Merton watched, and his eyes betrayed his fear. Esther took a step forward, and then stood still. Her eyes were open, but they did not seem to see. Ellison moved towards his foe.

"This would probably be the best place. My wife can see fair play."

Suddenly Esther found her voice and her power of movement. With a scream she threw herself upon her husband, and clung to him with all the strength of despair.

"Cuthbert—Cuthbert! for God's sake, forbear! Let him go, I implore you! He is not worthy to be touched by your little finger."

"Let me go, woman, let me go! How dare you stop me!"

"I dare anything now! I will not let you go until you have sworn not to raise your hand against that man." Then, facing round on the other, she cried: "As for you, fly while you are safe, and may the curse of an unhappy woman follow you to your grave!"

Merton did not need telling twice. With one bound he reached the veranda, and in another second he was outside the house, and flying towards the beach at the top of his speed. Ellison looked on like one in a dream; he did not seem to know what to do. Then slowly he felt Esther's arms untwining; her head fell forward on his shoulder. She had fainted. Springing to the door, he called to Mrs. Fenwick, who came running out.

"Your mistress is not well. Attend to her."

Then placing her on the sofa, he too left the house, and ran swiftly towards the beach. As he approached the jetty he saw a man pushing a boat into the water. At first he thought it was the man he wanted, but on nearer approach he saw that it was Murkard, who pointed out to sea.

"There he goes, the cowardly cur, rowing for his life."

"What are you going to do?"

"Hasten after him. You may be sure I shall not let him out of my sight until I know where he has hidden that pearl. Listen to me. He has not been off the island for a week; he has not had time to take anything with him now. Either he has it about him, or it is still here; in that case when all is quiet he'll come back for it. We must watch and wait; I'll follow him, you guard the station."

"I cannot; I must go after him. You don't know what a wrong that villain has done me. I must have vengeance!"

"No, no; you must not go after him with that look in your face. Stay here, I will do the rest. I feel convinced he will come back." As he spoke, he ran the boat into the water and leaped into it. "Give me your word you will not attempt to follow."

"I promise; but I will have vengeance here."

"So do, if you still wish it."

Murkard pulled out, and Ellison went back to the store. Alone there, he took down a Winchester repeater from a shelf, cleaned, and loaded it; then he went out again, securely

locking the door behind him. From the store he followed the little path that led through the scrub to the headland. It was the same path he had followed on the morning of his arrival at the station, the morning that he had first seen Esther. Following it along until it opened out on to the little knoll above the sands, he seated himself on a fallen tree and scanned the offing. By this time, his enemy must have landed on the other side. What would his next move be? At any rate, sleuth–hound Murkard was on his trail—that at least was one comfort. But why had he not gone himself? Why had he let Murkard go? To have followed him himself would have been altogether more satisfactory; he might have had his own vengeance then. But surely God would be good to him, and let him have it yet.

He looked up at the heavens studded with stars, and then down at the smooth water of the straits. Only the ripple of the wavelets on the shore and the occasional call of a night–bird in the scrub behind him disturbed the stillness; it was a perfect night. For what seemed an eternity he sat on, thinking and thinking; but though he tried to think coherently, he was too excited to work out his actual situation. There was only the one real craving in his brain, and that was for vengeance. He wanted the actual grip of his antagonist, to make him suffer bodily pain in return for the mental agony he had inflicted. The desire for personal vengeance is a whole–souled one, and, like the love of opium, when once it takes possession all else has to go.

And so he sat on and on, watching the star–powdered water, and listening for any sound that might proclaim the return of his foe. But nothing came, only the swish of the waves on the strand, and now and again faint music of the ships' bells across the water.

Twelve o'clock struck, and just as the sound died away his eyes caught something moving in the water opposite where he sat. What it was he could not determine, but he would soon be able to, for it was every moment coming closer. At length it came near enough for him to see that it was a man swimming. Who could it be? Could it be Merton? To make sure, he crawled out on to the edge of the little cliff, and throwing himself down upon the ground, leaned over and watched.

Closer and closer the figure came until the swimmer touched bottom. Yes, it was Merton! After pausing a moment to regain his breath, he pulled himself together and waded ashore. Just as he left the water, Ellison caught sight of another figure out at sea. This must be Murkard. Fortunately the first man did not see him. He seated himself for a while, and then made off and disappeared round the headland towards the station, just as the second figure found a footing on the beach. Ellison took it all in in a second; as Murkard expected, he had come to recover the pearl, believing everybody to be asleep.

Eager to be doing, Ellison watched Murkard leave the water and follow the other round the promontory, and then he himself set off through the scrub to intercept him on the other side. It was a difficult matter to steer through the thick jungle in the dark; but eventually he managed it, reaching the huts just as Merton was approaching the store. What was he going to do? Could the pearl, after all, be concealed in there? Reflecting that if he waited and left him undisturbed he would probably find out everything for himself, he paused for a few moments and watched. He saw the man look carefully round, to be sure that he was unobserved, and then approach the door. A minute later he entered the building. At the same instant the other shadow crept up towards the door. Seeing this, Ellison picked up his heels and ran towards it too; but the night was dark, and in the middle of his career his

foot came into collision with a discarded cable lying in the grass. He tripped and fell, one cartridge of the rifle he carried in his hand going off with a murderous report. For half a minute the breath was knocked out of his body, and he lay where he had fallen. Then picking himself up, he prepared to continue his advance.

But the report had given the alarm, and when he looked again, a strange scene was being enacted before him. From where he stood he could see the bright light streaming from the store door, and hear a sound of voices coming from within. Next moment two men, locked together in deadliest embrace, came staggering out into the open. There was no noise now, only the two locked bodies twisting and twining, this way and that, round and round over the open space before the door. It needed little discernment to see that both men were fighting for their lives. Like wildcats they clung to each other, each exerting every muscle to bring the other down. But, as Ellison half–consciously reflected, what match could Murkard hope to be for such a man as Merton? One was a big, powerful *man*, the other only a parody of the name. With this thought in his mind, he dashed across to them; but he was too late. He saw an arm go up, and a knife descend; again it went up in the lamplight, and again it descended. Then Murkard's hold gave way, and he fell to the ground; next moment his antagonist was speeding towards the beach. Ellison took it all in at a glance, and then set off as fast as his legs could carry him by another path to intercept his flight. So far, the man had not seen him; he would take him by surprise, or perish in the attempt.

The path he followed was one that gave him a decided start, and he was able to reach the shore and take advantage of the shelter of a bush before the other turned the corner of the headland. He heard him coming closer and closer, breathing heavily after the struggle he had just undergone. Then Ellison stepped out of the shadow and confronted him, rifle in hand.

"It's no good, Merton, you haven't a chance. Put up your hands, or I fire!"

The other came to a dead halt, and without a second thought did as he was ordered. But overcome with astonishment though he was, his habitual nonchalance returned to him in an instant.

"You're a little smarter than usual, Mr. Ellison. I didn't bargain for this!"

"You'd better not talk. Keep your hands up, or I'll drill you through and through. There are eight more cartridges under my finger, and I'll shoot without a second thought. Right about face, and walk up the middle of the path. Don't attempt any escape, or you're a dead man."

Merton did as he was ordered, and in this fashion they returned to the store. As they approached it they could discern a small crowd collected round the door. The report of the rifle had brought the hands from their huts, and between them they had carried Murkard into the building.

"Straight on, Merton. Keep your hands up, and don't turn to the right or left, or stop till I give you permission."

They came up to the store door, and the crowd fell back on either side to let them pass.

"My lads," said Ellison, "this is a very bad business, as you can see. Two of you catch hold of this man, and take care that he doesn't escape. Jimmy Rhotoma, go into the store

and bring me a pair of handcuffs you'll see hanging on a nail above my desk. Long Pete, you take a boat and pull across to the township for the doctor and a policeman. Bring them back with you, and be as quick as you can."

The handcuffs were soon forthcoming, and Ellison himself adjusted them on Merton's wrists.

"Now, boys, take him into your own hut and watch him there till I call. If he wants to talk tell him to hold his jaw. If he tries to bolt, kill him with the first thing you find handy. Two of you remain with me."

An angry growl from the men evidenced the reception Merton might expect to meet with if he attempted to escape, and he was wise enough to see that it would be impossible. When he had been led away Ellison entered the store. He found Murkard lying on the floor, his head pillowed on a couple of chair–cushions. The pool of blood by his side proclaimed the fact that he was seriously wounded. Moreover, he was unconscious. Ellison knelt beside him, and having found the wound on his breast, endeavoured to staunch the bleeding; but it was a hopeless task. Taking the whiskey bottle from the table, where it had remained since Merton had brought it down to him that evening, he tried to force some of the spirit into his mouth. A moment after he did so Murkard opened his eyes and looked about him.

"What has happened?" he asked faintly. Then his memory came back to him. "Oh, I remember. He has not escaped, Ellison?"

"Not he. We have him safe enough. But, oh, Murkard, to think that you should be wounded like this!"

"I told you what it would be, old man. This is the fulfilment of my prophecy. I knew it would come."

He moved his hand and let it fall to his side.

"I'm all wet," he went on, after a long pause. "By Jove! it's blood. Then it's hopeless. Well, I don't know that I'm sorry. But there is something else we have to do. When I came in he was burrowing behind that box there. Look for yourself. Don't bother about me."

He pointed to a box in the corner, and Ellison went towards it, and pulled it into the centre of the room.

"What do you see?"

"Nothing at all. Stay, there's a matchbox here."

He stooped and picked it up.

"Open it quickly—quickly!"

Ellison did as he was ordered.

"The pearl—the pearl! Here it is safe and sound!"

"I thought as much. The scoundrel! Now I can die happy. Give me some more whiskey."

Ellison thrust the pearl back into the safe, and then gave Murkard another drink of the spirit. It put fresh life into him for the moment.

“Ellison,” he said, taking his friend’s hand, “you’ve been a true friend to me.”

“I have not been half as true a friend as you have been to me. My God, Murkard, is there nothing I can do for you until the doctor comes? I cannot let you die like this!”

“It’s hopeless, old man. I can feel it. Let us talk while we have the chance. I want to tell you about that money. You see my family sent it to me, myself. They don’t know you in the matter at all. I deceived you there. If you would like to pay it back and start afresh send it to them from me. Tell them, too,”—he paused,—“tell them, too,—that I died—doing my duty. Do you understand? It will surprise them, but I should like them to know it.”

“They shall know that you died like a hero, giving your life for mine.”

“Don’t pile on the agony, old fellow. They’d not believe it; we’re by nature a sceptical race. I don’t want the matter turned to ridicule.”

“Is there nothing I can do to make you easier?”

“Nothing, old man, except to give me more liquor. Thank you. I’m getting weaker every minute. I wonder what they’ll do to that fellow Merton?”

“Hang him if I can do anything to forward it.”

“Poor devil! And yet he was only sent into the world for this. Look, Ellison, bring him here for a minute—I must speak to him.”

“I’ll send for him.”

Ellison went to the door, and sent one of the hands for Merton. The night was almost spent; the stars were paling in the eastern heavens. A cold, cheerless wind blew up from the sea.

In less time than it takes to tell Merton entered the hut, carefully guarded. He looked at the man lying on the floor, and a half–contemptuous smile passed across his face.

“What do you bring me here for?” he asked.

“Murkard wishes to speak to you,” said Ellison, and went outside leaving the pair together.

Three minutes later Merton emerged again, his face white as the death that was swiftly coming to the other. He was saying to himself over and over again, as the men led him away:

“God help me! If I had only known in time!”

Ellison went in again. One glance told him the end was very near at hand.

“Ellison, it’s a rum world, isn’t it? Do you know, I touched that fellow on his only tender spot, and I know now why he has always been so bitter against me. Poor devil, he never knew that—” He let the sentence die unfinished. Then he said, as if addressing someone present: “You need not have had any fear. I should not have betrayed you, dear. But five years is a long time to wait.” A pause, during which his wits seemed to come back to him. “Would you mind holding my hand, Ellison. I’ve got rather a rocky place to pull through, and, after all, I’m a bit of a coward. Somehow I think I’m going to have a little sleep now. Remember—we’ve got—to—get—those—accounts away—by—the mail—to–

morrow—”

He closed his eyes, and a moment later the other knew that Silas Murkard’s soul’s account had gone to be audited by the Auditor of Heaven.

Ellison, having placed the hand he held gently down by the dead man’s side, rose to his feet, and with a great mist between his eyes and a choking sensation in his throat went out of the hut. The doctor and two police–officers were climbing the hill. He waited and returned with them into the store. To the police officials he said:

“This is the victim; the murderer is in custody in the hut yonder.” To the doctor he only said: “I am sorry to have troubled you. You have come too late. He died five minutes ago.”

Chapter XII

Conclusion and Epilogue

When the doctor, policemen, and prisoner had left the island, Ellison went up to his own house. Though it only wanted a few minutes of sunrise, the lamp was still burning in the sitting room. He pushed open the door and walked in. To his surprise Esther stood before him. She did not look into his face, but waited with downcast eyes for him to speak. He gazed at her for a moment, and then led her to a chair.

“Esther,” he said, kneeling beside her, “can you ever forgive me?”

“Forgive you what?” she asked, almost in a whisper.

“For the lie I told you. The lie that was the beginning of all this misery.”

“I forgive you. I had forgotten all about it. Now let me go. It is daylight, and I must get away before anyone sees me.”

“Go away? What do you mean? Where are you going to?”

“I don’t know—I don’t care. But it must be somewhere where no one will know my name. You will find everything in order here, and Mrs. Fenwick knows all your wants. The boy is asleep in the room there. You will not let him even learn the story of my shame, will you?”

He put his arm around her waist, but she put it off with a little shiver.

“No! You must not do that now.”

“Why not? In God’s name, why not?”

“Because of what has happened to–night. I am the cause of it all. I know you cannot forgive me now; but oh, some day, for the child’s sake, you may not think so hardly of me.”

He moved on to the sofa and tried to hold her, but she fell on her knees at his feet and burst into a storm of passionate weeping.

“Esther, you are deceiving yourself. I have nothing to forgive. I love you as fondly now—nay, I am wrong, I love you more fondly now than ever. Fortunately I heard all that man said to you. I heard you refuse and repulse him. It was then that I interfered. You are as much my own true wife as you ever were. I love you still, and, as God hears me, I have never doubted you, not for one single moment.”

“You have never doubted me?”

“Never, so help me God!”

He took her in his arms and kissed her tears away. She did not repulse him this time, but clung to him like one returned from the dead.

“Oh, my husband! my husband!” was all that she could say. “Now that I know you love

me still, I can bear anything. Tell me, Cuthbert, all that has happened? Don't spare me."

Without more ado he told her everything—who Murkard really was; how Merton had cherished such a deadly hatred of him; the loss of the pearl; Merton's return to the island, and all the events connected with that fatal night. With the exception of the murder he told her everything. When he had finished, she said;

"And Murkard—where is he? My thanks are due to him."

"He will never receive them, dearest. He is dead."

"Dead!" she cried, in horrified amazement. "Oh, this is too horrible! How did he die?"

"Merton killed him in the store."

Her head dropped on to her hands, and again she sat white and trembling.

"A thief and a murderer, and what did he want to make me?"

"Hush, hush! you must never think of that again; it could not have been. You are the mother of my boy, and I am not afraid for you."

"But, Cuthbert, you don't know all; you don't know how he fascinated me. I seemed to have no will at all when he was talking to me. When he looked into my eyes I had to do his bidding. I was very wicked and weak to listen to him; but try how I would to escape I could not get away."

"He will fascinate no more women; he is safely under lock and key by this time. Now you must go to bed, and try to sleep, or you will be seriously ill after all this excitement. And think what that will mean for me."

She stooped and kissed his forehead, and then, struggling with her tears, departed to her room. Ellison went out into the cool veranda. The sun was just rising above the horizon, and already the Kanaka cook was bustling in and out of his kitchen preparing breakfast for the hands as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. Ellison descended the steps and went across to the store. With a feeling of intense awe he opened the door and passed in. Removing the blanket that covered the figure lying so stiff and cold upon the floor, he stood and looked down at the face he had grown to love so well. Poor Murkard, and yet rather happy, happy Murkard in his last great act of self–sacrifice. As he looked down at him his own sin rose before him in all its shame. Then by the dead body of his friend, who had given his life for him, he registered a solemn vow that never again would he yield to temptation. He had suffered bitterly for this one mistake, and now the whole future should be spent in endeavouring to make amends for it. He re–drew the blanket and left the store.

Shortly after breakfast a hand came to tell him that a police–officer desired to see him. He went out and asked the slim young official his business.

"I have been sent across, Mr. Ellison, to see you regarding the prisoner we removed from here last night on a charge of murder."

"Well, what about him?"

"He is dead—drowned."

"Drowned!" cried Ellison. "What do you mean? When was he drowned?"

“Crossing the straits last night. We’d got him halfway across; my mate pulling, the prisoner sitting amidships, the doctor and myself astern. Suddenly he gave a yell, jumped up, and threw himself overboard before we could stop him. There and then he sank, for his hands were handcuffed behind him, you see; and—well, we’ve not set eyes on him since, and I don’t suppose we’re likely to until his body’s washed up.”

“Good gracious!”

For a few seconds Ellison was so stunned by this intelligence that he could hardly think, and yet when he did come to think it out he could not help seeing that even in this Fate had been very good to him. Except for the fact that he had killed Murkard, he had no desire for Merton’s death, and as it was now, even that result had been achieved. Merton would trouble nobody again. He had gone to hear his verdict at a higher court than that presided over by any Queensland judge, and Ellison could not but own that it was as well. He thanked the police–officer for his intelligence, and went in to tell Esther. She received the news calmly enough. Indeed, it seemed as if she were almost beyond being surprised at anything.

“We seem bereft of everything,” she said at length; “friends, as well as enemies.”

“But we still have each other, and we have the little one asleep in there. Does that count for something, dear?”

“It counts for everything,” she said, and softly kissed his hands.

EPILOGUE

Eighteen months or so ago I happened to be in Tahiti, the capital of the Society Group. I had business in Papeete, and, while walking on the beautiful Broom Road one day, who should I chance upon but Ellison and his wife, picknicking among the palms. We walked down to the town together and dined in company. Afterwards I was invited to a trading schooner lying in the harbour.

“A beautiful boat,” I remarked to her owner, when I had gained the deck. “Why, she’s more like a Royal Cowes Yacht Squadron craft than a simple South Sea trader.”

“It is our home, you see,” he answered. “The pearling station, after Murkard’s death, grew distasteful to us, and as I was fortunate enough to be able to sell it to great advantage, I bought this boat. Since then we have made it our home, and our life is spent cruising about these lovely seas. It suits my wife and the boy admirably, and for that reason, of course, it suits me. Won’t you come and see our son?”

I followed him down the companion into the prettiest little cuddy it has ever been my good fortune to behold. Two large and beautifully fitted up cabins led off it, and in a corner of one of them hung a cradle. Mrs. Ellison conducted us to it, and drew aside the curtain, disclosing the tiny occupant asleep.

“What a really beautiful child!” I cried, in an outburst of sincere admiration, “and pray what may be his name?”

“Murkard,” said the father quietly, and without another remark led me back on deck again.

The name, and the tone in which it was uttered, puzzled me very considerably. But I was destined to be enlightened later on.

That night, when we sat under the awning on deck, smoking, and watching the lights of Papeete glittering ashore, and only the gentle gurgle of the water rising and falling alongside disturbed our talk, Ellison told me the story I have here told you.

When he had finished I felt constrained to say:

“With a little alteration of names and places, what a good book it would make.”

“Wouldn’t it,” he answered seriously. “But my life’s far too full of other interests now to write it.”

“Will you let me try my hand on it?” I asked eagerly.

“If you like. But before you do it you must promise me two things.”

“What are they?”

“That you will do my wife and Murkard justice.”

“Oh, yes! I’ll promise that and more with pleasure. And the other?”

“That you’ll let me down as lightly as possible.”

“I’ll promise that also.”

“Very good then; go ahead.”

I set to work, and in due time the book was written. The next time I met him was in Levuka, Fiji. The schooner was leaving for the Carolines the following morning, and I went on board to wish them God speed. Just as I was pushing off from the gangway on my return to the shore, Ellison, who with his wife alongside him was leaning on the taff–rail, called out:

“Oh, I say! what about your book, my friend?”

“It is finished.”

“Hearty congratulations. I wish you all good luck with it. And pray what do you intend its name to be?”

“That’s a difficult question to answer off–hand; but, all things considered, I think the most appropriate title would be *The Marriage of Esther*.”