FRANK NORRIS

MORAN OF THE LADY LETTY

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I. SHANGHAIED

This is to be a story of a battle, at least one murder, and several sudden deaths. For that reason it begins with a pink tea and among the mingled odors of many delicate perfumes and the hale, frank smell of Caroline Testout roses.

There had been a great number of debutantes "coming out" that season in San Francisco by means of afternoon teas, pink, lavender, and otherwise. This particular tea was intended to celebrate the fact that Josie Herrick had arrived at that time of her life when she was to wear her hair high and her gowns long, and to have a "day" of her own quite distinct from that of her mother.

Ross Wilbur presented himself at the Herrick house on Pacific Avenue much too early upon the afternoon of Miss Herrick's tea. As he made, his way up the canvased stairs he was aware of a terrifying array of millinery and a disquieting staccato chatter of feminine voices in the parlors and reception-rooms on either side of the hallway. A single high hat in the room that had been set apart for the men's use confirmed him in his suspicions.

"Might have known it would be a hen party till six, anyhow,"

he muttered, swinging out of his overcoat. “Bet I don’t know one girl in twenty down there now—all mamma’s friends at this hour, and papa’s maiden sisters, and Jo’s school-teachers and governesses and music-teachers, and I don’t know what all.”

When he went down he found it precisely as he expected. He went up to Miss Herrick, where she stood receiving with her mother and two of the other girls, and allowed them to chaff him on his forlornness.

“Maybe I seem at my ease,” said Ross Wilbur to them, “but really I am very much frightened. I’m going to run away as soon as it is decently possible, even before, unless you feed me.”

“I believe you had luncheon not two hours ago,” said Miss Herrick. “Come along, though, and I’ll give you some chocolate, and perhaps, if you’re good, a stuffed olive. I got them just because I knew you liked them. I ought to stay here and receive, so I can’t look after you for long.”

The two fought their way through the crowded rooms to the luncheon-table, and Miss Herrick got Wilbur his chocolate and his stuffed olives. They sat down and talked in a window recess for a moment, Wilbur toeing-in in absurd fashion as he tried to make a lap for his plate.

“I thought,” said Miss Herrick, “that you were going on the Ridgeways’ yachting party this afternoon. Mrs. Ridgeway said she was counting on you. They are going out with the ‘Petrel.’”

“She didn’t count above a hundred, though,” answered Wilbur. “I got your bid first, so I regretted the yachting party; and I guess

I'd have regretted it anyhow," and he grinned at her over his cup.

"Nice man," she said—adding on the instant, "I must go now, Ross."

"Wait till I eat the sugar out of my cup," complained Wilbur. "Tell me," he added, scraping vigorously at the bottom of the cup with the inadequate spoon; "tell me, you're going to the hoe-down to-night?"

"If you mean the Assembly, yes, I am."

"Will you give me the first and last?"

"I'll give you the first, and you can ask for the last then."

"Let's put it down; I know you'll forget it." Wilbur drew a couple of cards from his case.

"Programmes are not good form any more," said Miss Herrick.

"Forgetting a dance is worse."

He made out the cards, writing on the one he kept for himself, "First waltz—Jo."

"I must go back now," said Miss Herrick, getting up.

"In that case I shall run—I'm afraid of girls."

"It's a pity about you."

"I am; one girl, I don't say, but girl in the aggregate like this," and he pointed his chin toward the thronged parlors. "It un-mans me."

"Good-by, then."

"Good-by, until to-night, about—?"

"About nine."

"About nine, then."

Ross Wilbur made his adieu to Mrs. Herrick and the girls who were receiving, and took himself away. As he came out of the house and stood for a moment on the steps, settling his hat gingerly upon his hair so as not to disturb the parting, he was not by any means an ill-looking chap. His good height was helped out by his long coat and his high silk hat, and there was plenty of jaw in the lower part of his face. Nor was his tailor altogether answerable for his shoulders. Three years before this time Ross Wilbur had pulled at No. 5 in his varsity boat in an Eastern college that was not accustomed to athletic discomfiture.

"I wonder what I'm going to do with myself until supper time," he muttered, as he came down the steps, feeling for the middle of his stick. He found no immediate answer to his question. But the afternoon was fine, and he set off to walk in the direction of the town, with a half-formed idea of looking in at his club.

At his club he found a letter in his box from his particular chum, who had been spending the month shooting elk in Oregon.

> "Dear Old Man," it said, "will be back on the afternoon you receive this. Will hit the town on the three o'clock boat. Get seats for the best show going—my treat—and arrange to assimilate nutriment at the Poodle Dog—also mine. I've got miles of talk in me that I've got to reel off before midnight. Yours.
> *"JERRY."*

"I've got a stand of horns for you, Ross, that are Glory

Hallelujah."

"Well, I can't go," murmured Wilbur, as he remembered the Assembly that was to come off that night and his engaged dance with Jo Herrick. He decided that it would be best to meet Jerry as he came off the boat and tell him how matters stood. Then he resolved, since no one that he knew was in the club, and the instalment of the Paris weeklies had not arrived, that it would be amusing to go down to the water-front and loaf among the shipping until it was time for Jerry's boat.

Wilbur spent an hour along the wharves, watching the great grain ships consigned to "Cork for orders" slowly gorging themselves with whole harvests of wheat from the San Joaquin Valley; lumber vessels for Durban and South African ports settling lower and lower to the water's level as forests of pine and redwood stratified themselves along their decks and in their holds; coal barges discharging from Nanaimo; busy little tugs coughing and nuzzling at the flanks of the deep-sea tramps, while hay barges and Italian whitehalls came and went at every turn. A Stockton River boat went by, her stern wheel churning along behind, like a huge net-reel; a tiny maelstrom of activity centred about an Alaska Commercial Company's steamboat that would clear for Dawson in the morning.

No quarter of one of the most picturesque cities in the world had more interest for Wilbur than the water-front. In the mile or so of shipping that stretched from the docks where the China steamships landed, down past the ferry slips and on

to Meiggs's Wharf, every maritime nation in the world was represented. More than once Wilbur had talked to the loungers of the wharves, stevedores out of work, sailors between voyages, caulkers and ship chandlers' men looking—not too earnestly—for jobs; so that on this occasion, when a little, undersized fellow in dirty brown sweater and clothes of Barbary coast cut asked him for a match to light his pipe, Wilbur offered a cigar and passed the time of day with him. Wilbur had not forgotten that he himself was dressed for an afternoon function. But the incongruity of the business was precisely what most amused him.

After a time the fellow suggested drinks. Wilbur hesitated for a moment. It would be something to tell about, however, so, "All right, I'll drink with you," he said.

The brown sweater led the way to a sailors' boarding-house hard by. The rear of the place was built upon piles over the water. But in front, on the ground floor, was a barroom.

"Rum an' gum," announced the brown sweater, as the two came in and took their places at the bar.

"Rum an' gum, Tuck; wattle you have, sir?"

"Oh—I don't know," hesitated Wilbur; "give me a mild Manhattan."

While the drinks were being mixed the brown sweater called Wilbur's attention to a fighting head-dress from the Marquesas that was hung on the wall over the free-lunch counter and opposite the bar. Wilbur turned about to look at it, and remained so, his back to the barkeeper, till the latter told them their drinks

were ready.

"Well, mate, here's big blocks an' taut hawse-pipes," said the brown sweater cordially.

"Your very good health," returned Wilbur.

The brown sweater wiped a thin mustache in the hollow of his palm, and wiped that palm upon his trouser leg.

"Yessir," he continued, once more facing the Marquesas headdress. "Yessir, they're queer game down there."

"In the Marquesas Islands, you mean?" said Wilbur.

"Yessir, they're queer game. When they ain't tattoin' theirselves with Scripture tex's they git from the missionaries, they're pullin' out the hairs all over their bodies with two clamshells. Hair by hair, y' understan'?"

"Pull'n out 'er hair?" said Wilbur, wondering what was the matter with his tongue.

"They think it's clever—think the women folk like it."

Wilbur had fancied that the little man had worn a brown sweater when they first met. But now, strangely enough, he was not in the least surprised to see it iridescent like a pigeon's breast.

"Y' ever been down that way?" inquired the little man next.

Wilbur heard the words distinctly enough, but somehow they refused to fit into the right places in his brain. He pulled himself together, frowning heavily.

"What—did—you—say?" he asked with great deliberation, biting off his words. Then he noticed that he and his companion were no longer in the barroom, but in a little room back of it.

His personality divided itself. There was one Ross Wilbur—who could not make his hands go where he wanted them, who said one word when he thought another, and whose legs below the knee were made of solid lead. Then there was another Ross Wilbur—Ross Wilbur, the alert, who was perfectly clear-headed, and who stood off to one side and watched his twin brother making a monkey of himself, without power and without even the desire of helping him.

This latter Wilbur heard the iridescent sweater say:

"Bust me, if y' a'n't squiffy, old man. Stand by a bit an' we'll have a ball."

"Can't have got—return—exceptionally—and the round table—pull out hairs wi' tu clamsh'ls," gabbled Wilbur's stupefied double; and Wilbur the alert said to himself: "You're not drunk, Ross Wilbur, that's certain; what could they have put in your cocktail?"

The iridescent sweater stamped twice upon the floor and a trap-door fell away beneath Wilbur's feet like the drop of a gallows. With the eyes of his undrugged self Wilbur had a glimpse of water below. His elbow struck the floor as he went down, and he fell feet first into a Whitehall boat. He had time to observe two men at the oars and to look between the piles that supported the house above him and catch a glimpse of the bay and a glint of the Contra Costa shore. He was not in the least surprised at what had happened, and made up his mind that it would be a good idea to lie down in the boat and go to sleep.

Suddenly—but how long after his advent into the boat he could not tell—his wits began to return and settle themselves, like wild birds flocking again after a scare. Swiftly he took in the scene. The blue waters of the bay around him, the deck of a schooner on which he stood, the Whitehall boat alongside, and an enormous man with a face like a setting moon wrangling with his friend in the sweater—no longer iridescent.

"What do you call it?" shouted the red man. "I want able seamen—I don't figger on working this boat with dancing masters, do I? We ain't exactly doing quadrilles on my quarterdeck. If we don't look out we'll step on this thing and break it. It ain't ought to be let around loose without its ma."

"Rot that," vociferated the brown sweater. "I tell you he's one of the best sailor men on the front. If he ain't we'll forfeit the money. Come on, Captain Kitchell, we made show enough gettin' away as it was, and this daytime business ain't our line. D'you sign or not? Here's the advance note. I got to duck my nut or I'll have the patrol boat after me."

"I'll sign this once," growled the other, scrawling his name on the note; "but if this swab ain't up to sample, he'll come back by freight, an' I'll drop in on mee dear friend Jim when we come back and give him a reel nice time, an' you can lay to that, Billy Trim." The brown sweater pocketed the note, went over the side, and rowed off.

Wilbur stood in the waist of a schooner anchored in the stream well off Fisherman's wharf. In the forward part of the

schooner a Chinaman in brown duck was mixing paint. Wilbur was conscious that he still wore his high hat and long coat, but his stick was gone and one gray glove was slit to the button. In front of him towered the enormous red-faced man. A pungent reek of some kind of rancid fat or oil assailed his nostrils. Over by Alcatraz a ferry-boat whistled for its slip as it elbowed its way through the water.

Wilbur had himself fairly in hand by now. His wits were all about him; but the situation was beyond him as yet.

"Git for'd," commanded the big man.

Wilbur drew himself up, angry in an instant. "Look here," he began, "what's the meaning of this business? I know I've been drugged and mishandled. I demand to be put ashore. Do you understand that?"

"Angel child," whimpered the big man. "Oh, you lilee of the vallee, you bright an' mornin' star. I'm reely pained y'know, that your vally can't come along, but we'll have your piano set up in the lazarette. It gives me genuine grief, it do, to see you bein' obliged to put your lilee white feet on this here vulgar an' dirtee deck. We'll have the Wilton carpet down by to-morrer, so we will, my dear. Yah-h!" he suddenly broke out, as his rage boiled over. "Git for'd, d'ye hear! I'm captain of this here bathtub, an' that's all you need to know for a good while to come. I ain't generally got to tell that to a man but once; but I'll stretch the point just for love of you, angel child. Now, then, move!"

Wilbur stood motionless—puzzled beyond expression. No

experience he had ever been through helped in this situation.

"Look here," he began, "I—"

The captain knocked him down with a blow of one enormous fist upon the mouth, and while he was yet stretched upon the deck kicked him savagely in the stomach. Then he allowed him to rise, caught him by the neck and the slack of his overcoat, and ran him forward to where a hatchway, not two feet across, opened in the deck. Without ado, he flung him down into the darkness below; and while Wilbur, dizzied by the fall, sat on the floor at the foot of the vertical companion-ladder, gazing about him with distended eyes, there rained down upon his head, first an oilskin coat, then a sou'wester, a pair of oilskin breeches, woolen socks, and a plug of tobacco. Above him, down the contracted square of the hatch, came the bellowing of the Captain's voice:

"There's your fit-out, Mister Lilee of the Vallee, which the same our dear friend Jim makes a present of and no charge, because he loves you so. You're allowed two minutes to change, an' it is to be hoped as how you won't force me to come for to assist."

It would have been interesting to have followed, step by step, the mental process that now took place in Ross Wilbur's brain. The Captain had given him two minutes in which to change. The time was short enough, but even at that Wilbur changed more than his clothes during the two minutes he was left to himself in the reekind dark of the schooner's fo'castle. It was more than a change—it was a revolution. What he made up his mind to do

—precisely what mental attitude he decided to adopt, just what new niche he elected wherein to set his feet, it is difficult to say. Only by results could the change be guessed at. He went down the forward hatch at the toe of Kitchell's boot—silk-hatted, melton-overcoated, patent-booted, and gloved in suedes. Two minutes later there emerged upon the deck a figure in oilskins and a sou'wester. There was blood upon the face of him and the grime of an unclean ship upon his bare hands. It was Wilbur, and yet not Wilbur. In two minutes he had been, in a way, born again. The only traces of his former self were the patent-leather boots, still persistent in their gloss and shine, that showed grim incongruity below the vast compass of the oilskin breeches.

As Wilbur came on deck he saw the crew of the schooner hurrying forward, six of them, Chinamen every one, in brown jeans and black felt hats. On the quarterdeck stood the Captain, barking his orders.

"Consider the Lilee of the Vallee," bellowed the latter, as his eye fell upon Wilbur the Transformed. "Clap on to that starboard windlass brake, sonny."

Wilbur saw the Chinamen ranging themselves about what he guessed was the windlass in the schooner's bow. He followed and took his place among them, grasping one of the bars.

"Break down!" came the next order. Wilbur and the Chinamen obeyed, bearing up and down upon the bars till the slack of the anchor-chain came home and stretched taut and dripping from the hawse-holes.

"'Vast heavin'!"

And then as Wilbur released the brake and turned about for the next order, he cast his glance out upon the bay, and there, not a hundred and fifty yards away, her spotless sails tense, her cordage humming, her immaculate flanks slipping easily through the waves, the water hissing and churning under her forefoot, clean, gleaming, dainty, and aristocratic, the Ridgeways' yacht "Petrel" passed like a thing of life. Wilbur saw Nat Ridgeway himself at the wheel. Girls in smart gowns and young fellows in white ducks and yachting caps—all friends of his—crowded the decks. A little orchestra of musicians were reeling off a quickstep.

The popping of a cork and a gale of talk and laughter came to his ears. Wilbur stared at the picture, his face devoid of expression. The "Petrel" came on—drew nearer—was not a hundred feet away from the schooner's stern. A strong swimmer, such as Wilbur, could cover the distance in a few strides. Two minutes ago Wilbur might have—

"Set your mains'l," came the bellow of Captain Kitchell. "Clap on to your throat and peak halyards."

The Chinamen hurried aft.

Wilbur followed.

II. A NAUTICAL EDUCATION

In the course of the next few moments, while the little vessel was being got under way, and while the Ridgeways' "Petrel" gleamed off into the blue distance, Wilbur made certain observations.

The name of the boat on which he found himself was the "Bertha Millner." She was a two-topmast, 28-ton keel schooner, 40 feet long, carrying a large spread of sail—mainsail, foresail, jib, flying-jib, two gaff-topsails, and a staysail. She was very dirty and smelt abominably of some kind of rancid oil. Her crew were Chinamen; there was no mate. But the cook—himself a Chinaman—who appeared from time to time at the door of the galley, a potato-masher in his hand, seemed to have some sort of authority over the hands. He acted in a manner as a go-between for the Captain and the crew, sometimes interpreting the former's orders, and occasionally giving one of his own.

Wilbur heard the Captain address him as Charlie. He spoke pigeon English fairly. Of the balance of the crew—the five Chinamen—Wilbur could make nothing. They never spoke, neither to Captain Kitchell, to Charlie, nor to each other; and for all the notice they took of Wilbur he might easily have been a sack of sand. Wilbur felt that his advent on the "Bertha Millner" was by its very nature an extraordinary event; but the absolute indifference of these brown-suited Mongols, the blankness of

their flat, fat faces, the dulness of their slanting, fishlike eyes that never met his own or even wandered in his direction, was uncanny, disquieting. In what strange venture was he now to be involved, toward what unknown vortex was this new current setting, this current that had so suddenly snatched him from the solid ground of his accustomed life?

He told himself grimly that he was to have a free cruise up the bay, perhaps as far as Alviso; perhaps the "Bertha Millner" would even make the circuit of the bay before returning to San Francisco. He might be gone a week. Wilbur could already see the scare-heads of the daily papers the next morning, chronicling the disappearance of "One of Society's Most Popular Members."

"That's well, y'r throat halyards. Here, Lilee of the Vallee, give a couple of pulls on y'r peak halyard purchase."

Wilbur stared at the Captain helplessly.

"No can tell, hey?" inquired Charlie from the galley. "Pullum disa lope, sabe?"

Wilbur tugged at the rope the cook indicated.

"That's well, y'r peak halyard purchase," chanted Captain Kitchell.

Wilbur made the rope fast. The mainsail was set, and hung slatting and flapping in the wind. Next the for'sail was set in much the same manner, and Wilbur was ordered to "lay out on the ji'boom and cast the gaskets off the jib." He "lay out" as best he could and cast off the gaskets—he knew barely enough of yachting to understand an order here and there—and by the time

he was back on the fo'c'sle head the Chinamen were at the jib halyard and hoisting away.

"That's well, y'r jib halyards."

The "Bertha Millner" veered round and played off to the wind, tugging at her anchor.

"Man y'r windlass."

Wilbur and the crew jumped once more to the brakes.

"Brake down, heave y'r anchor to the cathead."

The anchor-chain, already taut, vibrated and then cranked through the hawse-holes as the hands rose and fell at the brakes. The anchor came home, dripping gray slime. A nor'west wind filled the schooner's sails, a strong ebb tide caught her underfoot.

"We're off," muttered Wilbur, as the "Bertha Millner" heeled to the first gust.

But evidently the schooner was not bound up the bay.

"Must be Vallejo or Benicia, then," hazarded Wilbur, as the sails grew tenser and the water rippled ever louder under the schooner's forefoot. "Maybe they're going after hay or wheat."

The schooner was tacking, headed directly for Meiggs's wharf. She came in closer and closer, so close that Wilbur could hear the talk of the fishermen sitting on the stringpieces. He had just made up his mind that they were to make a landing there, when—

"Stand by for stays," came the raucous bark of the Captain, who had taken on the heel. The sails slatted furiously as the schooner came about. Then the "Bertha Millner" caught the wind

again and lay over quietly and contentedly to her work. The next tack brought the schooner close under Alcatraz. The sea became heavier, the breeze grew stiff and smelled of the outside ocean. Out beyond them to westward opened the Golden Gate, a bleak vista of gray-green water roughened with white-caps.

"Stand by for stays."

Once again as the rudder went hard over, the "Bertha Millner" fretted and danced and shook her sails, calling impatiently for the wind, chafing at its absence like a child reft of a toy. Then again she scooped the nor'wester in the hollow palms of her tense canvases and settled quietly down on the new tack, her bowsprit pointing straight toward the Presidio.

"We'll come about again soon," Wilbur told himself, "and stand over toward the Contra Costa shore."

A fine huge breath of wind passed over the schooner. She heeled it on the instant, the water roaring along her quarter, but she kept her course. Wilbur fell thoughtful again, never more keenly observant.

"She must come about soon," he muttered uneasily, "if she's going to stand up toward Vallejo." His heart sank with a sudden apprehension. A nervousness he could not overcome seized upon him. The "Bertha Millner" held tenaciously to the tack. Within fifty yards of the Presidio came the command again:

"Stand by for stays."

Once more, her bows dancing, her cordage rattling, her sails flapping noisily, the schooner came about. Anxiously Wilbur

observed the bowsprit as it circled like a hand on a dial, watching where now it would point. It wavered, fluctuated, rose, fell, then settled easily, pointing toward Lime Point. Wilbur felt a sudden coldness at his heart.

"This isn't going to be so much fun," he muttered between his teeth. The schooner was not bound up the bay for Alviso nor to Vallejo for grain. The track toward Lime Point could mean but one thing. The wind was freshening from the nor'west, the ebb tide rushing out to meet the ocean like a mill-race, at every moment the Golden Gate opened out wider, and within two minutes after the time of the last tack the "Bertha Millner" heeled to a great gust that had come booming in between the heads, straight from the open Pacific.

"Stand by for stays."

As before, one of the Chinese hands stood by the sail rope of the jib.

"Draw y'r jib."

The jib filled. The schooner came about on the port tack; Lime Point fell away over the stern rail. The huge ground swells began to come in, and as she rose and bowed to the first of these it was precisely as though the "Bertha Millner" were making her courtesy to the great gray ocean, now for the first time in full sight on her starboard quarter.

The schooner was beating out to sea through the Middle Channel. Once clear of the Golden Gate, she stood over toward the Cliff House, then on the next tack cleared Point Bonita. The

sea began building up in deadly earnest—they were about to cross the bar. Everything was battened down, the scuppers were awash, and the hawse-holes spouted like fountains after every plunge. Once the Captain ordered all men aloft, just in time to escape a gigantic dull green roller that broke like a Niagara over the schooner's bows, smothering the decks knee-deep in a twinkling.

The wind blew violent and cold, the spray was flying like icy small-shot. Without intermission the "Bertha Millner" rolled and plunged and heaved and sank. Wilbur was drenched to the skin and sore in every joint, from being shunted from rail to mast and from mast to rail again. The cordage sang like harp-strings, the schooner's forefoot crushed down into the heaving water with a hissing like that of steam, blocks rattled, the Captain bellowed his orders, rope-ends flogged the hollow deck till it reverberated like a drum-head. The crossing of the bar was one long half-hour of confusion and discordant sound.

When they were across the bar the Captain ordered the cook to give the men their food.

"Git for'rd, sonny," he added, fixing Wilbur with his eye. "Git for'rd, this is tawble dee hote, savvy?"

Wilbur crawled forward on the reeling deck, holding on now to a mast, now to a belaying-pin, now to a stay, watching his chance and going on between the inebriated plunges of the schooner.

He descended the fo'c'sle hatch. The Chinamen were already

there, sitting on the edges of their bunks. On the floor, at the bottom of the ladder, punk-sticks were burning in an old tomato-can.

Charlie brought in supper—stewed beef and pork in a bread-pan and a wooden kit—and the Chinamen ate in silence with their sheath-knives and from tin plates. A liquid that bore a distant resemblance to coffee was served. Wilbur learned afterward to know the stuff as Black Jack, and to be aware that it was made from bud barley and was sweetened with molasses. A single reeking lamp swung with the swinging of the schooner over the centre of the group, and long after Wilbur could remember the grisly scene—the punk-sticks, the bread-pan full of hunks of meat, the horrid close and oily smell, and the circle of silent, preoccupied Chinese, each sitting on his bunk-ledge, devouring stewed pork and holding his pannikin of Black Jack between his feet against the rolling of the boat.

Wilbur looked fearfully at the mess in the pan, recalling the chocolate and stuffed olives that had been his last luncheon.

"Well," he muttered, clinching his teeth, "I've got to come to it sooner or later." His penknife was in the pocket of his waist-coat, underneath his oilskin coat. He opened the big blade, harpooned a cube of pork, and deposited it on his tin plate. He ate it slowly and with savage determination. But the Black Jack was more than he could bear.

"I'm not hungry enough for that just now," he told himself. "Say, Jim," he said, turning to the Chinaman next him on the

bunk-ledge, "say, what kind of boat is this? What you do—where you go?"

The other moved away impatiently.

"No sabe, no sabe," he answered, shaking his head and frowning. Throughout the whole of that strange meal these were the only words spoken.

When Wilbur came on deck again he noted that the "Bertha Millner" had already left the whistling-buoy astern. Off to the east, her sails just showing above the waves, was a pilot-boat with the number 7 on her mainsail. The evening was closing in; the Farallones were in plain sight dead ahead. Far behind, in a mass of shadow just bluer than the sky, he could make out a few twinkling lights—San Francisco.

Half an hour later Kitchell came on deck from his supper in the cabin aft. He glanced in the direction of the mainland, now almost out of sight, then took the wheel from one of the Chinamen and commanded, "Ease off y'r fore an' main sheets." The hands eased away and the schooner played off before the wind.

The staysail was set. The "Bertha Millner" headed to southwest, bowling easily ahead of a good eight-knot breeze.

Next came the order "All hands aft!" and Wilbur and his mates betook themselves to the quarterdeck. Charlie took the wheel, and he and Kitchell began to choose the men for their watches, just as Wilbur remembered to have chosen sides for baseball during his school days.

"Sonny, I'll choose you; you're on my watch," said the Captain to Wilbur, "and I will assoom the ree-sponsibility of your nautical eddoocation."

"I may as well tell you at once," began Wilbur, "that I'm no sailor."

"But you will be, soon," answered the Captain, at once soothing and threatening; "you will be, Mister Lilee of the Vallee, you kin lay to it as how you will be one of the best sailormen along the front, as our dear friend Jim says. Before I git throo with you, you'll be a sailorman or shark-bait, I can promise you. You're on my watch; step over here, son."

The watches were divided, Charlie and three other Chinamen on the port, Kitchell, Wilbur, and two Chinamen on the starboard. The men trooped forward again.

The tiny world of the schooner had lapsed to quiet. The "Bertha Millner" was now clear of the land, that lay like a blur of faintest purple smoke—ever growing fainter—low in the east. The Farallones showed but their shoulders above the horizon. The schooner was standing well out from shore—even beyond the track of the coasters and passenger steamers—to catch the Trades from the northwest. The sun was setting royally, and the floor of the ocean shimmered like mosaic. The sea had gone down and the fury of the bar was a thing forgotten. It was perceptibly warmer.

On board, the two watches mingled forward, smoking opium and playing a game that looked like checkers. Three of them

were washing down the decks with kaiar brooms. For the first time since he had come on board Wilbur heard the sound of their voices.

The evening was magnificent. Never to Wilbur's eyes had the Pacific appeared so vast, so radiant, so divinely beautiful. A star or two burned slowly through that part of the sky where the pink began to fade into the blue. Charlie went forward and set the side lights—red on the port rigging, green on the starboard. As he passed Wilbur, who was leaning over the rail and watching the phosphorus flashing just under the surface, he said:

"Hey, you go talkee-talk one-piecey Boss, savvy Boss—chin-chin."

Wilbur went aft and came up on the poop, where Kitchell stood at the wheel, smoking an inverted "Tarrier's Delight."

"Now, son," began Kitchell, "I natch'ly love you so that I'm goin' to do you a reel favor, do you twig? I'm goin' to allow you to berth aft in the cabin, 'long o' me an' Charlie, an' beesides you can make free of my quarterdeck. Mebbee you ain't used to the ways of sailormen just yet, but you can lay to it that those two are reel concessions, savvy? I ain't a mush-head, like mee dear friend Jim. You ain't no water-front swine, I can guess that with one hand tied beehind me. You're a toff, that's what you are, and your lines has been laid for toffs. I ain't askin' you no questions, but you got brains, an' I figger on gettin' more outa you by lettin' you have y'r head a bit. But mind, now, you get gay once, sonny, or try to flimflam me, or forget that I'm the boss of the bathtub,

an' strike me blind, I'll cut you open, an' you can lay to that, son. Now, then, here's the game: You work this boat 'long with the coolies, an' take my orders, an' walk chalk, an' I'll teach you navigation, an' make this cruise as easy as how-do-you-do. You don't, an' I'll manhandle you till y'r bones come throo y'r hide."

"I've no choice in the matter," said Wilbur. "I've got to make the best of a bad situation."

"I ree-marked as how you had brains," muttered the Captain.

"But there's one thing," continued Wilbur; "if I'm to have my head a little, as you say, you'll find we can get along better if you put me to rights about this whole business. Why was I brought aboard, why are there only Chinese along, where are we going, what are we going to do, and how long are we going to be gone?"

Kitchell spat over the side, and then sucked the nicotine from his mustache.

"Well," he said, resuming his pipe, "it's like this, son. This ship belongs to one of the Six Chinese Companies of Chinatown in Frisco. Charlie, here, is one of the shareholders in the business. We go down here twice a year off Cape Sain' Lucas, Lower California, an' fish for blue sharks, or white, if we kin ketch 'em. We get the livers of these an' try out the oil, an' we bring back that same oil, an' the Chinamen sell it all over San Francisco as simon-pure cod-liver oil, savvy? An' it pays like a nitrate bed. I come in because it's a Custom-house regulation that no coolie can take a boat out of Frisco."

"And how do I come in?" asked Wilbur.

"Mee dear friend Jim put a knock-me-out drop into your Manhattan cocktail. It's a capsule filled with a drug. You were shanghaied, son," said the Captain, blandly.

About an hour later Wilbur turned in. Kitchell showed him his bunk with its "donkey's breakfast" and single ill-smelling blanket. It was located under the companionway that led down into the cabin. Kitchell bunked on one side, Charlie on the other. A hacked deal table, covered with oilcloth and ironed to the floor, a swinging-lamp, two chairs, a rack of books, a chest or two, and a flaring picture cut from the advertisement of a ballet, was the room's inventory in the matter of furniture and ornament.

Wilbur sat on the edge of his bunk before undressing, reviewing the extraordinary events of the day. In a moment he was aware of a movement in one of the other two bunks, and presently made out Charlie lying on his side and holding in the flame of an alcohol lamp a skewer on which some brown and sticky stuff boiled and sizzled. He transformed the stuff to the bowl of a huge pipe and drew on it noisily once or twice. In another moment he had sunk back in his bunk, nearly senseless, but with a long breath of an almost blissful contentment.

"Beast!" muttered Wilbur, with profound disgust.

He threw off his oilskin coat and felt in the pocket of his waistcoat (which he had retained when he had changed his clothes in the fo'c'sle) for his watch. He drew it out. It was just nine o'clock. All at once an idea occurred to him. He fumbled in another pocket of the waistcoat and brought out one of his

calling-cards.

For a moment Wilbur remained motionless, seated on the bunk-ledge, smiling grimly, while his glance wandered now to the sordid cabin of the "Bertha Millner" and the opium-drugged coolie sprawled on the "donkey's breakfast," and now to the card in his hand on which a few hours ago he had written:

"First waltz—Jo."

III. THE LADY LETTY

Another day passed, then two. Before Wilbur knew it he had settled himself to his new life, and woke one morning to the realization that he was positively enjoying himself. Daily the weather grew warmer. The fifth day out from San Francisco it was actually hot. The pitch grew soft in the "Bertha Millner's" deck seams, the masts sweated resin. The Chinamen went about the decks wearing but their jeans and blouses. Kitchell had long since abandoned his coat and vest. Wilbur's oilskins became intolerable, and he was at last constrained to trade his pocket-knife to Charlie for a suit of jeans and wicker sandals, such as the coolies wore—and odd enough he looked in them.

The Captain instructed him in steering, and even promised to show him the use of the sextant and how to take an observation in the fake short and easy coasting style of navigation. Furthermore, he showed him how to read the log and the manner of keeping the dead reckoning.

During most of his watches Wilbur was engaged in painting the inside of the cabin, door panels, lintels, and the few scattered moldings; and toward the middle of the first week out, when the "Bertha Millner" was in the latitude of Point Conception, he and three Chinamen, under Kitchell's directions, ratlined down the forerigging and affixed the crow's nest upon the for'mast. The next morning, during Charlie's watch on deck, a Chinaman was

sent up into the crow's nest, and from that time on there was always a lookout maintained from the masthead.

More than once Wilbur looked around him at the empty coruscating indigo of the ocean floor, wondering at the necessity of the lookout, and finally expressed his curiosity to Kitchell. The Captain had now taken not a little to Wilbur; at first for the sake of a white man's company, and afterward because he began to place a certain vague reliance upon Wilbur's judgment. Kitchell had reemarked as how he had brains.

"Well, you see, son," Kitchell had explained to Wilbur, "ostensiblee we are after shark-liver oil—and so we are; but also we are on any lay that turns up; ready for any game, from wrecking to barratry. Strike me, if I haven't thought of scuttling the dough-dish for her insoorance. There's regular trade, son, to be done in ships, and then there's pickin's an' pickin's an' pickin's. Lord, the ocean's rich with pickin's. Do you know there's millions made out of the day-bree and refuse of a big city? How about an ocean's day-bree, just chew on that notion a turn; an' as fur a lookout, lemmee tell you, son, cast your eye out yon," and he swept the sea with a forearm; "nothin', hey, so it looks, but lemmee tell you, son, there ain't no manner of place on the ball of dirt where you're likely to run up afoul of so many things—unexpected things—as at sea. When you're clear o' land lay to this here pree-cep', 'A million to one on the unexpected.'"

The next day fell almost dead calm. The hale, lusty-lunged nor'wester that had snorted them forth from the Golden Gate had

lapsed to a zephyr, the schooner rolled lazily southward with the leisurely nonchalance of a grazing ox. At noon, just after dinner, a few cat's-paws curdled the milky-blue whiteness of the glassy surface, and the water once more began to talk beneath the bowsprit. It was very hot. The sun spun silently like a spinning brass discus over the mainmast. On the fo'c'sle head the Chinamen were asleep or smoking opium. It was Charlie's watch. Kitchell dozed in his hammock in the shadow of the mainsheet. Wilbur was below tinkering with his paint-pot about the cabin. The stillness was profound. It was the stillness of the summer sea at high noon.

The lookout in the crow's nest broke the quiet.

"Hy-yah, hy-yah!" he cried, leaning from the barrel and calling through an arched palm. "Hy-yah, one two, plenty, many tortle, topside, wattah; hy-yah, all-same tortle."

"Hello, hello!" cried the Captain, rolling from his hammock. "Turtle? Where-away?"

"I tink-um 'bout quallah mile, mebbee, four-piecee tortle all-same weatha bow."

"Turtle, hey? Down y'r wheel, Jim, haul y'r jib to win'ward," he commanded the man at the wheel; then to the men forward: "Get the dory overboard. Son, Charlie, and you, Wing, tumble in. Wake up now and see you stay so."

The dory was swung over the side, and the men dropped into her and took their places at the oars. "Give way," cried the Captain, settling himself in the bow with the gaff in his hand.

"Hey, Jim!" he shouted to the lookout far above, "hey, lay our course for us." The lookout nodded, the oars fell, and the dory shot forward in the direction indicated by the lookout.

"Kin you row, son? asked Kitchell, with sudden suspicion. Wilbur smiled.

"You ask Charlie and Wing to ship their oars and give me a pair." The Captain complied, hesitating.

"Now, what," he said grimly, "now, what do you think you're going to do, sonny?"

"I'm going to show you the Bob Cook stroke we used in our boat in '95, when we beat Harvard," answered Wilbur.

Kitchell gazed doubtfully at the first few strokes, then with growing interest watched the tremendous reach, the powerful knee-drive, the swing, the easy catch, and the perfect recover. The dory was cutting the water like a gasoline launch, and between strokes there was the least possible diminishing of the speed.

"I'm a bit out of form just now," remarked Wilbur, "and I'm used to the sliding seat; but I guess it'll do." Kitchell glanced at the human machine that once was No. 5 in the Yale boat and then at the water hissing from the dory's bows. "My Gawd!" he said, under his breath. He spat over the bows and sucked the nicotine from his mustache, thoughtfully.

"I ree-marked," he observed, "as how you had brains, my son."

A few minutes later the Captain, who was standing in the dory's bow and alternately conning the ocean's surface and

looking back to the Chinaman standing on the schooner's masthead, uttered an exclamation:

"Steady, ship your oars, quiet now, quiet, you damn fools! We're right on 'em—four, by Gawd, an' big as dinin' tables!"

The oars were shipped. The dory's speed dwindled. "Out your paddles, sit on the gun'l, and paddle ee-asy." The hands obeyed. The Captain's voice dropped to a whisper. His back was toward them and he gestured with one free hand. Looking out over the water from his seat on the gun'l, Wilbur could make out a round, greenish mass like a patch of floating seaweed, just under the surface, some sixty yards ahead.

"Easy sta'board," whispered the Captain under his elbow. "Go ahead, port; e-e-easy all, steady, steady."

The affair began to assume the intensity of a little drama—a little drama of midocean. In spite of himself, Wilbur was excited. He even found occasion to observe that the life was not so bad, after all. This was as good fun as stalking deer. The dory moved forward by inches. Kitchell's whisper was as faint as a dying infant's: "Steady all, s-stead-ee, sh-stead—"

He lunged forward sharply with the gaff, and shouted aloud: "I got him—grab holt his tail flippers, you fool swabs; grab holt quick—don't you leggo—got him there, Charlie? If he gets away, you swine, I'll rip y' open with the gaff—heave now—heave —there—there—soh, stand clear his nippers. Strike me! he's a whacker. I thought he was going to get away. Saw me just as I swung the gaff, an' ducked his nut."

Over the side, bundled without ceremony into the boat, clawing, thrashing, clattering, and blowing like the exhaust of a donkey-engine, tumbled the great green turtle, his wet, green shield of shell three feet from edge to edge, the gaff firmly transfixed in his body, just under the fore-flipper. From under his shell protruded his snake-like head and neck, withered like that of an old man. He was waving his head from side to side, the jaws snapping like a snapped silk handkerchief. Kitchell thrust him away with a paddle. The turtle craned his neck, and catching the bit of wood in his jaw, bit it in two in a single grip.

"I tol' you so, I tol' you to stand clear his snapper. If that had been your shin now, eh? Hello, what's that?"

Faintly across the water came a prolonged hallooing from the schooner. Kitchell stood up in the dory, shading his eyes with his hat.

"What's biting 'em now?" he muttered, with the uneasiness of a captain away from his ship. "Oughta left Charlie on board—or you, son. Who's doin' that yellin', I can't make out."

"Up in the crow's nest," exclaimed Wilbur. "It's Jim, see, he's waving his arms."

"Well, whaduz he wave his dam' fool arms for?" growled Kitchell, angry because something was going forward he did not understand.

"There, he's shouting again. Listen—I can't make out what he's yelling."

"He'll yell to a different pipe when I get my grip of him. I'll

twist the head of that swab till he'll have to walk back'ard to see where he's goin'. Whaduz he wave his arms for—whaduz he yell like a dam' philly-loo bird for? What's him say, Charlie?"

"Jim heap sing, no can tell. Mebbee—tinkum sing, come back chop-chop."

"We'll see. Oars out, men, give way. Now, son, put a little o' that Yale stingo in the stroke."

In the crow's nest Jim still yelled and waved like one distraught, while the dory returned at a smart clip toward the schooner. Kitchell lathered with fury.

"Oh-h," he murmured softly through his gritted teeth. "Jess lemmee lay mee two hands afoul of you wunst, you gibbering, yellow philly-loo bird, believe me, you'll dance. Shut up!" he roared; "shut up, you crazy do-do, ain't we coming fast as we can?"

The dory bumped alongside, and the Captain was over the rail like quicksilver. The hands were all in the bow, looking and pointing to the west. Jim slid down the ratlines, bubbling over with suppressed news. Before his feet had touched the deck Kitchell had kicked him into the stays again, fulminating blasphemies.

"Sing!" he shouted, as the Chinaman clambered away like a bewildered ape; "sing a little more. I would if I were you. Why don't you sing and wave, you dam' fool philly-loo bird?"

"Yas, sah," answered the coolie.

"What you yell for? Charlie, ask him whaffo him sing."

"I tink-um ship," answered Charlie calmly, looking out over the starboard quarter.

"Ship!"

"Him velly sick," hazarded the Chinaman from the ratlines, adding a sentence in Chinese to Charlie.

"He says he tink-um ship sick, all same; ask um something—ship velly sick."

By this time the Captain, Wilbur, and all on board could plainly make out a sail some eight miles off the starboard bow. Even at that distance, and to eyes so inexperienced as those of Wilbur, it needed but a glance to know that something was wrong with her. It was not that she failed to ride the waves with even keel, it was not that her rigging was in disarray, nor that her sails were disordered. Her distance was too great to make out such details. But in precisely the same manner as a trained physician glances at a doomed patient, and from that indefinable look in the face of him and the eyes of him pronounces the verdict "death," so Kitchell took in the stranger with a single comprehensive glance, and exclaimed:

"Wreck!"

"Yas, sah. I tink-um velly sick."

"Oh, go to 'll, or go below and fetch up my glass—hustle!"

The glass was brought. "Son," exclaimed Kitchell—"where is that man with the brains? Son, come aloft here with me." The two clambered up the ratlines to the crow's nest. Kitchell adjusted the glass.

"She's a bark," he muttered, "iron built—about seven hundred tons, I guess—in distress. There's her ensign upside down at the mizz'nhead—looks like Norway—an' her distress signals on the spanker gaff. Take a blink at her, son—what do you make her out? Lord, she's ridin' high."

Wilbur took the glass, catching the stranger after several clumsy attempts. She was, as Captain Kitchell had announced, a bark, and, to judge by her flag, evidently Norwegian.

"How she rolls!" muttered Wilbur.

"That's what I can't make out," answered Kitchell. "A bark such as she ain't ought to roll thata way; her ballast'd steady her."

"What's the flags on that boom aft—one's red and white and square-shaped, and the other's the same color, only swallow-tail in shape?"

"That's H. B., meanin: 'I am in need of assistance.'"

"Well, where's the crew? I don't see anybody on board."

"Oh, they're there right enough."

"Then they're pretty well concealed about the premises," turned Wilbur, as he passed the glass to the Captain.

"She does seem kinda empty," said the Captain in a moment, with a sudden show of interest that Wilbur failed to understand.

"An' where's her boats?" continued Kitchell. "I don't just quite make out any boats at all." There was a long silence.

"Seems to be a sort of haze over her," observed Wilbur.

"I noticed that, air kinda quivers oily-like. No boats, no boats—an' I can't see anybody aboard." Suddenly Kitchell lowered the

glass and turned to Wilbur. He was a different man. There was a new shine in his eyes, a wicked line appeared over the nose, the jaw grew salient, prognathous.

"Son," he exclaimed, gimleting Wilbur with his contracted eyes; "I have reemarked as how you had brains. I kin fool the coolies, but I can't fool you. It looks to me as if that bark yonder was a derelict; an' do you know what that means to us? Chaw on it a turn."

"A derelict?"

"If there's a crew on board they're concealed from the public gaze—an' where are the boats then? I figger she's an abandoned derelict. Do you know what that means for us—for you and I? It means," and gripping Wilbur by the shoulders, he spoke the word into his face with a savage intensity. "It means salvage, do you savvy?—salvage, salvage. Do you figger what salvage on a seven-hundred-tonner would come to? Well, just lemmee drop it into your think tank, an' lay to what I say. It's all the ways from fifty to seventy thousand dollars, whatever her cargo is; call it sixty thousand—thirty thou' apiece. Oh, I don't know!" he exclaimed, lapsing to landman's slang. "Wha'd I say about a million to one on the unexpected at sea?"

"Thirty thousand!" exclaimed Wilbur, without thought as yet.

"Now y'r singin' songs," cried the Captain. "Listen to me, son," he went on, rapidly shutting up the glass and thrusting it back in the case; "my name's Kitchell, and I'm hog right through." He emphasized the words with a leveled forefinger,

his eyes flashing. "H—O—G spells very truly yours, Alvinza Kitchell—ninety-nine swine an' me make a hundred swine. I'm a shoat with both feet in the trough, first, last, an' always. If that bark's abandoned, an' I says she is, she's ours. I'm out for anything that there's stuff in. I guess I'm more of a beach-comber by nature than anything else. If she's abandoned she belongs to us. To 'll with this coolie game. We'll go beach-combin', you and I. We'll board that bark and work her into the nearest port—San Diego, I guess—and get the salvage on her if we have to swim in her. Are you with me?" he held out his hand. The man was positively trembling from head to heel. It was impossible to resist the excitement of the situation, its novelty—the high crow's nest of the schooner, the keen salt air, the Chinamen grouped far below, the indigo of the warm ocean, and out yonder the forsaken derelict, rolling her light hull till the garboard streak flashed in the sun.

"Well, of course, I'm with you, Cap," exclaimed Wilbur, gripping Kitchell's hand. "When there's thirty thousand to be had for the asking I guess I'm a 'na'chel bawn' beach-comber myself."

"Now, nothing about this to the coolies."

"But how will you make out with your owners, the Six Companies? Aren't you bound to bring the 'Bertha' in?"

"Rot my owners!" exclaimed Kitchell. "I ain't a skipper of no oil-boat any longer. I'm a beach-comber." He fixed the wallowing bark with glistening eyes. "Gawd strike me," he murmured, "ain't she a daisy? It's a little Klondike. Come on,

son."

The two went down the ratlines, and Kitchell ordered a couple of the hands into the dory that had been rowing astern. He and Wilbur followed. Charlie was left on board, with directions to lay the schooner to. The dory flew over the water, Wilbur setting the stroke. In a few moments she was well up with the bark. Though a larger boat than the "Bertha Millner," she was rolling in lamentable fashion, and every laboring heave showed her bottom incrusted with barnacles and seaweed.

Her fore and main tops'ls and to'gallants'ls were set, as also were her lower stays'ls and royals. But the braces seemed to have parted, and the yards were swinging back and forth in their ties. The spanker was brailed up, and the spanker boom thrashed idly over the poop as the bark rolled and rolled and rolled. The mainmast was working in its shoe, the rigging and backstays sagged. An air of abandonment, of unspeakable loneliness, of abomination hung about her. Never had Wilbur seen anything more utterly alone. Within three lengths the Captain rose in his place and shouted:

"Bark ahoy!" There was no answer. Thrice he repeated the call, and thrice the dismal thrashing of the spanker boom and the flapping of the sails was the only answer. Kitchell turned to Wilbur in triumph. "I guess she's ours," he whispered. They were now close enough to make out the bark's name upon her counter, "Lady Letty," and Wilbur was in the act of reading it aloud, when a huge brown dorsal fin, like the triangular sail of a lugger, cut

the water between the dory and the bark.

"Shark!" said Kitchell; "and there's another!" he exclaimed in the next instant, "and another! Strike me, the water's alive with 'em'! There's a stiff on the bark, you can lay to that"; and at that, acting on some strange impulse, he called again, "Bark ahoy!" There was no response.

The dory was now well up to the derelict, and pretty soon a prolonged and vibratory hissing noise, strident, insistent, smote upon their ears.

"What's that?" exclaimed Wilbur, perplexed. The Captain shook his head, and just then, as the bark rolled almost to her scuppers in their direction, a glimpse of the deck was presented to their view. It was only a glimpse, gone on the instant, as the bark rolled back to port, but it was time enough for Wilbur and the Captain to note the parted and open seams and the deck bulging, and in one corner blown up and splintered.

The captain smote a thigh.

"Coal!" he cried. "Anthracite coal. The coal he't up and generated gas, of course—no fire, y'understand, just gas—gas blew up the deck—no way of stopping combustion. Naturally they had to cut for it. Smell the gas, can't you? No wonder she's hissing—no wonder she rolled—cargo goes off in gas—and what's to weigh her down? I was wondering what could 'a' wrecked her in this weather. Lord, it's as plain as Billy-b'damn."

The dory was alongside. Kitchell watched his chance, and as the bark rolled down caught the mainyard-brace hanging in a

bight over the rail and swung himself to the deck. “Look sharp!” he called, as Wilbur followed. “It won’t do for you to fall among them shark, son. Just look at the hundreds of ‘em. There’s a stiff on board, sure.”

Wilbur steadied himself on the swaying broken deck, choking against the reek of coal-gas that hissed upward on every hand. The heat was almost like a furnace. Everything metal was intolerable to the touch.

“She’s abandoned, sure,” muttered the Captain. “Look,” and he pointed to the empty chocks on the house and the severed lashings. “Oh, it’s a haul, son; it’s a haul, an’ you can lay to that. Now, then, cabin first,” and he started aft.

But it was impossible to go into the cabin. The moment the door was opened suffocating billows of gas rushed out and beat them back. On the third trial the Captain staggered out, almost overcome with its volume.

“Can’t get in there for a while yet,” he gasped, “but I saw the stiff on the floor by the table; looks like the old man. He’s spit his false teeth out. I knew there was a stiff aboard.”

“Then there’s more than one,” said Wilbur. “See there!” From behind the wheel-box in the stern protruded a hand and forearm in an oilskin sleeve.

Wilbur ran up, peered over the little space between the wheel and the wheel-box, and looked straight into a pair of eyes—eyes that were alive. Kitchell came up.

“One left, anyhow,” he muttered, looking over Wilbur’s

shoulder; “sailor man, though; can’t interfere with our salvage. The bark’s derelict, right enough. Shake him out of there, son; can’t you see the lad’s dotty with the gas?”

Cramped into the narrow space of the wheel-box like a terrified hare in a blind burrow was the figure of a young boy. So firmly was he wedged into the corner that Kitchell had to kick down the box before he could be reached. The boy spoke no word. Stupefied with the gas, he watched them with vacant eyes.

Wilbur put a hand under the lad’s arm and got him to his feet. He was a tall, well-made fellow, with ruddy complexion and milk-blue eyes, and was dressed, as if for heavy weather, in oilskins.

“Well, sonny, you’ve had a fine mess aboard here,” said Kitchell. The boy—he might have been two and twenty—stared and frowned.

“Clean loco from the gas. Get him into the dory, son. I’ll try this bloody cabin again.”

Kitchell turned back and descended from the poop, and Wilbur, his arm around the boy, followed. Kitchell was already out of hearing, and Wilbur was bracing himself upon the rolling deck, steadying the young fellow at his side, when the latter heaved a deep breath. His throat and breast swelled. Wilbur stared sharply, with a muttered exclamation:

“My God, it’s a girl!” he said.

IV. MORAN

Meanwhile Charlie had brought the "Bertha Millner" up to within hailing distance of the bark, and had hove her to. Kitchell ordered Wilbur to return to the schooner and bring over a couple of axes.

"We'll have to knock holes all through the house, and break in the skylights and let the gas escape before we can do anything. Take the kid over and give him whiskey; then come along back and bear a hand."

Wilbur had considerable difficulty in getting into the dory from the deck of the plunging derelict with his dazed and almost helpless charge. Even as he slid down the rope into the little boat and helped the girl to follow, he was aware of two dull, brownish-green shadows moving just beneath the water's surface not ten feet away, and he knew that he was being stealthily watched. The Chinamen at the oars of the dory, with that extraordinary absence of curiosity which is the mark of the race, did not glance a second time at the survivor of the "Lady Letty's" misadventure. To them it was evident she was but a for'mast hand. However, Wilbur examined her with extraordinary interest as she sat in the sternsheets, sullen, half-defiant, half-bewildered, and bereft of speech.

She was not pretty—she was too tall for that—quite as tall as Wilbur himself, and her skeleton was too massive. Her face

was red, and the glint of blue ice was in her eyes. Her eyelashes and eyebrows, as well as the almost imperceptible down that edged her cheek when she turned against the light, were blond almost to whiteness. What beauty she had was of the fine, hardy Norse type. Her hands were red and hard, and even beneath the coarse sleeve of the oilskin coat one could infer that the biceps and deltoids were large and powerful. She was coarse-fibred, no doubt, mentally as well as physically, but her coarseness, so Wilbur guessed, would prove to be the coarseness of a primitive rather than of a degenerate character.

One thing he saw clearly during the few moments of the dory's trip between bark and schooner—the fact that his charge was a woman must be kept from Captain Kitchell. Wilbur knew his man by now. It could be done. Kitchell and he would take the "Lady Letty" into the nearest port as soon as possible. The deception would have to be maintained only for a day or two.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.