

Cumner & South Sea Folk, v3

Gilbert Parker

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Contents:

The Planter's Wife

Barbara Golding

The Lone Corvette

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CUMNER'S SON AND OTHER SOUTH SEA FOLK

by Gilbert Parker

Volume 3.

THE PLANTER'S WIFE
BARBARA GOLDING
THE LONE CORVETTE

THE PLANTER'S WIFE

I

She was the daughter of a ruined squatter, whose family had been pursued with bad luck; he was a planter, named Houghton. She was not an uncommon woman; he was not an unusual man. They were not happy, they might never be; he was almost sure they would not be; she had long ceased to think they could be. She had told him when she married him that she did not love him. He had been willing to wait for her love, believing that by patience and devotion he could win it. They were both sorry for each other now. They accepted things as they were, but they knew there was danger in the situation. She loved some one else, and he knew it, but he had never spoken to her of it--he was of too good stuff for that. He was big and burly, and something awkward in his ways. She was pretty, clear-minded, kind, and very grave. There were days when they were both bitter at heart. On one such day they sat at luncheon, eating little, and looking much out of the door across the rice fields and banana plantations to the Hebron Mountains. The wife's eyes fixed on the hills and stayed. A road ran down the hill towards a platform of rock which swept smooth and straight to the sheer side of the mountain called White Bluff. At first glance it seemed that the road ended at the cliff--a mighty slide to destruction. Instead, however, of coming straight to the cliff it veered suddenly, and ran round the mountain side, coming down at a steep but fairly safe incline. The platform or cliff was fenced off by a low barricade of fallen trees, scarcely noticeable from the valley below. The wife's eyes had often wandered to the spot with a strange fascination, as now. Her husband looked at her meditatively. He nodded slightly, as though to himself. She looked up. Their understanding of each other's thoughts was singular.

"Tom," she said, "I will ride the chestnut, Bowline, to that fence some day. It will be a big steeplechase." He winced, but answered slowly. "You have meant to say that for a long time past. I am glad it has been said at last."

She was struck by the perfect quietness of his tone. Her eyes sought his

face and rested for a moment, half bewildered, half pitying.

"Yes, it has been in my mind often--often," she said. "It's a horrible thought," he gravely replied; "but it is better to be frank. Still, you'll never do it, Alice--you'll never dare to do it."

"Dare, dare," she answered, springing to her feet, and a shuddering sigh broke from her. "The thing itself is easy enough, Tom."

"And why haven't you done it?" he asked in a hard voice, but still calmly.

She leaned one hand upon the table, the other lay at her cheek, and her head bent forward at him. "Because," she answered, "because I have tried to be thoughtful for you."

"Oh, as to that," he said--"as to that!" and he shrugged his shoulders slightly.

"You don't care a straw," she said sharply, "you never did."

He looked up suddenly at her, a great bitterness in his face, and laughed strangely, as he answered: "Care! Good God! Care! . . . What's the use of caring? It's been all a mistake; all wrong."

"That is no news," she said wearily. "You discovered that long ago."

He looked out of the door across the warm fields again; he lifted his eyes to that mountain road; he looked down at her. "I haven't any hope left now, Alice. Let's be plain with each other. We've always been plain, but let us be plainer still. There are those rice fields out there, that banana plantation, and the sugar-cane stretching back as far as the valley goes--it's all mine, all mine. I worked hard for it. I had only one wish with it all, one hope through it all, and it was, that when I brought you here as my wife, you would come to love me--some time. Well, I've waited, and waited. It hasn't come. We're as far apart to-day as we were the day I married you. Farther, for I had hope then, but I've no hope now, none at all."

They both turned towards the intemperate sunlight and the great hill. The hollowness of life as they lived it came home to them with an aching force. Yet she lifted her fan from the table and fanned herself gently with it, and he mechanically lit a cigar. Servants passed in and out removing the things from the table. Presently they were left alone. The heavy breath of the palm trees floated in upon them; the fruit of the passion-flower hung temptingly at the window; they could hear the sound of a torrent just behind the house. The day was droning luxuriously, yet the eyes of both, as by some weird influence, were fastened upon the hill; and presently they saw, at the highest point where the road was visible, a horseman. He came slowly down until he reached the spot where the road was barricaded from the platform of the cliff. Here he paused. He sat long, looking, as it appeared, down into the valley. The husband rose and took down a field-glass from a shelf; he levelled it at the figure.

"Strange, strange," he said to himself; "he seems familiar, and yet--"

She rose and reached out her hand for the glass. He gave it to her. She raised it to her eyes, but, at that moment, the horseman swerved into the

road again, and was lost to view. Suddenly Houghton started; an enigmatical smile passed across his face.

"Alice," said he, "did you mean what you said about the steeplechase-- I mean about the ride down the White Bluff road?"

"I meant all I said," was her bitter reply.

"You think life is a mistake?" he rejoined.

"I think we have made a mistake," was her answer; "a deadly mistake, and it lasts all our lives."

He walked to the door, trained the glass again on the hill, then afterwards turned round, and said:

"If ever you think of riding the White Bluff road--straight for the cliff itself and over--tell me, and I'll ride it with you. If it's all wrong as it is, it's all wrong for both, and, maybe, the worst of what comes after is better than the worst of what is here."

They had been frank with each other in the past, but never so frank as this. He was determined that they should be still more frank; and so was she. "Alice," he said--

"Wait a minute," she interjected. "I have something to say, Tom. I never told you--indeed, I thought I never should tell you; but now I think it's best to do so. I loved a man once--with all my soul."

"You love him still," was the reply; and he screwed and unscrewed the field-glass in his hand, looking bluntly at her the while. She nodded, returning his gaze most earnestly and choking back a sob.

"Well, it's a pity, it's a pity," he replied. "We oughtn't to live together as it is. It's all wrong; it's wicked--I can see that now."

"You are not angry with me?" she answered in surprise.

"You can't help it, I suppose," he answered drearily.

"Do you really mean," she breathlessly said, "that we might as well die together, since we can't live together and be happy?"

"There's nothing in life that gives me a pleasant taste in the mouth, so what's the good? Mind you, my girl, I think it a terrible pity that you should have the thought to die; and if you could be happy living, I'd die myself to save you. But can you? That's the question--can you be happy, even if I went and you stayed?"

"I don't think so," she said thoughtfully, and without excitement.

"No, I don't think so."

"The man's name was Cayley--Cayley," he said to her bluntly.

"How did you know?" she asked, astonished. "You never saw him."

"Oh, yes, I've seen him," was the reply--"seen him often. I knew him once."

"I do not understand you," she rejoined.

"I knew it all along," he continued, "and I've waited for you to tell me."

"How did you know?"

"Cayley told me."

"When did he tell you?"

"The morning that I married you." His voice was thick with misery.

She became white and dazed. "Before--or after?" she asked. He paused a moment, looking steadily at her, and answered, "Before."

She drew back as though she had been struck. "Good God!" she cried. "Why did he not--" she paused.

"Why did he not marry you himself?" he rejoined.

"You must ask him that yourself, if you do not know."

"And yet you married me, knowing all--that he loved me," she gasped.

"I would have married you then, knowing a thousand times that."

She cowered, but presently advanced to him. "You have sinned as much as I," she said. "Do you dare pay the penalty?"

"Do I dare ride with you to the cliff--and beyond?" Her lips framed a reply, but no sound came.

"But we will wait till to-morrow," he said absently.

"Why not to-day?" she painfully asked.

"We will wait till to-morrow," he urged, and his eyes followed the trail of a horseman on the hill.

"Why not while we have courage?" she persisted, as though the suspense hurt her.

"But we will wait till to-morrow, Alice," he again repeated.

"Very well," she answered, with the indifference of despair.

He stood in the doorway and watched a horseman descending into valley.

"Strange things may chance before to-morrow," he said to himself, and he mechanically lighted another cigar. She idled with her fan.

II

He did not leave the house that afternoon. He kept his post on the

veranda, watching the valley. With an iron kind of calmness he was facing a strange event. It was full of the element of chance, and he had been taking chances all his life. With the chances of fortune he had won; with the chances of love and happiness he had lost. He knew that the horseman on the mountain-side was Cayley; he knew that Cayley would not be near his home without a purpose. Besides, Cayley had said he would come--he had said it in half banter, half threat. Houghton had had too many experiences backward and forward in the world, to be afflicted with littleness of mind. He had never looked to get an immense amount of happiness out of life, but he thought that love and marriage would give him a possible approach to content. He had chanced it, and he had lost. At first he had taken it with a dreadful bitterness; now he regarded it with a quiet, unimpassioned despair. He regarded his wife, himself, and Cayley, as an impartial judge would view the extraordinary claims of three desperate litigants. He thought it all over as he sat there smoking. When the servants came to him to ask him questions or his men ventured upon matters of business, he answered them directly, decisively, and went on thinking. His wife had come to take coffee with him at the usual hour of the afternoon. There was no special strain of manner or of speech. The voices were a little lower, the tones a little more decided, their eyes did not meet; that was all. When coffee-drinking was over the wife retired to her room. Still Houghton smoked on. At length he saw the horseman entering into the grove of palms before the door. He rose deliberately from his seat and walked down the pathway.

"Good day to you, Houghton," the horseman said; "we meet again, you see."

"I see."

"You are not overjoyed."

"There's no reason why I should be glad. Why have you come?"

"You remember our last meeting five years ago. You were on your way to be married. Marriage is a beautiful thing, Houghton, when everything is right and square, and there's love both sides. Well, everything was right and square with you and the woman you were going to marry; but there was not love both sides."

While they had been talking thus, Houghton had, of purpose, led his companion far into the shade of the palms. He now wheeled upon Cayley, and said sternly: "I warn you to speak with less insolence; we had better talk simply."

Cayley was perfectly cool. "We will talk simply. As I said, you had marriage without love. The woman loved another man. That other man loved the woman--that good woman. In youthful days at college he had married, neither wisely nor well, a beggar-maid without those virtues usually credited to beggar-maidens who marry gentlemen. Well, Houghton, the beggar-maid was supposed to have died. She hadn't died; she had shammed. Meanwhile, between her death and her resurrection, the man came to love that good woman. And so, lines got crossed; things went wrong. Houghton, I loved Alice before she was your wife. I should have married her but for the beggar-maid."

"You left her without telling her why."

"I told her that things must end, and I went away."

"Like a coward," rejoined Houghton. "You should have told her all."

"What difference has it made?" asked Cayley gloomily.

"My happiness and hers. If you had told her all, there had been an end of mystery. Mystery is dear to a woman's heart. She was not different in that respect from others. You took the surest way to be remembered."

Cayley's fingers played with his horse's mane; his eyes ran over the ground debatingly; then he lifted them suddenly, and said: "Houghton, you are remarkably frank with me; what do you mean by it?"

"I'll tell you if you will answer me this question: Why have you come here?"

The eyes of both men crossed like swords, played with each other for a moment, and then fixed to absolute determination. Cayley answered doggedly: "I came to see your wife, because I'm not likely ever to see her or you again. I wanted one look of her before I went away. There, I'm open with you."

"It is well to be open with me," Houghton replied. He drew Cayley aside to an opening in the trees, where the mountain and the White Bluff road could be seen, and pointed. "That would make a wonderful leap," he said, "from the top of the hill down to the cliff edge--and over!"

"A dreadful steeplechase," said Cayley.

Houghton lowered his voice. "Two people have agreed to take that fence."

Cayley frowned. "What two people?"

"My wife and I"

"Why?"

"Because there has been a mistake, and to live is misery."

"Has it come to that?" Cayley asked huskily. "Is there no way--no better way? Are you sure that Death mends things?" Presently he put his hand upon Houghton's arm, as if with a sudden, keen resolve. "Houghton," he said, "you are a man--I have become a villain. A woman sent me once on the high road to the devil; then an angel came in and made a man of me again; but I lost the angel, and another man found her, and I took the highway with the devil again. I was born a gentleman--that you know. Now I am . . ." He hesitated. A sardonic smile crept across his face.

"Yes, you are--?" interposed Houghton.

"I am--a man who will give you your wife's love."

"I do not understand," Houghton responded. Cayley drew Houghton back from where they stood and away from the horse.

"Look at that horse," he said. "Did you ever see a better?"

"Never," answered Houghton, running him over with his eye, "never."

"You notice the two white feet and the star on the forehead. Now,

listen. Firefoot, here!"

"My God!" said Houghton, turning upon him with staring eyes, "you are--"

"Whose horse is that?" interjected Cayley. Firefoot laid his head upon Cayley's shoulder.

Houghton looked at them both for a moment. "It is the horse of Hyland the bushranger," he said. "All Queensland knows Firefoot." Then he dazedly added: "Are you Hyland?"

"A price is set on my head," the bushranger answered with a grim smile.

Houghton stood silent for a moment, breathing hard. Then he rejoined: "You are bold to come here openly."

"If I couldn't come here openly I would not come at all," answered the other. "After what I have told you," he added, "will you take me in and let me speak with your wife?"

Houghton's face turned black, and he was about to answer angrily, but Cayley said: "On my honour--I will play a fair game," he said.

For an instant their eyes were fixed on each other; then, with a gesture for Cayley to follow, Houghton went towards the house.

Five minutes later Houghton said to his wife: "Alice, a stranger has come."

"Who is it?" she asked breathlessly, for she read importance in his tone.

"It is the horseman we saw on the hillside." His eyes passed over her face pityingly. "I will go and bring him."

She caught his arm. "Who is it? Is it any one I know?"

"It is some one you know," he answered, and left the room. Bewildered, anticipating, yet dreading to recognise her thoughts, she sat down and waited in a painful stillness.

Presently the door opened, and Cayley entered. She started to her feet with a stifled, bitter cry: "Oh, Harry!"

He hurried to her with arms outstretched, for she swayed; but she straightway recovered herself, and, leaning against a chair, steadied to his look.

"Why have you come here?" she whispered. "To say good-bye for always," was his reply.

"And why--for always?" She was very white and quiet.

"Because we are not likely ever to meet again."

"Where are you going?" she anxiously asked. "God knows!"

Strange sensations were working in her. What would be the end of this? Her husband, knowing all, had permitted this man to come to her alone.

She had loved him for years; though he had deserted her years ago, she loved him still--did she love him still?

"Will you not sit down?" she said with mechanical courtesy.

A stranger would not have thought from their manner that there were lives at stake. They both sat, he playing with the leaves of an orchid, she opening and shutting her fan absently. But she was so cold she could hardly speak. Her heart seemed to stand still.

"How has the world used you since we met last?" she tried to say neutrally.

"Better, I fear, than I have used it," he answered quietly.

"I do not quite see. How could you ill-use the world?" There was faint irony in her voice now. A change seemed to have come upon her.

"By ill-using any one person we ill-use society--the world"--he meaningly replied.

"Whom have you ill-used?" She did not look at him.

"Many--you chiefly."

"How have you--most-ill-used me?"

"By letting you think well of me--you have done so, have you not?"

She did not speak, but lowered her head, and caught her breath slightly. There was a silence. Then she said: "There was no reason why I should-- But you must not say these things to me. My husband--"

"Your husband knows all."

"But that does not alter it," she urged firmly. "Though he may be willing you should speak of these things, I am not."

"Your husband is a good fellow," he rejoined. "I am not."

"You are not?" she asked wearily.

"No. What do you think was the reason that, years ago, I said we could never be married, and that we must forget each other?"

"I cannot tell. I supposed it was some duty of which I could not know. There are secret and sacred duties which we sometimes do not tell, even to our nearest and dearest . . . but I said we should not speak of these things, and we must not." She rose to her feet. "My husband is somewhere near. I will call him. There are so many things that men can talk of-pleasant and agreeable things--"

He had risen with her, and as her hand was stretched out to ring, stayed it. "No, never mind your husband just now. I think he knows what I am going to say to you."

"But, oh, you must not--must not!" she urged.

"Pardon me, but I must," was his reply.

"As I said, you thought I was a good fellow. Well, I am not; not at all. I will tell you why I left you. I was--already married."

He let the bare unrelieved fact face her, and shock her.

"You were--already married--when--you loved me," she said, her face showing misery and shame.

He smiled a little bitterly when he saw the effect of his words, but said clearly: "Yes. You see I was a villain."

She shuddered a little, and then said simply: "Your face was not the face of a bad man. Are you telling me the truth?"

He nodded.

"Then you were wicked with me," she said at last, with a great sigh, looking him straight in the eyes. "But you--you loved me?" she said with injured pride and a piteous appeal in her voice. "Ah, I know you loved me!"

"I will tell you when you know all," he answered evenly.

"Is there more to tell?" she asked heavily, and shrinking from him now.

"Much more. Please, come here." He went towards the open window of the room, and she followed. He pointed out to where his horse stood in the palms.

"That is my horse," he said. He whistled to the horse, which pricked up its ears and trotted over to the window. "The name of my horse," he said, "maybe familiar to you. He is called Firefoot."

"Firefoot!" she answered dazedly, "that is the name of Hyland's horse--Hyland the bushranger."

"This is Hyland's horse," he said, and he patted the animal's neck gently as it thrust its head within the window.

"But you said it was your horse," she rejoined slowly, as though the thing perplexed her sorely.

"It is Hyland's horse; it is my horse," he urged without looking at her. His courage well-nigh failed him. Villain as he was, he loved her, and he saw the foundations of her love for him crumbling away before him. In all his criminal adventures he had cherished this one thing.

She suddenly gave a cry of shame and agony, a low trembling cry, as though her heart-strings were being dragged out. She drew back from him--back to the middle of the room.

He came towards her, reaching out his arms. "Forgive me," he said.

"Oh, no, never!" she cried with horror.

The cry had been heard outside, and Houghton entered the room, to find his wife, all her strength gone, turning a face of horror upon Cayley. She stretched out her arms to her husband with a pitiful cry. "Tom," she

said, "Tom, take me away."

He took her gently in his arms.

Cayley stood with his hand upon his horse's neck. "Houghton," he said in a low voice, "I have been telling your wife what I was, and who I am. She is shocked. I had better go."

The woman's head had dropped on her husband's shoulder. Houghton waited to see if she would look up. But she did not.

"Well, good-bye to you both," Cayley said, stepped through the window, and vaulted on his horse's back. "I'm going to see if the devil's as black as he's painted." Then, setting spurs to his horse, he galloped away through the palms to the gate.

.....

A year later Hyland the bushranger was shot in a struggle with the mounted police sent to capture him.

The planter's wife read of it in England, whither she had gone on a visit.

"It is better so," she said to herself, calmly. "And he wished it, I am sure."

For now she knew the whole truth, and she did not love her husband less --but more.

BARBARA GOLDING

The last time John Osgood saw Barbara Golding was on a certain summer afternoon at the lonely Post, Telegraph, and Customs Station known as Rahway, on the Queensland coast. It was at Rahway also that he first and last saw Mr. Louis Bachelor. He had had excellent opportunities for knowing Barbara Golding; for many years she had been governess (and something more) to his sisters Janet, Agnes and Lorna. She had been engaged in Sydney as governess simply, but Wandenong cattle station was far up country, and she gradually came to perform the functions of milliner and dressmaker, encouraged thereto by the family for her unerring taste and skill. Her salary, however, had been proportionately increased, and it did not decline when her office as governess became practically a sinecure as her pupils passed beyond the sphere of the schoolroom. Perhaps George Osgood, father of John Osgood, and owner of Wandenong, did not make an allowance to Barbara Golding for her services as counsellor and confidant of his family; but neither did he subtract anything from her earnings in those infrequent years when she journeyed alone to Sydney on those mysterious visits which so mightily puzzled the good people of Wandenong. The boldest and most off-hand of them, however, could never discover what Barbara Golding did not choose to tell. She was slight, almost frail in form, and very gentle of manner; but she also possessed that rare species of courtesy which, never declining to fastidiousness nor lapsing into familiarity, checked all

curious intrusion, was it ever so insinuating; and the milliner and dressmaker was not less self-poised and compelling of respect than the governess and confidant.

In some particulars the case of Louis Bachelor was similar. Besides being the Post, Telegraph, and Customs Officer, and Justice of the Peace at Rahway, he was available and valuable to the Government as a meteorologist. The Administration recognised this after a few years of voluntary and earnest labour on Louis Bachelor's part. It was not, however, his predictions concerning floods or droughts that roused this official appreciation, but the fulfilment of those predictions. At length a yearly honorarium was sent to him, and then again, after a dignified delay, there was forwarded to him a suggestion from the Cabinet that he should come to Brisbane and take a more important position. It was when this patronage was declined that the Premier (dropping for a moment into that bushman's jargon which came naturally to him) said, irritably, that Louis Bachelor was a "old fossil who didn't know when he'd got his dover in the dough," which, being interpreted into the slang of the old world, means, his knife into the official loaf. But the fossil went on as before, known by name to the merest handful of people in the colony, though they all profited, directly or indirectly, by his scientific services. He was as unknown to the dwellers at Wandenong as they were to him, or he again to the citizens of the moon.

It was the custom for Janet and Agnes Osgood to say that Barbara Golding had a history. On every occasion the sentiment was uttered with that fresh conviction in tone which made it appear to be born again. It seemed to have especially pregnant force one evening after Janet had been consulting Barbara on the mysteries of the garment in which she was to be married to Druce Stephens, part owner of Booldal Station. "Aggie," remarked the coming bride, "Barbara's face flushed up ever so pink when I said to her that she seemed to know exactly what a trousseau ought to be. I wonder! She is well-bred enough to have been anybody; and the Bishop of Adelaide recommended her, you know."

Soon after this Druce Stephens arrived at Wandenong and occupied the attention of Janet until suppertime, when he startled the company by the tale of his adventures on the previous evening with Roadmaster, the mysterious bushranger, whose name was now in every man's mouth; who apparently worked with no confederates—a perilous proceeding, though it reduced the chances of betrayal. Druce was about to camp on the plains for the night, in preference to riding on to a miserable bush-tavern a few miles away, when he was suddenly accosted in the scrub by a gallant-looking fellow on horseback, who, from behind his mask, asked him to give up what money he had about him, together with his watch and ring. The request was emphasised by the presence of a revolver held at an easy but suggestive angle. The disadvantage to the squatter was obvious. He merely asked that he should be permitted to keep the ring, as it had many associations, remarking at the same time that he would be pleased to give an equivalent for it if the bushranger would come to Wandenong. At the mention of Wandenong the highwayman asked his name. On being told, he handed back the money, the watch, and the ring, and politely requested a cigar, saying that the Osgoods merited consideration at his hands, and that their friends were safe from molestation. Then he added, with some grim humour, that if Druce had no objection to spending an hour with Roadmaster over a fire and a billy of tea, he would be glad of his company; for bushranging, according to his system, was but dull work. The young squatter consented, and together they sat for two hours, the highwayman, however, never removing his mask. They talked of many

things, and at last Druce ventured to ask his companion about the death of Blood Finchley, the owner of Tarawan sheep-run. At this Roadmaster became weary, and rose to leave; but as if on second thought, he said that Finchley's companion, whom he allowed to go unrobbed and untouched, was both a coward and a liar; that the slain man had fired thrice needlessly, and had wounded him in the neck (the scar of which he showed) before he drew trigger. Druce then told him that besides a posse of police, a number of squatters and bushmen had banded to hunt him down, and advised him to make for the coast if he could, and leave the country. At this Roadmaster laughed, and said that his fancy was not sea-ward yet, though that might come; and then, with a courteous wave of his hand, he jumped on his horse and rode away.

The Osgoods speculated curiously and futilely on Roadmaster's identity, as indeed the whole colony had done. And here it may be said that people of any observation (though, of necessity, they were few, since Rahway attracted only busy sugar-planters and their workmen) were used to speak of Louis Bachelor as one who must certainly have a history. The person most likely to have the power of inquisition into his affairs was his faithful aboriginal servant, Gongi. But records and history were only understood by Gongi when they were restricted to the number of heads taken in tribal battle. At the same time he was a devoted slave to the man who, at the risk of his own life, had rescued him from the murderous spears of his aboriginal foes. That was a kind of record within Gongi's comprehension, from the contemplation of which he turned to speak of Louis Bachelor as "That fellow budgery marmi b'longin' to me," which, in civilised language, means "my good master." Gongi often dilated on this rescue, and he would, for purposes of illustration, take down from his master's wall an artillery officer's sabre and show how his assailants had been dispersed.

From the presence of this sword it was not unreasonably assumed that Louis Bachelor had at some time been in the army. He was not, however, communicative on this point, though he shrewdly commented on European wars and rumours of wars when they occurred. He also held strenuous opinions of the conduct of Government and the suppression of public evils, based obviously upon military views of things. . For bushrangers he would have a modern Tyburn, but this and other tragic suggestions lacked conviction when confronted with his verdicts given as Justice of the Peace. He pronounced judgments in a grand and airy fashion, but as if he were speaking by a card, the Don Quixote whose mercy would be vaster than his wrath. This was the impression he gave, to, John Osgood on the day when the young squatter introduced himself to Rahway, where he had come on a mission to its one official. The young man's father had a taste for many things; astronomy was his latest, and he had bought from the Government a telescope which, excellent in its day, had been superseded by others of later official purchase. He had brought it to Wandenong, had built a home for it, and had got it into trouble. He had then sent to Brisbane for assistance, and the astronomer of the Government had referred him to the postmaster at Rahway, "Prognosticator" of the meteorological column in The Courier, who would be instructed to give Mr. Osgood every help, especially as the occultation of Venus was near. Men do not send letters by post in a new country when personal communication is possible, and John Osgood was asked by his father to go to Rahway. When John wished for the name of this rare official, the astronomer's letter was handed over with a sarcastic request that the name might be deciphered; but the son was not more of an antiquary than his father, and he had to leave without it. He rode to the coast, and there took a passing steamer to Rahway. From the sea Rahway looked a

tropical paradise. The bright green palisades of mangrove on the right crowded down to the water's edge; on the left was the luxuriance of a tropical jungle; in the centre was an are of opal shore fringed with cocoa-palms, and beyond the sea a handful of white dwellings. Behind was a sweeping monotony of verdure stretching back into the great valley of the Popri, and over all the heavy languor of the South.

But the beauty was a delusion. When John Osgood's small boat swept up the sands on the white crest of a league-long roller, how different was the scene! He saw a group of dilapidated huts, a tavern called The Angel's Rest, a blackfellow's hut, and the bareness of three Government offices, all built on piles, that the white ants should not humble them suddenly to the dust; a fever-making mangrove swamp, black at the base as the filthiest moat, and tenanted by reptiles; feeble palms, and a sickly breath creeping from the jungle to mingle with the heavy scent of the last consignment of augar from the Popri valley. It brought him to a melancholy standstill, disturbed at last by Gongi touching him on the arm and pointing towards the post-office. His language to Gongi was strong; he called the place by names that were not polite; and even on the threshold of the official domain said that the Devil would have his last big muster there. But from that instant his glibness declined. The squatters are the aristocracy of Australia, and rural postmasters are not always considered eligible for a dinner-party at Government House; but when Louis Bachelor came forward to meet his visitor the young fellow's fingers quickly caught his hat from his head, and an off-hand greeting became a respectful salute.

At first the young man was awed by the presence of the grizzled gentleman, and he struggled with his language to bring it up to the classic level of the old meteorologist's speech. Before they had spoken a dozen words John Osgood said to himself: "What a quaint team he and the Maid of Honour would make! It's the same kind of thing in both, with the difference of sex and circumstance." The nature of his visitor's business pleased the old man, and infused his courtesy with warmth. Yes, he would go to Wandenong with pleasure; the Government had communicated with him about it; a substitute had been offered; he was quite willing to take his first leave in four years; astronomy was a great subject, he had a very good and obedient telescope of his own, though not nearly so large as that at Wandenong; he would telegraph at once to Brisbane for the substitute to be sent on the following day, and would be ready to start in twenty-four hours. After visiting Wandenong he would go to Brisbane for some scientific necessities--and so on through smooth parentheses of talk. Under all the bluntness of the Bush young Osgood had a refinement which now found expression in an attempt to make himself agreeable--not a difficult task, since, thanks to his father's tastes and a year or two at college, he had a smattering of physical science. He soon won his way to the old man's heart, and to his laboratory, which had been developed through years of patience and ingenious toil in this desolate spot.

Left alone that evening in Louis Bachelor's sitting-room, John Osgood's eyes were caught by a portrait on the wall, the likeness of a beautiful girl. Something about the face puzzled him. Where had he seen it? More than a little of an artist, he began to reproduce the head on paper. He put it in different poses; he added to it; he took away from it; he gave it a child's face, preserving the one striking expression; he made it that of a woman--of an elderly, grave woman. Why, what was this? Barbara Golding! He would not spoil the development of the drama, of which he now held the fluttering prologue, by any blunt treatment; he would touch this and that nerve gently to see what past connection there

was between:

"These dim blown birds beneath an alien sky."

He mooned along in this fashion, a fashion in which his bushmen friends would not have known him, until his host entered. Then, in that auspicious moment when his own pipe and his companion's cigarette were being lighted, he said: "I've been amusing myself with drawing since you left, sir, and I've produced this," handing over the paper.

Louis Bachelor took the sketch, and, walking to the window for better light, said: "Believe me, I have a profound respect for the artistic talent. I myself once had--ah!" He sharply paused as he saw the pencilled head, and stood looking fixedly at it. Presently he turned slowly, came to the portrait on the wall, and compared it with that in his hand. Then, with a troubled face, he said: "You have much talent, but it is--it is too old--much too old--and very sorrowful."

"I intended the face to show age and sorrow, Mr. Bachelor. Would not the original of that have both?"

"She had sorrow--she had sorrow, but," and he looked sadly at the sketch again, "it is too old for her. Her face was very young--always very young."

"But has she not sorrow now, sir?" the other persisted gently.

The grey head was shaken sadly, and the unsteady voice meditatively murmured: "Such beauty, such presence! I was but five-and-thirty then." There was a slight pause, and then, with his hand touching the young man's shoulder, Louis Bachelor continued: "You are young; you have a good heart; I know men. You have the sympathy of the artist--why should I not speak to you? I have been silent about it so long. You have brought the past back, I know not how, so vividly! I dream here, I work here; men come with merchandise and go again; they only bind my tongue; I am not of them: but you are different, as it seems to me, and young. God gave me a happy youth. My eyes were bright as yours, my heart as fond. You love--is it not so? Ah, you smile and blush like an honest man. Well, so much the more I can speak now. God gave me then strength and honour and love--blessed be His name! And then He visited me with sorrow, and, if I still mourn, I have peace, too, and a busy life." Here he looked at the sketch again.

"Then I was a soldier. She was my world. Ah, true, love is a great thing--a great thing! She had a brother. They two with their mother were alone in the world, and we were to be married. One day at Gibraltar I received a letter from her saying that our marriage could not be; that she was going away from England; that those lines were her farewell; and that she commended me to the love of Heaven. Such a letter it was--so saintly, so unhappy, so mysterious! When I could get leave I went to England. She--they--had gone, and none knew whither; or, if any of her friends knew, none would speak. I searched for her everywhere. At last I came to Australia, and I am here, no longer searching, but waiting, for there is that above us!" His lips moved as if in prayer. "And this is all I have left of her, except memory," he said, tenderly touching the portrait.

Warmly, yet with discreet sympathy, the young man rejoined: "Sir, I respect, and I hope I understand, your confidence." Then, a little

nervously: "Might I ask her name?"

The reply was spoken to the portrait: "Barbara--Barbara Golding."

With Louis Bachelor the young squatter approached Wandenong homestead in some excitement. He had said no word to his companion about that Barbara Golding who played such a gracious part in the home of the Osgoods. He had arranged the movement of the story to his fancy, but would it occur in all as he hoped? With an amiability that was almost malicious in its adroit suggestiveness, though, to be sure, it was honest, he had induced the soldier to talk of his past. His words naturally, and always, radiated to the sun, whose image was now hidden, but for whose memory no superscription on monument or cenotaph was needed. Now it was a scrap of song, then a tale, and again a verse, by which the old soldier was delicately worked upon, until at last, as they entered the paddocks of Wandenong, stars and telescopes and even Governments had been forgotten in the personal literature of sentiment.

Yet John Osgood was not quite at his ease. Now that it was at hand, he rather shrank from the meeting of these ancient loves. Apart from all else, he knew that no woman's nerves are to be trusted. He hoped fortune would so favour him that he could arrange for the meeting of the two alone, or, at least, in his presence only. He had so far fostered this possibility by arriving at the station at nightfall. What next? He turned and looked at the soldier, a figure out of Hogarth, which even dust and travel left unspoiled. It was certain that the two should meet where John Osgood, squatter and romancer, should be prompter, orchestra, and audience, and he alone. Vain lad!

When they drew rein the young man took his companion at once to his own detached quarters known as the Barracks, and then proceeded to the house. After greetings with his family he sought Barbara Golding, who was in the schoolroom, piously employed, Agnes said, in putting the final touches to Janet's trousseau. He went across the square to the schoolroom, and, looking through the window, saw that she was quite alone. A few moments later he stood at the schoolroom door with Louis Bachelor. With his hand on the latch he hesitated. Was it not fairer to give some warning to either? Too late! He opened the door and they entered. She was sewing, and a book lay open beside her, a faded, but stately little figure whose very garments had an air. She rose, seeing at first only John Osgood, who greeted her and then said: "Miss Golding, I have brought you an old friend."

Then he stepped back and the two were face to face. Barbara Golding's cheeks became pale, but she did not stir; the soldier, with an exclamation of surprise half joyful, half pathetic, took a step forward, and then became motionless also. Their eyes met and stayed intent. This was not quite what the young man had expected. At length the soldier bowed low, and the woman responded gravely. At this point Osgood withdrew to stand guard at the door.

Barbara Golding's eyes were dim with tears. The soldier gently said, "I received--" and then paused. She raised her eyes to his. "I received a letter from you five-and-twenty years ago."

"Yes, five-and-twenty years ago."

"I hope you cannot guess what pain it gave me."

"Yes," she answered faintly, "I can conceive it, from the pain it gave to me."

There was a pause, and then he stepped forward and, holding out his hand, said: "Will you permit me?" He kissed her fingers courteously, and she blushed. "I have waited," he added, "for God to bring this to pass." She shook her head sadly, and her eyes sought his beseechingly, as though he should spare her; but perhaps he could not see that.

"You spoke of a great obstacle then; has it been removed?"

"It is still between us," she murmured.

"Is it likely ever to vanish?"

"I--I do not know."

"You can not tell me what it is?"

"Oh, you will not ask me," she pleaded.

He was silent a moment, then spoke. "Might I dare to hope, Barbara, that you still regard me with--" he hesitated.

The fires of a modest valour fluttered in her cheeks, and she pieced out his sentence: "With all my life's esteem." But she was a woman, and she added: "But I am not young now, and I am very poor."

"Barbara," he said; "I am not rich and I am old; but you, you have not changed; you are beautiful, as you always were."

The moment was crucial. He stepped towards her, but her eyes held him back. He hoped that she would speak, but she only smiled sadly. He waited, but, in the waiting, hope faded, and he only said, at last, in a voice of new resolve grown out of dead expectancy: "Your brother--is he well?"

"I hope so," she somewhat painfully replied. "Is he in Australia?"

"Yes. I have not seen him for years, but he is here." As if a thought had suddenly come to him, he stepped nearer, and made as if he would speak; but the words halted on his lips, and he turned away again. She glided to his side and touched his arm. "I am glad that you trust me," she faltered.

"There is no more that need be said," he answered. And now, woman-like, denying, she pitied, too. "If I ever can, shall--shall I send for you to tell you all?" she murmured.

"You remember I told you that the world had but one place for me, and that was by your side; that where you are, Barbara--"

"Hush, oh hush!" she interrupted gently. "Yes, I remember everything."

"There is no power can alter what is come of Heaven," he said, smiling faintly.

She looked with limpid eyes upon him as he bowed over her hand, and she spoke with a sweet calm: "God be with you, Louis."

Strange as it may seem, John Osgood did not tell his sisters and his family of this romance which he had brought to the vivid close of a first act. He felt the more so because Louis Bachelor had said no word about it, but had only pressed his hand again and again--that he was somehow put upon his honour, and he thought it a fine thing to stand on a platform of unspoken compact with this gentleman of a social school unfamiliar to him; from which it may be seen that cattle-breeding and bullock-driving need not make a man a boor. What his sisters guessed when they found that Barbara Golding and the visitor were old friends is another matter; but they could not pierce their brother's reserve on the point.

No one at Wandenong saw the parting between the two when Louis Bachelor, his task with the telescope ended, left again for the coast; but indeed it might have been seen by all men, so outwardly formal was it, even as their brief conversations had been since they met again. But is it not known by those who look closely upon the world that there is nothing so tragic as the formal?

John Osgood accompanied his friend to the sea, but the name of Barbara Golding was not mentioned, nor was any reference made to her until the moment of parting. Then the elder man said: "Sir, your consideration and delicacy of feeling have moved me, and touched her. We have not been blind to your singular kindness of heart and courtesy, and--God bless you, my friend!"

On his way back to Wandenong, Osgood heard exciting news of Roadmaster. The word had been passed among the squatters who had united to avenge Finchley's death that the bushranger was to be shot on sight, that he should not be left to the uncertainty of the law. The latest exploit of the daring freebooter had been to stop on the plains two members of a Royal Commission of Inquiry. He had relieved them of such money as was in their pockets, and then had caused them to write sumptuous cheques on their banks, payable to bearer. These he had cashed in the very teeth of the law, and actually paused in the street to read a description of himself posted on a telegraph-pole. "Inaccurate, quite inaccurate," he said to a by-stander as he drew his riding-whip slowly along it, and then, mounting his horse, rode leisurely away into the plains. Had he been followed it would have been seen that he directed his course to that point in the horizon where Wandenong lay, and held to it.

It would not perhaps have been pleasant to Agnes Osgood had she known that, as she hummed a song under a she-oak, a mile away from the homestead, a man was watching her from a clump of scrub near by; a man who, however gentlemanly his bearing, had a face where the devil of despair had set his foot, and who carried in his pocket more than one weapon of inhospitable suggestion. But the man intended no harm to her, for, while she sang, something seemed to smooth away the active evil of his countenance, and to dispel a threatening alertness that marked the whole personality.

Three hours later this same man crouched by the drawing-room window of the Wandenong homestead and looked in, listening to the same voice, until Barbara Golding entered the room and took a seat near the piano, with her face turned full towards him. Then he forgot the music and looked long at the face, and at last rose, and stole silently to where his horse was tied in the scrub. He mounted, and turning towards the house muttered: "A little more of this, and good-bye to my nerves! But it's pleasant to

have the taste of it in my mouth for a minute. How would it look in Roadmaster's biography, that a girl just out of school brought the rain to his eyes?" He laughed a little bitterly, and then went on: "Poor Barbara! She mustn't know while I'm alive. Stretch out, my nag; we've a long road to travel to-night."

This was Edward Golding, the brother whom Barbara thought was still in prison at Sydney under another name, serving a term of ten years for manslaughter. If she had read the papers more carefully she would have known that he had been released two years before his time was up. It was eight years since she had seen him. Twice since then she had gone to visit him, but he would not see her. Bad as he had been, his desire was still strong that the family name should not be publicly reviled. At his trial his real name had not been made known; and at his request his sister sent him no letters. Going into gaol a reckless man he came out a constitutional criminal; with the natural instinct for crime greater than the instinct for morality. He turned bushranger for one day, to get money to take him out of the country; but having once entered the lists he left them no more, and, playing at deadly joust with the law, soon became known as Roadmaster, the most noted bushranger since the days of Captain Starlight.

It was forgery on the name of his father's oldest friend that had driven him from England. He had the choice of leaving his native land for ever or going to prison, and he chose the former. The sorrow of the crime killed his mother. From Adelaide, where he and Barbara had made their new home, he wandered to the far interior and afterwards to Sydney; then came his imprisonment on a charge of manslaughter, and now he was free-but what a freedom!

With the name of Roadmaster often heard at Wandenong, Barbara Golding's heart had no warning instinct of who the bushranger was. She thought only and continuously of the day when her brother should be released, to begin the race of life again with her. She had yet to learn in what manner they come to the finish who make a false start.

Louis Bachelor, again in his place Rahway, tried to drive away his guesses at the truth by his beloved science. When sleep would not come at night he rose and worked in his laboratory; and the sailors of many a passing vessel saw the light of his lamp in the dim hours before dawn, and spoke of fever in the port of Rahway. Nor did they speak without reason; fever was preparing a victim for the sacrifice at Rahway, and Louis Bachelor was fed with its poison till he grew haggard and weak.

One night he was sending his weather prognostications to Brisbane, when a stranger entered from the shore. The old man did not at first look up, and the other leisurely studied him as the sounder clicked its message. When the key was closed the new-comer said: "Can you send a message to Brisbane for me?"

"It is after hours; I cannot," was the reply. "But you were just sending one."

"That was official," and the elder man passed his hand wearily along his forehead. He was very pale. The other drew the telegraph-forms towards him and wrote on one, saying as he did so: "My business is important;" then handing over what he had written, and, smiling ironically, added: "Perhaps you will consider that official."

Louis Bachelor took the paper and read as follows: To the Colonial Secretary, Brisbane. I am here tonight; to-morrow find me. Roadmaster." He read it twice before he fully comprehended it. Then he said, as if awakening from a dream: "You are--"

"I am Roadmaster," said the other.

But now the soldier and official in the other were awake. He drew himself up, and appeared to measure his visitor as a swordsman would his enemy. "What is your object in coming here?" he asked.

"For you to send that message if you choose. That you may arrest me peaceably if you wish; or there are men at The Angel's Rest and a Chinaman or two here who might care for active service against Roadmaster." He laughed carelessly.

"Am I to understand that you give yourself up to me?"

"Yes, to you, Louis Bachelor, Justice of the Peace, to do what you will with for this night," was the reply. The soldier's hands trembled, but it was from imminent illness, not from fear or excitement. He came slowly towards the bushranger who, smiling, said as he advanced: "Yes, arrest me!"

Louis Bachelor raised his hand, as though to lay it on the shoulder of the other; but something in the eyes of the highwayman stayed his hand.

"Proceed, Captain Louis Bachelor," said Roadmaster in a changed tone.

The hand fell to the old man's side. "Who are you?" he faintly exclaimed. "I know you yet I cannot quite remember."

More and more the voice and manner of the outlaw altered as he replied with mocking bitterness: "I was Edward Golding, gentleman; I became Edward Golding, forger; I am Roadmaster, convicted of manslaughter, and bushranger."

The old man's state was painful to see. "You--you--that, Edward!" he uttered brokenly.

"All that. Will you arrest me now?"

"I--cannot."

The bushranger threw aside all bravado and irony, and said: "I knew you could not. Why did I come? Listen--but first, will you shelter me here to-night?"

The soldier's honourable soul rose up against this thing, but he said slowly at last: "If it is to save you from peril, yes."

Roadmaster laughed a little and rejoined: "By God, sir, you're a man! But it isn't likely that I'd accept it of you, is it? You've had it rough enough, without my putting a rock in your swag that would spoil you for the rest of the tramp. You see, I've even forgotten how to talk like a gentleman. And now, sir, I want to show you, for Barbara's sake, my dirty logbook."

Here he told the tale of his early sin and all that came of it. When he

had finished the story he spoke of Barbara again. "She didn't want to disgrace you, you understand," he said. "You were at Wandenong; I know that, never mind how. She'd marry you if I were out of the way. Well, I'm going to be out of the way. I'm going to leave this country, and she's to think I'm dead, you see."

At this point Louis Bachelor swayed, and would have fallen, but that the bushranger's arms were thrown round him and helped him to a chair. "I'm afraid that I am ill," he said; "call Gongi. Ah!" He had fainted.

The bushranger carried him to a bed, and summoned Gongi and the woman from the tavern, and in another hour was riding away through the valley of the Popri. Before thirty-six hours had passed a note was delivered to a station-hand at Wandenong addressed to Barbara Golding, and signed by the woman from The Angel's Rest. Within another two days Barbara Golding was at the bedside of Captain Louis Bachelor, battling with an enemy that is so often stronger than love and always kinder than shame.

In his wanderings the sick man was ever with his youth and early manhood, and again and again he uttered Barbara's name in caressing or entreaty; though it was the Barbara of far-off days that he invoked; the present one he did not know. But the night in which the crisis, the fortunate crisis, of the fever occurred, he talked of a great flood coming from the North, and in his half-delirium bade them send to headquarters, and mournfully muttered of drowned plantations and human peril. Was this instinct and knowledge working through the disordered fancies of fever? Or was it mere coincidence that the next day a great storm and flood did sweep through the valley of the Popri, putting life in danger and submerging plantations?

It was on this day that Roadmaster found himself at bay in the mangrove swamp not far from the port of Rahway, where he had expected to find a schooner to take him to the New Hebrides. It had been arranged for by a well-paid colleague in crime; but the storm had delayed the schooner, and the avenging squatters and bushmen were closing in on him at last. There was flood behind him in the valley, a foodless swamp on the left of him, open shore and jungle on the right, the swollen sea before him; and the only avenue of escape closed by Blood Finchley's friends. He had been eluding his pursuers for days with little food and worse than no sleep. He knew that he had played his last card and lost; but he had one thing yet to do, that which even the vilest do, if they can, before they pay the final penalty--to creep back for a moment into their honest past, however dim and far away. With incredible skill he had passed under the very rifles of his hunters, and now stood almost within the stream of light which came from the window of the sick man's room, where his sister was. There was to be no more hiding, no more strategy. He told Gongi and another that he was Roadmaster, and bade them say to his pursuers, should they appear, that he would come to them upon the shore when his visit to Louis Bachelor, whom he had known in other days, was over, indicating the place at some distance from the house where they would find him.

He entered the house. The noise of the opening door brought his sister to the room.

At last she said: "Oh, Edward, you are free at last!"

"Yes, I am free at last," he quietly replied.

"I have always prayed for you, Edward, and for this."

"I know that, Barbara; but prayer cannot do anything, can it? You see, though I was born a gentleman, I had a bad strain in me. I wonder if, somewhere, generations back, there was a pirate or a gipsy in our family." He had been going to say highwayman, but paused in time. "I always intended to be good and always ended by being bad. I wanted to be of the angels and play with the devils also. I liked saints--you are a saint, Barbara--but I loved all sinners too. I hope when--when I die, that the little bit of good that's in me will go where you are. For the rest of me, it must be as it may."

"Don't speak like that, Edward, please, dear. Yes, you have been wicked, but you have been punished, oh, those long, long years!"

"I've lost a great slice of life by both the stolen waters and the rod, but I'm going to reform now, Barbara."

"You are going to reform? Oh, I knew you would! God has answered my prayer." Her eyes lighted.

He did not speak at once, for his ears, keener than hers, were listening to a confused sound of voices coming from the shore. At length he spoke firmly: "Yes, I'm going to reform, but it's on one condition."

Her eyes mutely asked a question, and he replied: "That you marry him," pointing to the inner room, "if he lives."

"He will live, but I--I cannot tell him, Edward," she sadly said.

"He knows."

"He knows! Did you dare to tell him?" It was the lover, not the sister, who spoke then.

"Yes. And he knows also that I'm going to reform--that I'm going away."

Her face was hid in her hand. "And I kept it from him five-and-twenty years! . . . Where are you going, Edward?"

"To the Farewell Islands," he slowly replied.

And she, thinking he meant some island group in the Pacific, tearfully inquired: "Are they far away?"

"Yes, very far away, my girl."

"But you will write to me or come to see me again--you will come to see me again, sometimes, Edward?"

He paused. He knew not at first what to reply, but at length he said, with a strangely determined flash of his dark eyes: "Yes, Barbara, I will come to see you again--if I can." He stooped and kissed her. "Goodbye, Barbara."

"But, Edward, must you go to-night?"

"Yes, I must go now. They are waiting for me. Good-bye."

She would have stayed him but he put her gently back, and she said plaintively: "God keep you, Edward. Remember you said that you would come again to me."

"I shall remember," he said quietly, and he was gone. Standing in the light from the window of the sick man's room he wrote a line in Latin on a slip of paper, begging of Louis Bachelor the mercy of silence, and gave it to Gongi, who whispered that he was surrounded. This he knew; he had not studied sounds in prison through the best years of his life for nothing. He asked Gongi to give the note to his master when he was better, and when it could be done unseen of any one. Then he turned and walked coolly towards the shore.

A few minutes later he lay upon a heap of magnolia branches breathing his life away. At the same moment of time that a rough but kindly hand closed the eyes of the bushranger, the woman from The Angel's Rest and Louis Bachelor saw the pale face of Roadmaster peer through the bedroom window at Barbara Golding sitting in a chair asleep; and she started and said through her half-wakefulness, looking at the window: "Where are you going, Edward?"

THE LONE CORVETTE

"And God shall turn upon them violently, and toss them like a ball into a large country."--ISAIIH.

"Poor Ted, poor Ted! I'd give my commission to see him once again."

"I believe you would, Debney."

"I knew him to the last button of his nature, and any one who knew him well could never think hardly of him. There were five of us brothers, and we all worshipped him. He could run rings round us in everything, at school, with sports, in the business of life, in love."

Debney's voice fell with the last few words, and there was a sorrowful sort of smile on his face. His look was fastened on the Farilone Islands, which lay like a black, half-closed eyelid across the disc of the huge yellow sun, as it sank in the sky straight out from the Golden Gate. The long wash of the Pacific was in their ears at their left, behind them was the Presidio, from which they had come after a visit to the officers, and before them was the warm, inviting distance of waters, which lead, as all men know, to the Lotos Isles.

Debney sighed and shook his head. "He was, by nature, the ablest man I ever knew. Everything in the world interested him."

"There lay the trouble, perhaps."

"Nowhere else. All his will was with the wholesome thing, but his brain, his imagination were always hunting. He was the true adventurer at the start. That was it, Mostyn."

"He found the forbidden thing more interesting than--the other?"

"Quite so. Unless a thing was really interesting, stood out, as it were, he had no use for it--nor for man nor woman."

"Lady Folingsby, for instance."

"Do you know, Mostyn, that even to-day, whenever she meets me, I can see one question in her eyes: 'Where is he?' Always, always that. He found life and people so interesting that he couldn't help but be interesting himself. Whatever he was, I never knew a woman speak ill of him. . . . Once a year there comes to me a letter from an artist girl in Paris, written in language that gets into my eyes. There is always the one refrain: 'He will return some day. Say to him that I do not forget.'"

"Whatever his faults, he was too big to be anything but kind to a woman, was Ted."

"I remember the day when his resignation was so promptly accepted by the Admiralty. He walked up to the Admiral--Farquhar it was, on the Bolingbroke--and said: 'Admiral, if I'd been in your place I'd have done the same. I ought to resign, and I have. Yet if I had to do it over again, I'd be the same. I don't repent. I'm out of the Navy now, and it doesn't make any difference what I say, so I'll have my preachment out. If I were Admiral Farquhar, and you were Edward Debney, ex-commander, I'd say: "Debney, you're a damned good fellow and a damned bad officer.'"

"The Admiral liked Edward, in spite of all, better than any man in the Squadron, for Ted's brains were worth those of any half-dozen officers he had. He simply choked, and then, before the whole ship, dropped both hands on his shoulders, and said: 'Debney, you're a damned good fellow and a damned bad officer, and I wish to God you were a damned bad fellow and a damned good officer--for then there were no need to part.' At that they parted. But as Edward was leaving, the Admiral came forward again, and said: 'Where are you going, Debney?' 'I'm going nowhere, sir,' Ted answered. 'I'm being tossed into strange waters--a lone corvette of no squadron.' He stopped, smiled, and then said--it was so like him, for, with all his wildness, he had the tastes of a student: 'You remember that passage in Isaiah, sir, "And God shall turn upon them violently, and toss them like a ball into a large country"?'"

"There wasn't a man but had a kind thought for him as he left, and there was rain in the eyes of more than one A.B. Well, from that day he disappeared, and no one has seen him since. God knows where he is; but I was thinking, as I looked out there to the setting sun, that his wild spirit would naturally turn to the South, for civilised places had no charm for him."

"I never knew quite why he had to leave the Navy."

"He opened fire on a French frigate off Tahiti which was boring holes in an opium smuggler."

Mostyn laughed. "Of course; and how like Ted it was--an instinct to side with the weakest."

"Yes, coupled with the fact that the Frenchman's act was mere brutality, and had not sufficient motive or justification. So Ted pitched into him."

"Did the smuggler fly the British flag?"

"No, the American; and it was only the intervention of the United States which prevented serious international trouble. Out of the affair came Ted a shipwreck."

"Have you never got on his track?"

"Once I thought I had at Singapore, but nothing came of it. No doubt he changed his name. He never asked for, never got, the legacy my poor father left him."

"What was it made you think you had come across him at Singapore?"

"Oh, certain significant things."

"What was he doing?"

Debney looked at his old friend for a moment debatingly, then said quietly: "Slave-dealing, and doing it successfully, under the noses of men-of-war of all nations."

"But you decided it was not he after all?"

"I doubted. If Ted came to that, he would do it in a very big way. It would appeal to him on some grand scale, with real danger and, say, a few scores of thousands of pounds at stake--not unless."

Mostyn lit a cigar, and, thrusting his hands into his pockets, regarded the scene before him with genial meditation--the creamy wash of the sea at their feet, the surface of the water like corrugated silver stretching to the farther sky, with that long lane of golden light crossing it to the sun, Alcatraz, Angel Island, Saucilto, the rocky fortresses, and the men-of-war in the harbour, on one of which flew the British ensign--the Cormorant, commanded by Debney.

"Poor Ted!" said Mostyn at last; "he might have been anything."

"Let us get back to the Cormorant," responded Debney sadly. "And see, old chap, when you get back to England, I wish you'd visit my mother for me, for I shall not see her for another year, and she's always anxious--always since Ted left."

Mostyn grasped the other's hand, and said: "It's the second thing I'll do on landing, my boy."

Then they talked of other things, but as they turned at the Presidio for a last look at the Golden Gate, Mostyn said musingly: "I wonder how many millions' worth of smuggled opium have come in that open door?"

Debney shrugged a shoulder. "Try Nob Hill, Fifth Avenue, and the Champs Elysees. What does a poor man-o'-war's-man know of such things?"

An hour later they were aboard the Cormorant dining with a number of men asked to come and say good-bye to Mostyn, who was starting for England the second day following, after a pleasant cruise with Debney.

Meanwhile, from far beyond that yellow lane of light running out from Golden Gate, there came a vessel, sailing straight for harbour. She was

an old-fashioned cruiser, carrying guns, and when she passed another vessel she hoisted the British flag. She looked like a half-obsolete corvette, spruced up, made modern by every possible device, and all her appointments were shapely and in order. She was clearly a British man-of-war, as shown in her trim-dressed sailors, her good handful of marines; but her second and third lieutenants seemed little like Englishmen. There was gun-drill and cutlass-drill every day, and, what was also singular, there was boat-drill twice a day, so that the crew of this man-of-war, as they saw Golden Gate ahead of them, were perhaps more expert at boat-drill than any that sailed. They could lower and raise a boat with a wonderful expertness in a bad sea, and they rowed with clock-like precision and machine-like force.

Their general discipline did credit to the British Navy. But they were not given to understand that by their Commander, Captain Shewell, who had an eye like a spot of steel and a tongue like aloes or honey as the mood was on him. It was clear that he took his position seriously, for he was as rigid and exact in etiquette as an admiral of the old school, and his eye was as keen for his officers as for his men; and that might have seemed strange too, if one had seen him two years before commanding a schooner with a roving commission in the South Seas. Then he was more genial of eye and less professional of face. Here he could never be mistaken for anything else than the commander of a man-of-war--it was in his legs, in the shoulder he set to the wind, in the tone of his orders, in his austere urbanity to his officers. Yet there was something else in his eye, in his face, which all this professionalism could not hide, even when he was most professional--some elusive, subterranean force or purpose.

This was most noticeable when he was shut away from the others in his cabin. Then his whole body seemed to change. The eye became softer, and yet full of a sort of genial devilry, the body had a careless alertness and elasticity, the whole man had the athletic grace of a wild animal, and his face had a hearty sort of humour, which the slightly-lifting lip, in its insolent disdain, could not greatly modify. He certainly seemed well pleased with himself, and more than once, as he sat alone, he laughed outright, and once he said aloud, as his fingers ran up and down a schedule--not a man-o'-war's schedule--laughing softly:

"Poor old Farquhar, if he could see me now!" Then, to himself: "Well, as I told him, I was violently tossed like a ball into the large country; and I've had a lot of adventure and sport. But here's something more the biggest game ever played between nations by a private person--with fifty thousand pounds as the end thereof, if all goes well with my lone corvette."

The next evening, just before dusk, after having idled about out of sight of the signal station nearly all day, Captain Shewell entered Golden Gate with the Hornet-of no squadron. But the officers at the signal station did not know that, and simply telegraphed to the harbour, in reply to the signals from the corvette, that a British man-of-war was coming. She came leisurely up the bay, with Captain Shewell on the bridge. He gave a low whistle as he saw the Cormorant in the distance. He knew the harbour well, and saw that the Cormorant had gone to a new anchorage, not the same as British men-of-war took formerly. He drew away to the old anchorage--he need not be supposed to know that a change was expected; besides--and this was important to Captain Shewell--the old anchorage was near the docks; and it was clear, save for one little life-boat and a schooner which was making out as he came up.

As the Hornet came to anchor the Cormorant saluted her, and she replied instantly. Customs officers who were watching the craft from the shore or from their boats put down their marine glasses contentedly when they saw and heard the salutes. But two went out to the Hornet, were received graciously by Captain Shewell, who, over a glass of wine in his cabin--appropriately hung with pictures of Nelson and Collingwood--said that he was proceeding to Alaska to rescue a crew shipwrecked which had taken refuge on a barren island, and that he was leaving the next day as soon as he could get some coal; though he feared it would be difficult coaling up that night. He did not need a great deal, he said--which was, indeed, the case--but he did need some, and for the Hornet's safety he must have it. After this, with cheerful compliments, and the perfunctory declaration on his part that there was nothing dutiable on board, the officers left him, greatly pleased with his courtesy, saluted by the sailors standing at the gangway as they left the ship's side. The officers did not notice that one of these sailors winked an eye at another, and that both then grinned, and were promptly ordered aft by the second lieutenant.

As soon as it was very dark two or three boats pushed out from the Hornet, and rowed swiftly to shore, passing a Customs boat as they went, which was saluted by the officers in command. After this, boats kept passing backward and forward for a long time between the Hornet and the shore, which was natural, seeing that a first night in port is a sort of holiday for officers and men. If these sailors had been watched closely, however, it would have been seen that they visited but few saloons on shore, and drank little, and then evidently as a blind. Close watching would also have discovered the fact that there were a few people on shore who were glad to see the safe arrival of the Hornet, and who, about one o'clock in the morning, almost fell on the neck of Captain Shewell as they bade him good bye. Then, for the rest of the night, coal was carried out to the Hornet in boats and barges.

By daybreak her coal was aboard, then came cleaning up, and preparations to depart. Captain Shewell's eye was now much on the Cormorant. He had escaped one danger, he had landed half a million dollars' worth of opium in the night, under the very nose of the law, and while Customs boats were patrolling the bay; there was another danger--the inquisitiveness of the Cormorant. It was etiquette for him to call upon the captain of the Cormorant, and he ought to have done so the evening before, but he had not dared to run the risk, nor could he venture this morning. And yet if the Cormorant discovered that the Hornet was not a British man-of-war, but a bold and splendid imposture, made possible by a daring ex-officer of the British Navy, she might open fire, and he could make but a sorry fight, for he was equipped for show rather than for deadly action. He had got this ex-British man-of-war two years before, purchased in Brazil by two adventurous spirits in San Francisco, had selected his crew carefully, many of them deserters from the British Navy, drilled them, and at last made this bold venture under the teeth of a fortress, and at the mouth of a warship's guns.

Just as he was lifting anchor to get away, he saw a boat shoot out from the side of the Cormorant. Captain Debney, indignant at the lack of etiquette, and a little suspicious also now--for there was no Hornet in the Pacific Squadron, though there was a Hornet, he knew, in the China Squadron--was coming to visit the discourteous commander.

He was received with the usual formalities, and was greeted at once by

Captain Shewell. As the eyes of the two men met both started, but Captain Debney was most shaken. He turned white, and put out his hand to the bulwark to steady himself. But Captain Shewell held the hand that had been put out; shook it, pressed it. He tried to urge Captain Debney forward, but the other drew back to the gangway.

"Pull yourself together, Dick, or there'll be a mess," said Shewell softly.

"My God, how could you do it?" replied his brother aghast.

Meanwhile the anchor had been raised, and the Hornet was moving towards the harbour mouth. "You have ruined us both," said Richard Debney. "Neither, Dick! I'll save your bacon." He made a sign, the gangway was closed, he gave the word for full steam ahead, and the Hornet began to race through the water before Captain Debney guessed his purpose.

"What do you mean to do?" he asked sternly, as he saw his own gig falling astern.

"To make it hard for you to blow me to pieces. You've got to do it, of course, if you can, but I must get a start."

"How far do you intend carrying me?"

"To the Farilones, perhaps."

Richard Debney's face had a sick look. "Take me to your cabin," he whispered.

What was said behind the closed door no man in this world knows, and it is well not to listen too closely to those who part, knowing that they will never meet again. They had been children in the one mother's arms; there was nothing in common between them now except that ancient love.

Nearing the Farilones, Captain Debney was put off in an open boat. Standing there alone, he was once more a naval officer, and he called out sternly: "Sir, I hope to sink you and your smuggling craft within four-and-twenty hours!"

Captain Shewell spoke no word, but saluted deliberately, and watched his brother's boat recede, till it was a speck upon the sea, as it moved towards Golden Gate.

"Good old Dick!" he said at last, as he turned away toward the bridge. "And he'll do it, if he can!"

But he never did, for as the Cormorant cleared the harbour that evening there came an accident to her machinery, and with two days' start the Hornet was on her way to be sold again to a South American Republic.

And Edward Debney, once her captain? What does it matter?

ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

Answered, with the indifference of despair

Mystery is dear to a woman's heart
Never looked to get an immense amount of happiness out of life
There is nothing so tragic as the formal

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