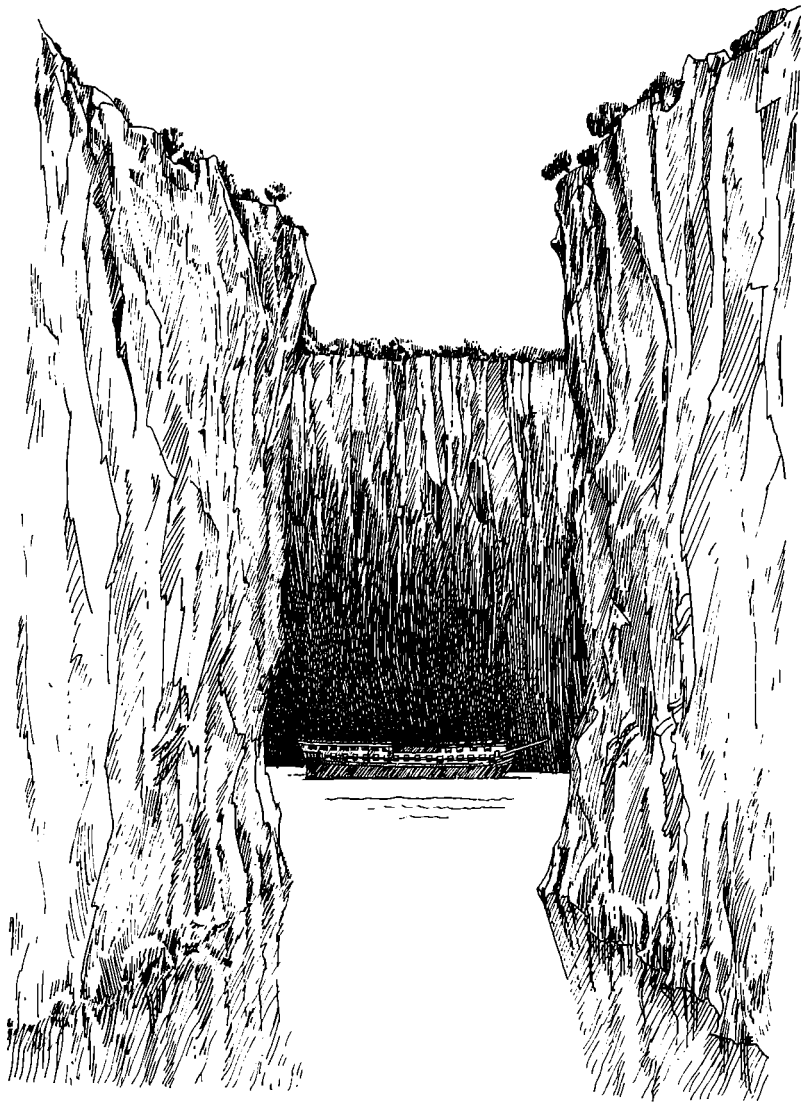


A decorative rectangular border with ornate floral and scrollwork designs in each corner, enclosing the title and author information.

# The Habitants of Middle Islet

*William Hope Hodgson*



“That’s ’er,” exclaimed the old whaler to my friend Trenhern, as the yacht coasted slowly around Nightingale Island. The old fellow was pointing with the stump of a blackened clay pipe to a small islet on our starboard bow.

“That’s ’er, Sir,” he repeated. “Middle Islet, an’ we’ll open out ther cove in er bit. Mind you, Sir, I don’t say as ther ship is still there, an’ if she is, you’ll bear in mind as I told you all erlong as there weren’t no one in ’er when we went aboard.” He replaced his pipe, and took a couple of slow draws, while Trenhern and I scrutinized the little island through our glasses.

We were in the South Atlantic. Far away to the north showed dimly the grim, weather-beaten peak of the Island of Tristan, the largest of the Da Cunha group; while on the horizon to the westward we could make out indistinctly Inaccessible Island. Both of these, however, held little interest for us. It was on Middle Islet off the coast of Nightingale Island that our attention was fixed.

There was little wind, and the yacht forged but slowly through the deep-tinted water. My friend, I could see, was tortured by impatience to know whether the cove still held the wreck of the vessel that had carried his sweetheart. On my part, though greatly curious, my mind was not sufficiently occupied to exclude a half-conscious wonder at the strange coincidence that had led to our present search. For six long months my friend had waited in vain for news of the *Happy Return* in which his sweetheart had sailed for Australia on a voyage in search of health. Yet nothing had been heard, and she was given up for lost; but Trenhern, desperate, had made a last effort. He had sent advertisements to all the largest papers of the world, and this measure had brought a certain degree of success in the shape of the old whaler alongside of him. This man, attracted by the reward offered, had volunteered information regarding a dismasted hulk, bearing the name of the *Happy Return* on her bows and stern, which he had come across during his last voyage, in a queer cove

on the south side of Middle Islet. Yet he had been able to give no hope of my friend finding his lost love, or indeed anything living in her; for he had gone aboard with a boat's crew, only to find her utterly deserted, and—as he told us—had stayed no time at all. I am inclined now to think that he must unconsciously have been impressed by the unutterable desolation, and atmosphere of the unknown, by which she was pervaded, and of which we ourselves were so soon to be aware. Indeed, his very next remark went to prove that I am right in the above supposition.

“We none on us wanted to 'ave much truck with 'er. She 'adn't a comfertable feelin' 'bout 'er. An' she were too dam clean an' tidy for my likin'.”

“How do you mean, too clean and tidy?” I inquired, puzzled at his way of putting it.

“Well,” he replied, “so she were. She sort of gave you ther feelin' as 'er crowd 'ad only just left 'er, an' might be back any bloomin' minnit. You'll savvy wot I mean, Sir, when you gets aboard of 'er.” He wagged his head wisely, and recommenced drawing at his pipe.

I looked at him a moment doubtfully; then I turned and glanced at Trenhern; but it was evident that he had not noticed these last remarks of the old seaman. He was far too busily engaged in staring through his telescope at the little island to notice what was going on about him. Suddenly he gave a low cry, and turned to the old whaler.

“Quick, Williams!” he said, “is that the place?” He pointed with the telescope. Williams shaded his eyes and stared.

“That's it, Sir,” he replied after a moment's pause.

“But—but where's the ship?” inquired my friend in a trembling voice. “I see no sign of her.” He caught Williams by the arm, and shook it in sudden fright.

“It's all right, Sir,” exclaimed Williams. “We ain't far enuff to the Sutherd yet ter open out ther cove. It's narrer at ther mouth, an' she were right away up inside. You'll see in er minnit.”

At that, Trenhern dropped his hand from the old fellow's arm, his face clearing somewhat, yet greatly anxious. For a minute he held on to the rail as though for support; then he turned to me.

“Henshaw,” he said, “I feel all of a shake—I—I—”

“There, there, old chap,” I replied, and slipped my arm through his. Then, thinking to occupy his attention somewhat, I suggested to him that he should order one of the boats to be got ready for lowering. This he did, and then for a little while further we scanned that narrow opening among the rocks. Gradually, as we drew more abreast of it, I realized that it ran a con-

siderable depth into the islet, and then at last something came into sight away up among the shadows within the cove. It was like the stern of a vessel projecting from behind the high walls of the rocky recess, and as I grasped the fact, I gave a little shout, pointing it out to Trenhern with some considerable excitement.

The boat had been lowered, and Trenhern and I with the boat's crew, and the old whaler steering, were heading direct for that opening in the coast of Middle Islet.

Presently we were amongst the broad belt of kelp with which the islet was surrounded, and a few minutes later we slid into the clear, dark waters of the cove, with the rocks rising up in stark, inaccessible walls on each side of us until they seemed almost to meet in the heights far overhead.

A few seconds swept us through the passage and into a small circular sea enclosed by gaunt cliffs that shot up on all sides to a height of some hundred odd feet. It was as though we looked up from the bottom of a gigantic pit. Yet at the moment we noted little of this, for we were passing under the stern of a vessel, and looking upward, I read in white letters *Happy Return*.

I turned to Trenhern. His face was white, and his fingers fumbled with the buttons of his jacket, while his breath came irregularly. The next instant, Williams had laid us alongside, and Trenhern and I were scrambling aboard. Williams followed, carrying up the painter; he made it fast to a cleat, and then turned to lead the way.

Upon the deck, as we walked, our feet beat with an empty sound that spelt out desolation; while our voices, when we spoke, seemed to echo back from the surrounding cliffs with a strange hollow ring that caused us at once to speak in whispers. And so I began to understand what Williams had meant when he said "She 'adn't a comfertable feelin' 'bout 'er."

"See," he said, stopping after a few paces, "'ow bloomin' clean an' tidy she is. It aren't nat'ral." He waved his hand toward the surrounding deck furniture. "Everythin' as if she was just goin' inter port, an' 'er a bloomin' wreck."

He resumed his walk aft, still keeping the lead. It was as he had said. Though the vessel's masts and boats had gone, she was extraordinarily tidy and clean, the ropes—such as were left—being coiled up neatly upon the pins, and in no part of her decks could I discern any signs of disorder. Trenhern had grasped all this simultaneously with myself, and now he caught my shoulder with a quick nervous grasp.

"See her, Henshaw," he said in an excited whisper, "this shows

some of them were alive when she drove in here—" He paused as though seeking for breath. "They may be—they may be—" He stopped once more, and pointed mutely to the deck. He had gone past words.

"Down below?" I said, trying to speak brightly.

He nodded, his eyes searching my face as though he would seek in it fuel for the sudden hope that had sprung up within him. Then came Williams' voice; he was standing in the companionway.

"Come along, Sir. I aren't goin' below 'ere by myself."

"Yes, come along, Trenhern," I cried. "We can't tell."

We reached the companionway together, and he motioned me to go before him. He was all aquiver. At the foot of the stairs, Williams paused a moment, then turned to the left and entered the saloon. As we came in through the doorway, I was again struck by the exceeding tidiness of the place. No signs of hurry or confusion, but everything in its place as though the steward had but the moment before tidied out the apartment and dusted the table and fittings. Yet to our knowledge she had lain here a dimasted hulk for at least five months.

"They must be here! They must be here!" I heard my friend mutter under his breath, and I—though bearing in mind that Williams had found her thus all those months gone—could scarcely but join in his belief.

Williams had gone across to the starboard side of the saloon, and I saw that he was fumbling at one of the doors. It opened under his hand, and he turned and beckoned to Trenhern.

"See 'ere, Sir," he said. "This might be your young leddy's cabin; there's feemayles' things 'ung up, an' their sort of fixins on ther table—"

He did not finish, for Trenhern had made one spring across the saloon, and caught him by the neck and arm.

"How dare you—desecrate—" he almost shrieked, and forthwith hauled him out from the little room. "How—how—" he gasped, and stooped to pick up a silver-backed brush which Williams had dropped at his unexpected onslaught.

"No offense, Mister," replied the old whaler in a surprised voice, in which there was also some righteous anger. "No offense. I wern't goin' ter steal ther bloomin' thing." He gave the sleeve of his jacket a brush with the palm of his hand, and glanced across at me, as though he would have me witness to the truth of his statement. Yet I scarcely noticed what it was that he said; for I heard my friend cry out from the interior of his sweetheart's cabin, and in his voice there was blent a marvelous

depth of hope and fear and bewilderment. An instant later he burst out into the saloon; in his hand he held something white. It was a calendar. He twisted it right way up to show the date at which it was set.

"See," he cried, "read the date! Read the date!"

As my eyes gathered the import of the few visible figures, I drew my breath swiftly and bent forward, staring. The calendar had been set for the date of that very day.

"God God!" I muttered, and then, "It's a mistake! It's just a chance!" And still I stared.

"It's not," answered Trenhern vehemently. "It's been set this very day—" He broke off short for a moment. Then after a queer little pause he cried out "O, my God! Grant I find her!"

He turned sharply to Williams.

"What was the date at which this was set? Quick!" he almost shouted.

Williams stared at him blankly.

"Damnation!" shouted my friend, almost in a frenzy. "When you came aboard here before?"

"I never even seen ther blessed thing before, Sir," he answered. "We didn't stay no time aboard of 'er."

"My goodness, man!" cried Trenhern. "What a pity! O what a pity!" Then he turned and ran toward the saloon door.

In the doorway he looked back over his shoulder.

"Come on! Come on!" he called. "They're somewhere about. They're hiding—search!"

And so we did; but though we went through the whole ship from stern to bow, there was nowhere any sign of life. Yet everywhere that extraordinary clean orderliness prevailed, instead of the wild disorder of an abandoned wreck; and always, as we went from place to place and cabin to cabin, there was upon me the feeling that they had but just been inhabited.

Presently, we had made an end to our search, and having found nothing of that for which we looked, were facing one another bewilderedly, though saying but little. It was Williams who first said anything intelligible.

"It's as I said, Sir; there weren't anythin' livin' aboard of 'er."

To this Trenhern replied nothing, and in a minute Williams spoke again.

"It aren't far off dark, Sir, an' we'll 'ave ter be gettin' out of this place while there's a bit of daylight."

Instead of replying to this, Trenhern asked if any of the boats were there when he was aboard before, and on his answering in the negative, fell once more into his silent abstraction.

After a little, I ventured to draw his attention to what Williams had said about getting aboard the yacht before the light had all gone. At that, he gave an absent nod of assent, and walked toward the side, followed by Williams and myself. A minute later we were in the boat and heading out for the open sea.

During the night, there being no safe anchorage, the yacht was kept off and on, it being Trenhern's intention to land upon Middle Islet and search for any trace of the lost crew of the *Happy Return*. If that produced nothing, he was going to make a thorough exploration of Nightingale Island and the Islet of Stoltenkoff before abandoning all hopes.

The first portion of this plan he commenced to put into execution as soon as it was dawn, for his impatience was too great to allow of his waiting longer.

Yet before we landed on the Islet, he bade Williams take the boat into the cove. He had a belief, which affected me somewhat, that he might find the crew and his sweetheart returned to the vessel. He suggested to me—searching my face all the while for mutual hope—that they had been absent on the preceding day, perhaps on an expedition to the island in search of vegetable food. And I (remembering the date of the calendar) was able to look at him encouragingly; though had it not been for that, I should have been helpless to aid his belief.

We entered through the passage into that great pit among the cliffs. The ship, as we ranged alongside of her, showed wan and unreal in the gray light of the mist-shrouded dawn; yet this we noticed little then, for Trenhern's visible excitement and hope was becoming infectious. It was he who now led the way down into the twilight of the saloon. Once there, Williams and I hesitated with a certain natural awe, whilst Trenhern walked across to the door of his sweetheart's room. He raised his hand and knocked, and in the succeeding stillness, I heard my heart beat loud and fast. There was no reply, and he again rapped with his knuckles on the panels, the sounds echoing hollowly through the empty saloon and cabins. I felt almost sick with the suspense of waiting, then abruptly, he seized the handle, turned it, and threw the door wide. I heard him give a sort of groan. The little cabin was empty. The next instant, he gave out a shout, and reappeared in the saloon holding the same little calendar. He ran to me and pushed it into my hands with an inarticulate cry. I looked at it. When Trenhern had shown it to me the preceding day it had been showing the date 27th; *now it had been altered to the 28th.*



"What's it mean, Henshaw? What's it mean?" he asked helplessly.

I shook my head. "Sure you didn't alter it yesterday—by accident?"

"I'm quite sure!" he said.

"What are they playing at?" he went on. "There's no sense in it—" He paused a moment; then again, "What's it mean?"

"God knows," I muttered. "I'm stumped."

"You mean sumone's been in 'ere since yesterday?" inquired Williams at this point.

I nodded.

"Be gum then, Sir," he said, "it's ghostses!"

"Hold your tongue, Williams!" cried my friend, turning savagely upon him.

Williams said nothing, but walked toward the door.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"On deck, Sir," he replied. "I didn't sign on for this 'ere trip to 'ave no truck with sperrets!" and he stumbled up the companion stairway.

Trenhern seemed to have taken no notice of these last remarks, for when next he spoke he appeared to be following out a train of thought.

"See here," he said. "They're not living aboard here at all. That's plain. They've some reason for keeping away. They're hiding somewhere—perhaps in a cave."

"What about the calendar then. You think—?"

"Yes, I've an idea that they may come aboard here at night. There may be something that keeps them away during the daylight. Perhaps some wild beast, or something; and they would be seen in the daytime."

I shook my head. It was all so improbable. If there was something that could get at them aboard the ship, lying as it did surrounded by the sea, at the bottom of the great pit among the cliffs, then it seemed to me that they would nowhere be safe; besides, they could stay below decks during the day, and I could conceive of nothing that could reach them there. A multitude of other objections rose in my mind. And then I knew perfectly well that there were no wild beasts of any description on the islands. No! Obviously it could not be explained in that manner. And yet—there was the unaccountable altering of the calendar. I ended my line of reasoning in a fog. It seemed useless to apply any ordinary sense to the problem, and I turned once more to Trenhern.

"Well," I said, "there's nothing here, and there may be something, after all, in what you say; though I'm hanged if I can make head or tail of anything."

We left the saloon and went on deck. Here we walked forward and glanced into the fo'cas'le; but, as I had expected, found nothing. After that we bundled down into the boat and proceeded to search Middle Islet. To do this, we had to pull out of the cove and round the coast a bit to find a suitable landing place.

As soon as we had landed, we pulled the boat up into a safe place and arranged the order of the search. Williams and I were to take a couple of the men apiece, and go right round the coast in opposite directions until we met, examining on the way all the caves that we came across. Trenhern was to make a journey to the summit and survey the Islet from there.

Williams and I accomplished our part, and met close to where we had hauled up the boat. He reported nothing, and so did I. Of Trenhern we could see no trace, and presently, as he did not appear, I told Williams to stay by the boat while I went up the height to look for him. Soon I reached the top and found that I was standing upon the brink of the great pit in which lay the wreck. I glanced round and there away to the left, I saw my friend lying on his stomach with his head over the edge of the chasm, evidently staring down at the hulk.

"Trenhern," I called softly, not wanting to startle him.

He raised his head and looked in my direction; seeing me, he beckoned, and I hurried to his side.

"Bend down," he said in a low voice. "I want you to look at something."

As I got down beside him, I gave a quick glance at his face; it was very pale; then I had my face over the brink and was staring into the gloomy depth below.

"See what I mean?" he asked, still speaking scarcely above a whisper.

"No," I said. "Where?"

"There," he answered, pointing. "In the water on the starboard side of the *Happy Return*."

Looking in the direction indicated, I now made out in the water close alongside the wreck several pale, oval-shaped objects.

"Fish," I said. "What queer ones!"

"No!" he replied. "Faces!"

"What?"

"Faces!"

I got up onto my knees and looked at him.

"My dear Trenhern, you're letting this matter affect you too

deeply—You know you have my deepest sympathy. But—”

“See,” he interrupted, “they’re moving, they’re watching us!” He spoke quietly, utterly ignoring my protest.

I bent forward again and looked. As he had said, they were moving, and as I peered, a sudden idea came to me. I stood up abruptly.

“I have it!” I cried excitedly. “If I’m right it may account for their leaving the ship. I wonder we never thought of it before!”

“What?” he asked in a weary voice, and without raising his face.

“Well, in the first place, old man, those are not faces, as you very well know; but I’ll tell you what they very likely are, they’re the tentacles of some sort of sea monster, kraken, or devil fish—something of that sort. I can quite imagine a creature of the kind haunting that place down there, and I can equally well understand that if your sweetheart and the crew of the *Happy Return* are alive, they’ll be inclined to give their old packet a pretty wide berth if I am right—eh?”

By the time I had finished explaining my solution of the mystery, Trenhern was upon his feet. The sanity had returned to his eyes, and there was a flush of half-suppressed excitement on his hitherto pale cheeks.

“But—but—but—the calendar?” he breathed.

“Well, they may venture aboard at night, or in certain states of the tides, when perhaps they have found there is little danger. Of course, I can’t say; but it seems probable, and what more natural than that they should keep count of the days, or it may have just been put forward thoughtlessly in passing. It may even be your sweetheart counting the days since she was parted from you.”

I turned and peered once more over the edge of the cliff; the floating shapes had vanished. Then Trenhern was pulling at my arm.

“Come along, Henshaw, come along. We’ll go right back to the yacht and get some weapons. I’m going to slaughter that brute if he shows up.”

An hour later we were back with a couple of the yacht’s boats and their crews, the men being armed with cutlasses, harpoons, pistols, and axes. Trenhern and I had each chosen a heavy shell-gun.

The boats were left alongside, and the men ordered aboard the wreck, and there, having brought sufficient food, they picnicked for the rest of the day, keeping a keen watch for signs of anything.

Yet when the night drew near, they manifested considerable

uneasiness, finally sending the old whaler aft to tell Trenhern that they would not stay aboard the *Happy Return* after dark; they would obey any order he chose to give in the yacht, but they had not signed on to stay aboard of a ghost-ridden craft at night.

Having heard Williams out, my friend told him to take the men off to the yacht; but to come back in one of the boats with some bedding, as he and I were going to stay the night aboard the hulk. This was the first I had heard on the matter; but when I remonstrated with him, he told me I was at perfect liberty to return to the yacht. For his part he had determined to stay and see if anyone came.

Of course, after that, I had to stay. Presently they returned with the bedding, and having received orders from my friend to come for us at daybreak, they left us there alone for the night.

We carried down our bedding and made it up on the saloon table; then we went on deck and paced the poop, smoking and talking earnestly—anon listening; but nothing came to our ears save the low voice of the sea beyond the kelp belts. We carried our guns, for we had no knowledge but that they might be needed. Yet the time passed quietly, except once when Trenhern dropped the butt of his weapon upon the deck somewhat heavily. Then indeed, from all the cliffs around us, there came back a low hollow boom that was frightening. It was like the growl of a great beast. At the bottom of that tremendous pit it presently became exceedingly dark. So far as I could judge, a mist had come down upon the Islet and formed a sort of huge lid to the pit. It was about twelve o'clock that we went below. I think by that time even Trenhern had begun to realize that there was a certain rashness in our having stayed; and below, at least, if we were attacked, we would be better able to hold our own. Somehow such vague fear as I had was not induced by the thought of the great monster I believed I had seen close to the vessel during the day, but rather by an unnamable something in the very air, as though the atmosphere of the place were a medium of terror. Yet—calming myself with an effort—I put down this feeling to my nerves being at tension; so that presently, Trenhern offering to take the first watch, I fell asleep on the saloon table, leaving him sitting beside me with his gun across his knees.

Then as I slept, a dream came to me—so extraordinarily vivid was it that it seemed almost I was awake. I dreamt that all of a sudden Trenhern gave a little gasp and leapt to his feet. In the same moment, I heard a soft voice call "Tren! Tren!" It came from the direction of the saloon doorway, and—in my dream—I turned and saw a most beautiful face, containing great wondrous

eyes. "An angel!" I whispered to myself; then I knew that I was mistaken and that it was the face of Trenhern's sweetheart. I had seen her once just before she sailed. From her, my gaze wandered to Trenhern. He had laid his gun upon the table, and now his arms were extended toward her. I heard her whisper "Come!" and then he was beside her. Her arms went about him, and then, together, they passed out through the doorway. I heard his feet upon the stairs, and after that my sleep became a blank, dreamless rest.

I was aroused by a terrible scream, so dreadful that I seemed to wake rather to death than life. For perhaps the half of a minute I sat up upon my bedding, motionless in a very frost of fear; but no further sound came to me, and so my blood ran warm once more, and I reached out my hand for my gun. I grasped it, shook the clothes from me, and sprang to the floor. The saloon was filled with a faint gray light which filtered in through the skylight overhead. It was just sufficient to show me that Trenhern was not present, and that his gun was upon the table, just where I had seen him place it in my dream. At that, I called his name quickly, but the only answer I received was a hollow, ghostly echo from the surrounding empty cabins. Then I ran for the door, and so up the stairs onto the deck. Here, in the gloomy twilight, I glanced along the bare decks, but he was nowhere visible. I raised my voice and shouted. The grim, circling cliffs caught up the name and echoed it a thousand times, until it seemed that a multitude of demons shouted "Trenhern! Trenhern! Trenhern!" from the surrounding gloom. I ran to the port side and glanced over—nothing! I flew to starboard; my eyes caught something—many things that floated apparently just below the surface of the water. I stared, and my heart seemed suddenly quiet in my bosom. I was looking at a score of pale, unearthly faces that stared back at me with sad eyes. They appeared to sway and quiver in the water, but otherwise there was no movement. I must have stood thus for many minutes; for, abruptly, I heard the sound of oars, and then round the quarter of the vessel swept the boat from the yacht.

"In bow, there," I heard Williams shout. "Ere we are, Sir!" The boat grated against the side.

"Ow 'ave—" Williams began; but it seemed to me that I had seen something coming to me along the deck, and I gave out one scream and leapt for the boat. I landed on a thwart.

"Push off! Push off!" I yelled, and seized an oar to help.

"Mr. Tren'ern, Sir?" interjected Williams.

"He's dead!" I shouted. "Push her off! Push her off!" and the men, infected by my fear, pushed and rowed until, in a few

moments we were a score of yards distant from her. Here there was an instant's pause.

"Take her out, Williams!" I called, crazy with the thing upon which I had stumbled. "Take her out!" And at that, he steered for the passage into the open sea. This took us close past the stern of the wreck, and as we passed beneath, I looked up at the overhanging mass. As I did so, a dim, beauteous face came over the taffrail, and looked at me with great sorrowful eyes. She stretched out her arms to me, and I screamed aloud, for her hands were like unto the talons of a wild beast.

As I fell fainting, Williams' voice came to me in a hoarse bellow of sheer terror. He was shouting to the men:

"Pull! Pull! Pull!"