

# ★ Famous FANTASTIC Mysteries ★

Vol. 1

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No. 1

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THIS magazine is the answer to thousands of requests that we have received over a period of years, demanding a second look at famous fantasies which, since their original publication, have become accepted classics. Our choice has been dictated by your requests and our firm belief that these are the aces of imaginative fiction.

—The Editors.

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# The Whimpus

BY TOD ROBBINS

If you are a militant materialist, with no belief in anything but that which you see with your eyes or touch with your own hands, this story is not for you. But, "There are more strange things hidden away in the sea than ever man heard tell of."

## CHAPTER I

### THE BOX ON THE BEACH

"THERE'S things out there, Miss Bessie, that you never heard tell of. I know you're school-learned and all, but the old sea's got more secrets hid away than there are shells on this beach."

Elizabeth Wilkinson smiled down on the garrulous old fisherman, who sat cross-legged on the sand patiently mending the broken strands of a net. He had been in her father's employ since she could first remember and had always had that quality, so endearing to the very young, of being able to lie prodigiously and convincingly. Even now she enjoyed his wild tales. The savor of the sea was in them. While listening to them, she felt very childlike and very frightened. It was just as though she were swept off her feet and carried away in a heavy surf.

"Now, own up, Captain Ben," she said, attempting to make his watery blue eyes drop before her steady brown ones, "you just thought of that on the spur of the moment. There never was such a creature as a whimpus."

The old man's under-lip shot out as it always did when his word was doubted. He assumed a grieved and disgusted expression. His thick, blunt fingers once more busied themselves with their task.

"What's the use of tellin' you anythin', Miss Bessie?" he mumbled. "You're gettin' to be just like your pop, with no belief in nothin' but what you sees with your own eyes. If all folks was like you there wouldn't be no religion, even. It ain't what we see what makes life interestin', it's what's just around the corner. There's things happenin' right now that ain't never been writ up in books, and there's creatures crawl'in' about what would make Ringling Brothers' head animal-trainer take to his heels if he ever suddenly happened to catch sight of 'em."

"But a whimpus, Captain Ben! You say it has a tail and fins like a fish?"

"It has so, Miss Bessie; and big blue eyes, most like a gal's. Leastwise, so Dick Jamieson told me—him who was wrecked in the China Sea. And Dick was a truthful man when not in liquor."

"How long are they, Captain Ben?"

"About the length of my arm, missy, with pointed teeth which can give a man a cruel bite if they caught him in the calf of the leg."

"And hair, Captain Ben? I believe you said they had long, curly hair?"

"So Dick told me, missy. With a flash to it like gold in the sunlight. He leaned down and put his hand on one of 'em, thinkin' he had found a treasure or somethin'. It was nothin' more or less than a whimpus sleepin', her hair slung over her like



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a net; and she wakes up, fightin'-mad, and bites a piece off his little finger for his boldness. Then she gives a flip to her tail and away she sails as saucy as you please—leavin' Dick on the bank, jumpin' with pain."

For a long moment there was silence. The girl had half turned away from the old fisherman and was looking out to sea. It was a day in late August. Above the gray tumbling waste of waters, a pale opalescent curtain of fog was slowly descending. The Adventurer—Mr. Wilkinson's yacht—rode at anchor barely two hundred yards from shore. Already she was swathed in drifting tides of vapor. Like a fantom ship, she appeared and disappeared. At one moment she seemed to be scarcely a stone's throw from the beach; at the next, a mile or so offshore. It had been blowing hard on the preceding night. The waves were like an army coming home with victory on their shields. They thundered out their deep-throated war song on the beach. Far out in the impenetrable mist, like a voice from another world, the melancholy call of a seagull rose for a moment above the tumult of tumbling waters.

"No, Miss Bessie," Captain Ben continued with a shake of his head, "there's more things hid away in the sea than ever man heard tell of. But the fog's gettin' precious thick. I think you'd best be off to the house or you'll get wet to the skin."

But Elizabeth had caught sight of something in the surf which held her undivided attention. It was a large box which, at that moment, was riding the snowy crest of a wave. On it came smoothly, like a miniature ship, sinking at last into a milky chasm as the billow tripped on the beach with its treasure and fell sprawling. For an instant the box was left high and dry.

Moved by a sudden impulse which she was soon to regret, Elizabeth ran forward across the wet, quivering sand and bent over the box.

"Come back, missy!" Captain Ben called in a shrill, quavering voice. "What ever are ye thinkin' of? Come back this instant afore one of them big waves catches yer!"

Elizabeth raised the box. Holding it tight to her breast, she hurried back just as another huge wave charged down on her with a threatening roar. Lowering her prize to the sand beyond the reach of its many long arms, she surveyed Captain Ben triumphantly.

"This belongs to me now, doesn't it?" she asked, indicating the box with a slender, moist finger.

"Aye, aye, missy," Captain Ben said solemnly. "What a man fishes out of the sea belongs to him, no matter who it belonged to afore. The King of England's crown jewels might be in this here box and they wouldn't be no more his now than Mike Rafferty's pig." He paused and scratched his grizzled chin. "But I guess these ain't crown jewels," he added rather sorrowfully. "They're more like to be lemons."

"Why lemons?"

"'Cause a tramp steamer run aground in the fog last night off Wishbone Point. They had to lighten her cargo afore they got her off; and they do say she was loaded down with crates of lemons. Some of the boys in the village was fishin' for 'em all mornin'."

"I don't believe it *is* a crate of lemons," Elizabeth said with a shake of her head. Once more she bent down and turned the box over on its side. At the next moment, with a stifled cry, she stepped back so hurriedly that she nearly tripped over the old man's outstretched legs.

"Why, what's the matter, missy?" Captain Ben asked, looking up from the net in surprise. "You looks as if somethin' had bit yer!"

"There's something alive in that box," she said in a rather unsteady voice. "I heard it move. Do you suppose it could be a baby, Captain Ben?"

The old fisherman's mouth extended from ear to ear. A glimpse of his gums could be seen, with here and there a single discolored tooth rising from them like so many weatherbeaten tombstones. He was laughing silently.

"Don't laugh at Elizabeth cried

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angrily. "I tell you there is something alive in that box! I heard it rattling about when I moved it!"

Captain Ben rose stiffly to his feet and bent over the box. "I misdoubt it's a baby, Miss Bessie," he mumbled. "A baby wouldn't have much chance of weatherin' through such a sea in this old craft. Mebbe the lemons ain't packed very tight. Let's see."

He put one of his gnarled hands on the box and turned it over. On the instant a strange flapping sound could be heard issuing from the interior, followed almost immediately by a loud scratching as though long, sharp nails were at work.

Captain Ben uttered an ejaculation of amazement. "That's mighty strange!" he muttered. "There must be fish and crabs in this box. But who ever heard tell of—" He paused and scratched the top of his weatherbeaten hat. "Shall I open it?"

"No," Elizabeth murmured. "I don't want to see what's in it. There's something horrible, I know. I wish I hadn't taken that box out of the water."

"Why, what's the matter, missy? You look all upset. It's only fish and crabs thrown in higgledy-piggledy in an old chest. It ain't like you to get worked up over nothin'."

Elizabeth bit her lip. What made her feel this way about a harmless old box? It was ridiculous! And yet, try as she would, she could not even look at it now. When she had bent over it and put her hand on its cold, wet surface, when she had heard those strange flapping and scratching sounds within, a wave of intense, if unaccountable, fear and repulsion had passed through her. Now trembling little patches of gooseflesh stood out on her brown arms. This was absurd. She must have caught cold. Or perhaps she just had a touch of malaria.

"I think I'll go back to the house, Captain Ben," she said at last. "I feel cold."

"You don't look very hearty today, missy, and that's a fact. You'd better change yer shoes and stockin's, I reckon. But what will I do with the box?"

"Bring it up to the house, Captai! You can leave it on the back stoop."

"Aye aye, missy. I'll tote it up in a wheelbarrow. Mebbe there's some likely sized fish in this here chest. They seem lively enough. And a good crab ain't to be sneezed at, neither, if it's cooked proper."

## CHAPTER II

### A CLAIMANT FOR THE CHEST

MR. WILKINSON greeted his daughter as she mounted the veranda. He was a stout, middle-aged man with a sallow complexion, dull, prominent eyes and a predilection for a quiet, uneventful life. The one excitement which he allowed himself was an occasional flyer in Wall Street. He was proverbially lucky in such speculations. The considerable fortune, which his father had left him, had never taken wings—on the contrary, like a snowball rolling down-hill, it had gathered to itself many lesser fortunes. But this success without effort had given him no flicker of joy.

Each year his complexion had grown sallow, his eyes duller, his muscles flabbier. The boredom which must necessarily attend a smooth existence, was smothering the manhood in the financier. Beneath a mountain of down, he was snoring his life away.

Now he rose ponderously, and laid a plump, moist hand on his daughter's shoulder. "I've got a surprise for you, Bessie," he said in a slow, heavy voice.

"A surprise, dad! What is it?"

Mr. Wilkinson smiled sleepily. He had intended teasing her, but now lacked the vitality. "The surprise is upstairs, shawing," he said, sinking back into the easy-chair like a large stuffed doll.

Elizabeth flushed. In an instant she forgot all about the wooden box and her dread of its flapping, scratching contents. "You don't mean that the surprise is Jay, dad, do you?"

Mr. Wilkinson nodded and smiled, "Yes," he murmured. "Dropped into my

office just after he got off the boat. Didn't wire—wanted to make it a surprise. But here he is to tell you about it himself."

At this moment a tall, athletic young man opened the screened door, and, seeing Elizabeth, hurried forward and took her in a bearlike hug. Jay had never been a gentle lover, but she liked him all the better for that.

"Well, old girl," he said at last, holding her off at arm's length and regarding her attentively with his steady gray eyes, "you're looking pretty fit. You didn't expect me home so soon, eh?"

"No, I didn't," she murmured. "You wrote me that you intended doing Europe with the rest of the team."

He smiled a trifle shamefacedly. "I intended to," he said. "I thought that you'd think all the more of me if I stayed away a little longer. After we beat the Englishmen that deciding game, the team broke up. Larry and Martin dropped in on Paris; Henry and I were going to do Scotland and Ireland, but at the last moment I quit. I had to do some explaining. Henry was as sore as a boil." He paused and stroked the cleft in his prominent chin meditatively. "Well, here I am," he finished, "and willing to step up to the altar most any time."

"Wait till somebody asks you, sir," she said with a sudden flash of color. "Do you still think that polo is the most important thing in life?"

The young man shook his head. "No, but it's exciting; and I crave excitement."

Elizabeth experienced the disquieting sensation at her fiancé's words which is common enough to most girls when they are brought face to face with their great enemy—that priestess of adventure which beckons the swift and the strong. It is the instinct of feminine love to be everything, and it must content itself with so little.

After a moment she said a trifle bitterly: "At one moment, Jay, you talk of settling down, of becoming thoroughly domesticated; at the next, you sigh for speed and thrills. Which side of you am I to believe? I like excitement, but I don't put it above everything else in the world."

"You're a girl," her fiancé answered calmly, "and with a girl it's different. But a fellow has to be doing strenuous things or else—" He paused and shrugged.

"Haskin' pardon, lady and gentlemen," said a strange, husky voice which sounded like the scraping together of two rusty iron bars, "a chap down at the beach says as 'ow you 'ad picked up a old chest."

All three turned their heads in surprise. There, standing on the lower step of the veranda, swinging a mildewed, canvas cap between finger and thumb, was one of the strangest figures Elizabeth had ever seen.

Above medium height, but so bent that his back rounded out like a drawn bow; his long legs wide apart as though balancing himself against the shock of the sea; his head, with its great bulbous nose and close-set black eyes, cocked on one side shrewdly like a bird about to take flight—he resembled some scarecrow posturing in a cornfield. And yet, on the second glance, one felt the humanness of the man. It was in his crafty, thin-lipped mouth, in the swing of his lantern jaws, in the twitching of his corded, brown fists, which resembled two sea-spiders. All in all, from his tangle of straw-colored hair to his shining boots, he looked as out of place on Mr. Wilkinson's broad, sun-swept veranda as one of the pirates in "Treasure Island."

"The chap as I spoke to," the man continued, "said as 'ow 'e 'ad brought the chest up 'ere a few minutes back. Now could I once lay my eyes on it, lady and gentlemen, I'd know it fast enough by some 'oles I drilled in its side."

"I think he must mean the box I picked out of the surf," Elizabeth said, turning toward her father. "There was some holes in that, I remember."

"Was there, lady, was there?" cried the man in evident excitement. "The Lord love yer, lady! That's news to warm a poor sailor's soul! Now did these 'oles form a kind of a 'eart, lady—a 'eart like yer see on this 'ere arm of mine?"

He rolled up his sleeve, disclosing a sunburnt arm on which was tattooed in gay coloring a three-masted schooner; two lov-

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ers sitting under a dark blue tree; a queen of spades; and, lastly, a mermaid reclining on a cliff and pulling up, hand over hand, a large scarlet heart, on which was inscribed in minute letteri "Caught again! September 15, 1935."

"You're well decorated, my man," said Mr. Wilkinson with a flicker of an eyelash in Jay's direction. "Who was the artist?"

"It's a tasty bit of work, ain't it?" said the sailor in evident pleasure. "That's what I halways says—*tasty*! Black Tom did 'em hall—'im who was my shipmate aboard the Sea King. Lord, 'e was a hartist-born, was Tom! Liked nothin' better than to get a poor chap in front of 'im like a bloody blackboard to draw purty pictures on. 'E did this 'ere when we was shipwrecked together on a coral island in the China Seas. 'E never got off that island neither, did Black Tom."

"Never got off it!" Elizabeth cried. "Did he die there?"

"Now I wouldn't say so much as that, gal. Leastwise, I ain't. 'E went off and left me sudden one mornin' and 'e never showed up no more. They caught 'im, I guess."

"Who caught him?" Jay broke in.

The sailor half-closed his eyes till they were mere pin-points. "*They*," he muttered. "Them things what live on coral islands in the China Seas."

"He means *whimpus*," said Captain Ben, who had at that moment hobbled up.

"Right you are, matey," said the man. "The whimpus got Black Tom, soul and body. 'E was uncommon fond of gals, was Tom."

At is point Mr. Wilkinson rose impatiently to his feet. "Now what can we do for you?" he said rather sharply. "If you've come up here to tell us lies about mermaids you're wasting your time. We've got a first-class liar here as it is." He gave Captain Ben a significant stare.

"There's more things afloat, Mr. Wilkinson, than you ever heard tell of," Captain Ben began in a plaintive, asthmatic whine. "This man here is right when he speaks of whimpus. I heard tell of 'em afore."

But the sailor cut him short. "Look here, lady and gentlemen," he said, stepping forward, "I come peaceful enough for my property, and I'm bound I'll 'ave it!"

"My daughter picked the box out of the water. Well, according to law, it now belongs to her. If you want it back, you'll have to pay salvage," said Mr. Wilkinson.

Now the sailor turned toward Elizabeth. "I'll pay salvage, lady," he whined. "Now would a ten-pound note be agreeable? Say the word, lady." He began to fumble in his pocket.

"Don't take it, Bessie," Mr. Wilkinson advised, enjoying the affair as a child enjoys a new kind of game. "Take an old business man's advice. He offers fifty dollars—well, it must be worth a good deal more."

"Lord love yer, no, lady! There ain't nothin' in that old chest but a few keepsakes and trinkets. Pictures of gals and the likes of that. I wouldn't give no ten pounds if my 'eart wasn't kinder set on 'em."

Elizabeth bit her lip to repress a laugh. The sailor was lying so poorly that a child would not have been deceived. But what could be in the chest? Something alive—she had heard it move—something which this man considered to be worth more than fifty dollars. It was worth finding out.

"It couldn't be your box I found," she said at last.

"And why ain't it, lady? Ain't there no 'eart cut in it?"

"Yes, I believe there is a heart."

"Well, ain't that proof enough, lady, that it's Bill Farley's chest right enough?"

"Is your name Bill Farley?"

"Aye, aye, ma'am. And you'll find a B and a F on the tother end, burnt there with a red-hot poker—rough, I grant you; but plain to see in the sunlight."

"That's all very well, Mr. Farley," said Elizabeth very sweetly. "You seem to know what the outside of the box looks like. But that isn't enough. I believe you said that there were a few trinkets inside?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well, that isn't so, Mr. Farley. There's something alive in that box."

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For a moment there was a disconcerting silence. The sailor's crafty eyes wandered here, there, and everywhere: Mr. Wilkinson's round face indicated surprise; Jay began stroking his amber-colored mustache thoughtfully. At last Captain Ben spoke up.

"It's no use, Bill Farley, or whatever your name may be," he said. "You've gone and steered yourself into a fog. None of us here will rest easy till we've had a peep into that chest of yours. You've lied yourself into a heap more trouble than ten pounds will buy yer out of."

Suddenly Elizabeth uttered a little cry of horror. "Have you a baby in that box?" she asked excitedly.

"Perhaps he's a kidnaper," Jay suggested. "They're quite common."

"He's got a bad face," Captain Ben muttered, casting a suspicious look at the cowering Bill Farley. "When a Britisher is bad, he's most uncommon bad."

Mr. Wilkinson took a step forward with the air of a stern judge. "What *have* you got in the box?" he demanded harshly.

The sailor looked from right to left, as though contemplating escape, and then into the faces of his persecutors. Tiny beads of perspiration had gathered on his forehead; his eyes looked like those of a trapped animal.

"I got—" He paused for breath and swallowed several times.

"What?" they demanded almost in unison.

"I got a whimpus in that there chest," Bill Farley said a trifle wearily.

### CHAPTER III

#### A CHINESE MERMAID

FOR several moments there was a dead silence. All regarded the sailor with open-eyed amazement. Mr. Wilkinson was the first to speak.

"You've got a *what*?" he asked.

"I got a whimpus," Bill Farley repeated stubbornly. "It's a Chinese mermaid fish, common enough on that coral island where me and Tom was cast away."

Jay allowed himself an incredulous smile. "Where did you put that box, Captain Ben?" he asked.

"It's on the back porch, sir. Will I get it?"

"Yes," Mr. Wilkinson broke in, "get it. This man must be drunk or mad. A whimpus—a mermaid—whoever heard of such nonsense?"

Captain Ben turned away with a shake of his head. "I told you more times than once, sir, that there be strange creatures in the sea what you never heard tell of," he mumbled.

Bill Farley stared sullenly at his boots with the air of an abused man. "What's the odds whether a chap lies or tells the Gospel truth?" he muttered. "E ain't believed neither way."

"A whimpus!" Mr. Wilkinson continued irritably. "And 'perhaps you'll be kind enough to tell us how you happened to catch your mermaid?"

"I will that," said Bill Farley. "It 'appened this way: I rigged up a kind of drag-net while I was on that there coral island, and put it out each mornin' to catch gay-colored fish of which there was aplenty. One mornin' I pulls the net in and finds 'er lyin' there as snug as a bug in a rug. She give me a start, lookin' at me most like a gal with 'er big blue eyes kinder smilin' in 'er 'ead. 'Lord, Bill,' I says to myself, 'you've 'ad a touch of sun, my poor lad!'"

"Here comes Captain Ben with the box, dad," Elizabeth broke in.

As she spoke her eyes were fixed on the chest which the old fisherman carried; and once again that wave of incomprehensible fear passed through her.

"Why open it, dad?" she murmured. "Let the man have it."

It is doubtful if Mr. Wilkinson heard her. At that moment he and Jay were bending over the box. Captain Ben had placed it on the veranda in a stream of sunshine. In this bright light the small, drilled holes, so arranged that they formed the outline of a human heart and the blurred *B* and *F* were plainly to be seen. Several knotted cords encircled the chest.

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Jay, with the impatience of a small boy on Christmas morning, pulled out a penknife and severed them. Mr. Wilkinson began to lift the lid.

"Ave a care!" Bill Farley warned him. "She's got a most uncommon nasty temper with strangers. You're like to lose a finger if you don't watch your 'and!"

Mr. Wilkinson, in spite of his incredulous smile, raised the lid slowly and cautiously. A shaft of sunlight stole into the chest. At the next moment he uttered an ejaculation of amazement, which was echoed by Jay. Captain Ben hobbled up and bent forward in his turn.

"It's a whimpus, sure enough!" he cried, a shrill note of triumph ringing through his voice like the clanging of an old, cracked bell. "What did I tell you, Mr. Wilkinson? Do yer see that fish's tail, and them claws, and them long, pointed teeth? And she has yaller hair, too, same as that feller said what had his finger bit off by one of 'em. But look at them gal's eyes! Ain't they purty, though—blue as sea-shells, yet with a sparkle to 'em! Aye, aye, Mr. Wilkinson, this sure is a whimpus."

"Well, I'm hanged if I ever saw anything like it before!" Jay muttered under his breath.

Even the financier's rather irritating common sense was shattered for the moment. He stared down at the contents of the sailor's chest in blank amazement. His pursed lips seemed on the point of emitting a long-drawn "Oh!" of astonishment.

"Well, now that you 'ave taken a squint at my whimpus," Bill Farley said sullenly, "perhaps you'll be so kind as to return a poor man's property and let 'im be off about his business."

The sailor's words seemed to restore a measure of Mr. Wilkinson's presence of mind. "Not so fast," said he, straightening his back. "You've got a most peculiar freak of nature here; I'll grant you that. The only one in existence, I imagine."

"There's 'undreds and 'undreds of 'em

on Whimpus Island," Bill Farley said composedly.

Once more an incredulous smile flitted across Mr. Wilkinson's face. "I doubt that very much," said he. "However, let's come to terms. You've got a freak in the fish world here—something which will cause considerable comment. What did you intend doing with it?"

A sly, secretive smile played for a moment beneath the sailor's bulbous nose, creasing his face till it resembled a walnut-shell. "This 'ere whimpus is worth money," he muttered. "I was thinkin' of sellin' 'er to a zoo."

"That won't be necessary. I'll buy it myself. How would a hundred dollars strike you?"

"A 'undred dollars—twenty pounds! Gawd, governor!" Bill Farley's face took on an expression of lively disgust. "This whimpus is worth 'er weight in diamonds. I wouldn't take a thousand pounds for 'er, and that's a fact."

Mr. Wilkinson nodded briskly. "Very well, my man. I'm afraid we can't do business. Good afternoon."

The sailor seemed greatly relieved. Passing the back of his hand across his forehead, he bent down awkwardly and laid hold of the chest. "Come on 'ome with Bill, Lizzie," he muttered. "We've 'ad a mighty tough day of it, old gal."

"Hold on, there!" Mr. Wilkinson called sharply. "What are you about? You can't have that fish until you pay salvage. You said it was worth its weight in diamonds, that you wouldn't take a thousand pounds for it—well, that should make the salvage pretty high."

"Gawd! Ain't you 'ard on a poor chap, gove'nor?" Bill Farley released his hold on the chest and straightend himself. His face drew up into knots of anxiety and grief. "I cawn't pay no 'igh salvage 'cause I ain't got no more than thirty pounds in all the world! This here whimpus is mighty nigh my entire fortune!"

"Now, why not tell us the truth, Farley?" the financier said in a kindlier tone. "It's no use lying—you've got something



up your sleeve. Why do you think this fish is worth so much? Tell us the whole story, and I give you my word we'll deal squarely by you."

Bill Farley hesitated and shifted uneasily on his feet. "You 'ave me, gove'nor," he said with a new note of respect in his tone. "Whichever way I turn, you 'ave me. A poor seafarin' chap ain't got a Dutchman's chance with a far-seein' gentleman like you. But I got a question to ask afore I spins my yarn. Is that craft, lyin' so snug in the cove, your yacht, gove'nor?"

"The Adventurer? Yes, she belongs to me."

"That's good news, gove'nor. Now, 'as the young lady 'ere a bit of a ring, a bracelet, or somethin' kinder shiny which she would lend a poor seafarin' chap for the sake of a test?"

Elizabeth nodded. Drawing a thin band of gold from her finger, she presented it to the sailor.

"Thank yer kindly, ma'am," said he. "Now, gove'nor, lady, and gentlemen, will yer take a little walk down to that pier yonder, and I'll show you what Lizzie 'ere can do once she's sot her mind on it."

"What are you driving at?" Mr. Wilkinson asked with some asperity.

"Never you mind, gove'nor. Just you step along with old Bill, and 'e'll show you what's what. You ain't afeared, gove'nor?"

Jay burst out into a laugh. "What do you know about that?" he said. "He thinks we're afraid of his mermaid. Let's see what he's got to show us down on the pier."

"Very well," said Mr. Wilkinson, with an uneasy look at the water-soaked box. "Are you coming with us, Bessie?"

Elizabeth shook her head. "Not if you're going to take that creature with you."

"Surely you're not afraid of a fish, Bessie?" Jay broke in. "Why, you haven't even looked at it yet!"

"It isn't fear exactly. I don't know how to explain it. It's the same feeling I have for a mouse—only a thousand times worse. I've had a horror of it from the

very first. If I looked at it, I know I'd scream."

"Poor old Lizzie!" Bill Farley muttered, picking the box up in his arms. "You ain't very popular with the gals, are yer, Lizzie? Well, gove'nor, lead the way."

The four men descended the steps of the veranda and started across the lawn toward the pier which stretched out like a wooden arm over the sea. Mr. Wilkinson and Jay led, Captain Ben and Bill Farley brought up the rear.

Elizabeth watched them receding in the distance with a wildly beating heart. Her natural curiosity was battling with that strange repulsion for which she was unable to account. At one moment she wished she had accompanied them; at the next, she was glad that she had remained where she was.

The pier was several hundred yards from the house. Elizabeth, although she strained her eyes, was unable to ascertain what the men were about. By this time they had reached their destination. Looking very small and toylke, they were bending forward as though examining something.

An involuntary shudder passed through the girl's frame. They were now opening the box and examining that horrible creature which Captain Ben had described as having long yellow hair and eyes like a girl's—that must be what they were about. How could they do it? Men were callous. Perhaps they would even touch it. Perhaps Jay, her Jay, might fondle it, might run his fingers through its hair, might—

Something very near akin to jealous rage made Elizabeth rise and hurry toward them. But before she had traversed more than a quarter of the distance, she encountered Captain Ben, who had detached himself from the group on the pier and was hobbling across the front lawn.

"I was comin' up to tell yer all about it, missy," he said, smothering a yawn with a huge fist. "You missed it. It's too late now—they've put the whimpus back in her box."

"What happened, Captain Ben?" asked breathlessly.

## THE WHIMPUS

The old man once more paused to open his mouth in a cavernous yawn before he answered. "Funny how sleepy I feel!" he muttered.

"What happened?" Elizabeth repeated impatiently.

"Why, when we got down to the pier, that there sailor opened the box, grabbed the whimpus quick by the neck, and jerked her out. She begin to scratch at him with her claws and gnash her teeth—but it weren't no use, for Farley had her safe by the neck all the time. Well, missy, he had a piece of fishin' line in his trouser-pocket. No sooner did she stop her antics than he made it fast about her. It was curious the easy way he handled the critter."

"What did he do then?" Elizabeth asked.

"Why, then he took that ring that you give him and chucked it into the sea. That made me howlin' mad, I can tell yer. I never expected to see it no more. 'Have yer taken leave of yer senses?' I says, step-pin' forward with the thought of layin' my fist on that ugly jaw of his. But he just kinder smiles superior and throws his whimpus overboard, not forgettin' to hold on to the other end of the line. 'Watch my Lizzie,' he says, very proud. 'She's no end of a gal when it comes to findin' valuabl'."

"And then what happened, Captain Ben?"

"Why, we all watched that there fishin' line goin' out farther and farther. Then, all of a sudden, it stopped dead; and Farley begun to pull it in, hand over hand. Pretty soon that whimpus pops out of the water. And what do you think, missy—there was your ring, gripped tight in her claws."

"It picked my ring up?"

"Yes, missy. And Farley let her keep it for a while, sayin' them bright things made the poor gal happy. She's got it along with her now in her box, and she's hummin' like a thousand tops goin' at once."

"Humming?"

"Aye, aye, missy. She hums when she's content, Farley says. And it's a soothin'

sound—a most soothin' sound." The old man broke off, and once more displayed his gums in a prodigious yawn.

## CHAPTER IV

### MOONSHINE AND MADNESS

"WELL, now, as I 'ave showed yer what my Lizzie could do, let us talk business, gove'nor."

It was Bill Farley who spoke. Leaning back comfortably in one of Mr. Wilkinson's easy chairs, a corpulent Havana cigar between his yellow teeth, he surveyed the others with a strange air of mingled civility and triumph. The financier, his face still mirroring astonishment and a measure of expectancy, crossed his plump legs and lit a match. Elizabeth and Jay interchanged glances, but remained silent. Captain Ben had taken up a trowel, and was making a pretense at weeding the flower-bed in the shadow of the veranda; while, in reality, he was straining his old ears to catch any scattered fragments of the conversation.

"I don't see how your fish's accomplishments alter the case," Mr. Wilkinson said finally. "It recovered my daughter's ring, certainly; but my daughter recovered it. In a word, the more valuable you make your fish appear, Farley, the higher salvage may be demanded."

"But you ain't got me right, gove'nor," the sailor cried. "Lizzie is a valuable possession—not because she ain't known in these parts, not because she can pick up a gold ring occasional, but because she 'as a fortune of all 'er own. She's a capitalist, that's what my Lizzie is."

"I'm sure I don't know what you're driving at," Mr. Wilkinson broke in.

"Look 'ere, gove'nor—I'll explain." Bill Farley leaned forward and knocked the ash of his cigar off on the toe of his boot. "There's a coral island in the China Seas where there's 'undreds and 'undreds of Lizzies. Them mermaid fish is all alike. They're the same as gals—a diamond or a gold ring, anythin' kinder dazzlin', tickles 'em to death. Now, down on the bottom

## FAMOUS FANTASTIC MYSTERIES

of the sea there's loads and loads of such things lyin' kinder careless about. Think of the ships what's foundered off the China coast, gove'nor, in them ragin' typhoons; ships loaded down with gold and precious stones, and the like of that. What do yer think them whimpus 'as been doin' these thousands of years? Get my drift, gove'nor?"

"You mean that they've been storing up treasure-trove from wrecked vessels?" Mr. Wilkinson asked, sitting up very straight in his chair.

Jay drew his breath in through his teeth with a hissing sound. "Oh-ho, what an idea!" he muttered.

"That's what I'm a tellin' yer," Bill Farley continued patiently. "Them whimpus 'ave been stealin' from foundered ships since the world was new. There's undreamed-of wealth for the chap what finds their cave, gove'nor. Captain Kidd's treasure wouldn't be a ante in that game. Now, suppose I knowed the whereabouts of that island, gove'nor, and suppose Lizzie 'ere could do the rest?"

Mr. Wilkinson rose and began to pace the veranda. "Of course, all this is just foolishness," he muttered. "And yet—"

"You 'ave a tidy little yacht in the 'arbor," Bill Farley said hopefully. "Just you say the word, gove'nor, and I'll pilot yer to Whimpus Island. We'll split the pot—all 'ands what sails. There'll be enough treasure to spare, or sink me for a Dutchman!"

Mr. Wilkinson came to a sudden halt in front of the sailor. "I want to hear all about this," he said querulously. "How did you happen to get hold of this fish? It'll pay you to stick to the truth."

"Gawd blast me if I lie, gove'nor! It 'appened this way: I was aboard the Sea King what went down in a tornado just off the China coast. Me and Black Tom rigged up a raft. Two days and two nights we drifted, and then we touched ground on one of them coral islands, which is as thick as flees on a mangy dog in them parts. Lucky for us there was a big, 'ollowed-out place in the center of the island which 'ad

caught a deal of rain-water. For food we 'ad the fish, which was all colors of the rainbow, and sweet-tastin' enough."

"Was that Whimpus Island?"

"Aye, aye, gove'nor. We didn't see 'ide nor 'air of 'em for the first few days. Only we 'eard a low 'ummin' sometimes which would put Black Tom and me to sleep like we was kids. One day Black Tom catches one sunnin' 'erself. 'E come runnin' to me, 'oldin' 'er in a bit of fish-net."

"Just look 'ere, Bill!" 'e says, swallowin' 'ard. "Look what this gal 'as in 'er fist!"

"Well, I gives 'er a stare; and she stares back at me, as bold as you please, through the 'oles in the net. Pretty soon I see some-thin' shinin' in 'er claws. Gawd! I give my eyes a rub, but it weren't no use! That there shinin' stone in 'er fist was a diamond as big as a robin's egg."

"We're rich men, Tom," I says joyful.

"But 'e gives a shake of 'is 'ead, bein' a gloomy, sorrowful chap mostly. 'We might be bloody millionaires, Bill,' says 'e; 'but what good would it do us on this blawsted gridiron?"

"Well, for all that, Black Tom took the diamond out of the whimpus's fist—though 'e 'ad to treat 'er a bit rough first, she bein' havaricious, as are most females. Then 'e made a pet of 'er, feedin' 'er bits of fish, and now and then givin' 'er a swim on the end of a cord. And it was a most unnatural thing to see, that there fish and Black Tom sleepin' alongside one another each night—she with 'er 'ead on 'is breast, 'er golden 'air brushin' 'is cheek. Lord, it give me the creeps—the way she 'ad of lookin' at 'im like a lovesick gal on 'er 'oneymoon! And it made me feel kinder lonesome, too. I began to wish I 'ad a whimpus of my own."

"One day I was all alone, sunnin' myself on a bit of rock. Black Tom was out walkin' with 'is whimpus—though 'e did all the walkin', wadin' about the island while she swum alongside. Pretty soon I 'ears a great 'ullabaloo; and 'ere comes Black Tom, runnin' fit to bust, 'is lady friend under 'is arm."

## THE WHIMPUS

"'What's the row?' says I. 'Row?' says 'e. 'We're the richest men in the world, Bill! And it's all because of this little gal 'ere.' Then 'e gives 'is whimpus a squeeze which makes 'er cock one blue eye at me kinder coy.

"'Ave you found another diamond?' I asked.

"'A diamond, Bill!' says 'e kinder scornful. 'Where I just come from they're thick as pebbles on the beach.'

"Then 'e went on to tell me as 'ow the whimpus 'ad took 'im into a cave while they was walkin', and pretty soon they come to a strip of sand where there was a pile of rubies and diamonds and gold pieces. And there was bones, too—human bones, white as chalk—and bits of junk which weren't no use to nobody.

"'You come away in a hurry,' says I.

"'I did that,' says 'e, blinkin' 'is eyes at me solemn. 'There was some skulls sittin' on them piles of precious stones, and they give me the creeps. 'Owsomever, I'm goin' back now and take another squint.'

"'I'll go with yer,' says I.

"'No, yer won't,' says 'e, givin' me a nasty look. 'Two's company, three's a crowd.' 'E give a little 'itch to 'is knife which I knew meant trouble. 'Dolly and me 'll treat yer square, Bill,' 'e says, 'but we don't want yer nosin' around in there.'

"'With that 'e starts back again with a ugly grin at me over 'is shoulder and 'is 'and on the 'aft of 'is knife. Now, bein' a peaceful man myself, 'avin' sung in the church choir in my youth, I let 'im 'ave 'is way—more especial as 'e was a wicked chap to cross and as tall as a steeple. Pretty soon I lost sight of 'im and 'is whimpus behind a bit of rock. And I never laid eyes on either of 'em since that day, gove'nor."

Bill Farley paused to light his cigar, which had gone out. Elizabeth glanced at Jay, and saw that his eyes were flashing brightly, and that there was a hectic splash of color in each cheek. She glanced at her father, and saw that he, also, showed marked signs of excitement. The sailor's box stood near the railing. A low, intermittent buzzing sound came from it.

"How is it that you never saw him again?" Mr. Wilkinson asked.

"I dunno, gove'nor. That there cave 'e told me about must 'ave swallowed 'im like the whale swallowed Jonah. 'E never come out alive—nor 'dead neither, I reckon."

"Did you discover the entrance of the cave?" Jay asked suddenly.

"Not me, sir," Bill Farley answered with a weak smile. "Black Tom would 'ave skinned me alive 'ad I followed 'im. 'E was a mean man when crossed. But Lizzie, she knows where that cave is, right enough."

"How did you happen to catch your whimpus?" Mr. Wilkinson asked.

"I caught 'er with a bit of net when I was fishin' off the rocks. But I wasn't takin' no chances at explorin' caves with no one 'andy in case of trouble. I put Li 'ie in my old sea-chest, and a day or so later I got picked up by a tramp steamer bound for New York. Natural enough, I didn't tell them what I knowed. There was too many 'ands aboard. 'When I gets to New York,' I says to myself, 'I'll find some skipper I can trust, and then—'"

"But how did the chest happen to be in the water?" Jay broke in.

Bill Farley moved his feet uneasily, and a guilty flush spread over his face. "That tramp steamer went aground off Wish-bone Point," he muttered. "Them custom officers might 'ave made things 'ot for Lizzie and me, so I took French leave in one of the life-boats when none of the crew was lookin'. Pretty soon a squall comes up, and the boat capsizes. Lizzie come aground 'ere, but I swam to shore half a mile farther up. Gawd, I was near out of my 'ead till that old chap told me 'e 'ad seen my chest."

"That's a very strange tale," said Mr. Wilkinson, chewing savagely on his cigar. "If you're lying, you do it very well."

Bill Farley's heavily wrinkled face took on a grieved expression. "So 'elp me, I ain't spinnin' a yarn, gove'nor! This 'ere is Gospel truth. You've a sizable yacht in the cove. What do yer say if we go treasure-untin'?"

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"This is all moonshine and madness," Mr. Wilkinson muttered. "Still, I was thinking of taking a cruise; and it might as well be the China Seas as anywhere else."

"I'm all for it!" Jay cried enthusiastically. "This is the kind of thing which makes life worth while."

Suddenly a long, solemn face appeared over the railing of the veranda. It was Captain Ben's. "What have I always told yer, Mr. Wilkinson?" he said. "There's more strange critters and strange adventures out there"—he pointed unsteadily toward the surging stretch of sea—"than you ever heard tell of. Can't I go along, sir? I ain't so spry as I was, but I'm a deep thinker and all."

"You can go, Captain Ben!" cried Mr. Wilkinson with a strange note of boyish enthusiasm in his voice. "How about you, Bessie?"

Elizabeth nodded her head. "I'll go, too, dad," she murmured. "Perhaps I might be able to help some way. There might be something that—"

Suddenly she broke off. A dozen feet from her, from the interior of the sailor's chest, a strange flapping, scratching sound could be heard.

"Never you mind 'er, ma'am," said Bill Farley, with an embarrassed smile. "Lizzie 'as tantrums when she ain't fed regular. Poor gal, she's 'ad a 'ard day."

### CHAPTER V

#### ANCHORS AWEIGH

FOR the next few days Maple Ridge, as Mr. Wilkinson's country place was called, was humming with activity. The preparations for the extended voyage went on apace, and the obese financier attended to the work with unusual animation.

Captain Ben and Farley slept together in the fisherman's cottage. They kept the sailor's chest in the same room with them. Often, and especially while the moon was full, the whimpus would emit that strange humming sound so peculiar to it, and at

these times the men's snores would grow in volume till the tiny apartment seemed the interior of some huge beehive.

But Elizabeth, unlike the others, did not view the contemplated cruise for treasure with sparkling eyes and flushed cheeks. No; on the contrary, an involuntary tremor passed through her when she thought of it. During these days a shadow dogged her footsteps. And because this shadow was so vague in outline, so incomprehensible, it was doubly terrifying.

"What am I afraid of?" she would ask herself. "Am I afraid of a trip by sea to the China coast?"

"No," an inner voice would answer. "You are afraid of arriving safely at an island where there will be hundreds and hundreds of creatures like that creature which is now in the sailor's box."

"Perhaps. But why should I fear these creatures. I did not even see the one in the box."

"Very true," the voice would answer with terrifying calmness; "but you have a feminine intuition which tells you that there are worse things than death—an intuition which has shown you the meaning of such creatures in your dreams. Beware the whimpus! Was it not chanted over your cradle by another woman who, in her turn, heard it almost at dawn of thought? The whimpus, that intangible something which robs women of husbands and homes—the whimpus, that destroyer of our faith in those we hold close to our breasts, that breaker of men's destinies, that flapping, scratching creature of guile—beware the whimpus!"

And Elizabeth could not rid herself of that shadow. She saw it reflected in her father's kindling eyes and flushed cheeks; she saw it written in the curve of Jay's prominent chin; and she noted that even the aged Captain Ben, bore its dread echo in his shrill voice as the rusted antique bugle holds the echo of war somewhere in its dry throat. Like a relentless Medusa, it was turning to stone all those kindlier, gentler traits of man. Somewhere in the distance—on a coral island in the China

## THE WHIMPUS

Seas—strange, flapping, scratching creatures were beckoning to them. The men heard their call. They were going, even as Bill Farley had gone, even as all men had gone through all centuries. It was destiny—destiny sad for women to look upon. She was alone, and they were many; she went unprotected, and they were armed with all the hidden guile of the infinite. What was waiting for her on Whimpus Island?

At last came that never-to-be-forgotten day when the *Adventurer*, who had not earned her name till then, weighed anchor and swept majestically out of the harbor into the open sea. Elizabeth, from the upper deck, watched the shore slip past and finally disappear like a cloud of smoke. Several gulls followed the yacht, emitting shrill, plaintive cries. The wind had freshened, and a sprinkling of spray was borne against her face. The waves, in a long slanting procession, marched gaily forward against the prow of the *Adventurer*, only to be disemboweled and cast aside. They seemed an army seeking suicide. Each perished with a little gasp. A few somber clouds rode the heavens. They looked down on the bright tumult beneath like elderly, corpulent generals who watch the battle from afar.

"Well, ma'am, 'ow's it feel to go sailin' arter treasure?"

It was Bill Farley who spoke. He and Captain Ben had sauntered over to the rail, within arm's reach of Elizabeth's chair. They both wore a grin, now that they were safe at sea.

"Of course, I feel very excited," Elizabeth murmured. "What have you done with your fish, Mr. Farley?"

"Who? Lizzie, ma'am? She's as safe as a bug in a rug. I 'ave 'er alongside my 'ammock. I wouldn't take 'alf a chance with Lizzie."

"I'll miss the sound of her to-night, Bill," Captain Ben broke in. "That there whimpus has a soothin' sound when a feller's sleepy—a most soothin' sound."

"So I 'ave took notice, matey," Bill Farley muttered reflectively. "She's dif-

ferent than most gals there—beggin' your pardon, ma'am. I 'ad a wife in Singapore once. Gawd, that gal wouldn't lull yer off to sleep none, not 'er! She was hall for talk. She 'ad a tongue like a tin knife beatin' on a fryin'-pan. Give me Lizzie in a 'urricane to 'er."

The yacht had weighed anchor in the late afternoon. Now night began to settle down over the waste of tossing waters. The lips of foam, which rode each wave, seemed encrusted with tiny sparks of living fire. The wake was a flaming phosphorescent streak. Very gradually, very timidly, the stars appeared and looked down vacantly on the sea. The moon rose grinning from a patch of clouds far ahead. It had an air of jovial hospitality about it. "I'm glad you've come," it seemed to be saying through its wide, toothless mouth. "Step this way, won't you? I've got a surprise for you on the other side of the world."

Elizabeth rose with a little shiver. Night had suddenly reached out and gripped the *Adventurer* in her huge shadowy palm. Mystery and adventure were all about in those charging waves, in that somber sky, in that surge and sweep, in that power and passion of the sea.

### CHAPTER VI

#### AN IRON WHIRLWIND

IT WAS a calm day. Not a breath of air ruffled the placid surface of the sea which stretched out like some solid, luminous substance. The *Adventurer* plowed her way forward unconcernedly, casting a foam-capped furrow on either side.

"Aye, aye, governor," Bill Farley said in reply to a question of Mr. Wilkinson's, "we should sight Whimpus Island to-morrow night. And a very fine cruise we 'ad of it, weather as though served to order and no sea to speak of."

"We ain't there yet," Captain Ben broke in with a pessimistic shake of his grizzled head. It's a treacherous sea at this time of the year. Them iron whirlwinds pops up as sudden as a devil out of hell!"

"An iron whirlwind?" Jay asked.

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"'E means a typhoon, gov'nor," Bill Farley explained. "They calls 'em iron whirlwinds 'ereabouts."

At that moment Elizabeth mounted the companionway and joined the four men. "Isn't it warm?" she murmured.

"Aye, aye, it's 'ot," Bill Farley replied.

"It is," said Captain Ben. "I recollect that it was on a day like this that—"

"Hello!" Mr. Wilkinson broke in. "Here comes the skipper! I wonder what he wants?"

The tall, lean figure of the captain of the *Adventurer* came striding toward them. His usually placid countenance wore a lugubrious expression.

"Well, what is it, Masters?" Mr. Wilkinson asked.

"The barometer has been falling for the last hour, sir. I think we're due a bit of rough weather."

Bill Farley drew in his breath sharply. "That looks bad 'ereabouts," he muttered.

"Bad signs both," said Captain Ben. "Take an old sailor's advice and don't let a iron whirlwind sneak up behind yer when you're not lookin' for it. Listen! What's that I hear?"

Far away across the calm expanse of water to the east a faint moaning could be heard. It was as though a grieving human soul were wandering in that vast amphitheater between sea and sky. Now other voices joined it in a melancholy chorus. The pack was coming from all sides—that pack of wind-wolves which would soon be down on them with a rush and a roar.

"What is it?" Mr. Wilkinson asked in a bewildered tone.

"There's a typhoon comin' up, gov'nor," said Bill Farley, tightening his leather belt. "There'll be 'ell presently. Take a squint at the sky, gov'nor."

Even as he spoke great black clouds, like knights fully caparisoned for the lists, rode swiftly into the pale-blue sky. They had appeared with startling suddenness as though they had been created in an instant by some malevolent magician of the infinite; and, with their coming, the whole

face of the heavens was altered. A soft glow suffused the heights above. The sky glowed ruby red in spots as though it were a glass door against which gigantic tongues of flame were pushing forward. At any moment one expected to see it come crashing down in red-hot fragments.

Suddenly the mournful wailing ceased. It was followed by a silence so profound that the ticking of Captain Ben's large silver watch was distinctly audible to all. There was something awe-inspiring in this silence. One felt that all about in that sullen sky, in that motionless sea now shot with fiery corrugations, in those swiftly gathering clouds, a relentless force was creeping forward noiselessly on hands and knees.

A solid white wall had risen up from the sea a mile or so away. For an instant it hovered there, a mound of snow against a murky background, and then it swept toward them with a sullen roar.

"Hurry, missy, hurry!" cried Captain Ben in a high falsetto.

Seizing Elizabeth's hand, he half led and half dragged her toward her cabin. Scarcely had they stumbled down to comparative safety before a huge wave tossed the *Adventurer* up on her beam-ends as though she were a toy; and a frantic, tearing wind, like a mad old woman, screaming, chuckling, roaring, circled about overhead, raking the yacht from stem to stern.

The sudden wild bound of the *Adventurer* skyward threw Elizabeth on the floor of her cabin, and Captain Ben, head first, against the wall. Both were stunned. For a long time they lay there, unconscious of the progress of the typhoon.

When Elizabeth opened her eyes again, night had fallen. But what a strange night it was!—a luminous night which enveloped the raging sea with a pall of fire. Through the doorway she caught a glimpse of a blood-red heaven. Indeed the sea and the sky had apparently become as one—a fiery brotherhood, inseparable on the horizon's edge.

The typhoon had not abated in fury since those first few blinding moments.

## THE WHIMPUS

On the contrary, the ocean had been so lashed by that terrific and luminous wind that it had risen up in wild revolt, threatening the very sky. Great billows, with fiery locks, charged down on the *Adventurer* and tossed her heavenward in derision. Each instant it seemed that she must perish in those glowing chasms ahead; but she fought her way through them somehow and rose up gamely on the other side, salt incrustated from her keel to her smoke-stacks.

Elizabeth was too weak to move. She lay there, a blinding pain creasing her forehead, staring about her like a terror-stricken child. There was no light in the cabin except those strange, vivid flashes which stole in through the doorway and which served to illumine objects in a fragmentary fashion. Now Captain Ben's face could be seen. He lay within arm's-reach of Elizabeth, huddled up against the wall. She wondered if he were dead.

But now something happened which made her forget Captain Ben entirely. Suddenly the roaring of the wind died down as though by magic—it was as though nature were holding her breath—and she heard strange flapping, scratching sounds in the cabin where the steps led up to the main deck. Whatever it was, it was coming closer.

A great, numbing fear enveloped Elizabeth like a coverlet of snow. Only too well she knew those flapping, scratching sounds. She tried to scream, but her voice was frozen in her throat; she tried to rise, but her limbs refused their office. And now even the luminous light from the sea failed her. An inky blackness succeeded it which draped all things in impenetrable shadow.

But the flapping, scratching sounds continued. They were not more than two feet away—now less than a foot—now— Suddenly she felt something cold and sharp touch her outstretched palm.

"Lizzie!" a hoarse voice shouted. "Lizzie! Where 'ave yer got to, Lizzie?"

Bill Farley's dark figure blocked the cabin door. Striking a match, he peered about him anxiously. At this moment Cap-

tain Ben sat up and rubbed his head.

"Who's that?" he called weakly.

"It's Bill Farley, matey. 'Ave yer seen my Lizzy 'ereabouts? That there iron whirlwind smashed my chest ag'in' the wall; and Lizzie took it into 'er 'ead to skedaddle."

Captain Ben drew an electric flash-light from his pocket and touched the button. As the cabin became illumined, Bill Farley uttered a cry of joy.

"There she is!" he shouted jubilantly. "Lizzie, old gal, don't you go for to desert Bill. Come out from under that bed afore I go arter yer. Bli'me, if this ain't luck!"

**B**EFORE dawn the typhoon wore itself out. All night the *Adventurer* had been running before the hurricane like a chip in a mill-race; now she was able to pursue her course unmolested. The wind had died down to a gentle breeze; and, although the waves still rode mountain high, their crests were no longer flecked with foam. Soon the sun rose and looked down reassuringly on a wind-scarred sea.

The passengers of the yacht, looking much the worse for the night's rough usage, gathered under the awning on the after-deck.

"Here comes Captain Masters," said Elizabeth suddenly. "He seems to be rather excited."

"Perhaps the old tub's sprung a leak," Bill Farley suggested. "These pleasure-boats ain't built for seas like we was ridin' all of last night."

By now Captain Masters had drawn up alongside the owner of the *Adventurer*. "There's land off our port bow," he said, raising his hat. "A coral island, I believe, sir."

"You don't say so!" Mr. Wilkinson began to fumble with his case of binoculars. "I think I'll take a look at it, Masters."

Bill Farley silently went aft, reappearing a moment later with a long, brass telescope. "I can see it now," Jay said, shielding his eyes with the palm of his hand. "There was a curtain of mist hiding it, but it's rising."



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Bill Farley raised the telescope to his eye and gazed long and attentively. Suddenly it began to shake oddly. "Gawd!" he muttered, "if it ain't Whimpus Island!"

"There must be some mistake!" Mr. Wilkinson cried. "We couldn't have run into it by accident like this!"

"Nary a mistake, gov'nor. There she is just as I seen her last, shaped like a 'orse-shoe and all. And there's that bit of flag-pole what me and my mate rigged up with Black Tom's red flannel drawers still flappin' there, or what's left of 'em."

Jay took the telescope from his hand. "He's right, Mr. Wilkinson," he said at length. "At least I can see the pole and something red flying from it."

"Run in closer, Masters," Mr. Wilkin-son ordered.

The *Adventurer* ran slowly forward. It came to a halt along the coral shores which glowed like molten metal in the sun. A great splash of foam told that the anchor had been lowered.

"What's that?" Jay cried suddenly. "I thought I saw something dive off that ledge of coral into the water."

"It was a whimpus, gove'nor," said Bill Farley composedly. "I saw 'er myself. There's 'undreds 'ere—'undreds."

"When shall we begin searchin' for the treasure?" Captain Ben asked, moving his nutcracker jaws as though he were chewing a delectable morsel. "I'm most too tired to go skinnin' my shins on diamonds till I've had a few winks of sleep."

"And me too, matey," Bill Farley agreed. "My 'ead's swimmin' around, I'm that wore out. Let's us 'ave our beauty sleep, gov-ernor, afore we tackle treasure-untin'."

"I'd like to start right now," Jay cried impatiently. "We've got all the rest of our lives to sleep."

But Mr. Wilkinson shook his head. "No, no Jay. Captain Ben and Farley are right. We want to start at this thing when we can do our best. Let's turn in now, and in the afternoon we can land and look over the ground."

"Right you are, gove'nor!" Bill Farley cried with alacrity. "I'm off to my 'am-

mock this minute. Sweet dreams to one and all." With a smile which was half a grimace and a bow which bent him double, the sailor turned and made off toward his quarters.

"I don't fancy that fellow's manners," Jay said with a flush. "He's entirely too free and easy. What he needs is a strenuous toe-application on the right spot."

"Never mind, Jay," Mr. Wilkinson said. "We can teach him his place after he's found the treasure for us. But speaking about place, mine should be in a downy couch this minute. How about you, Bes-sie?"

"I'm awfully tired, dad. I'm going to turn in."

"Every one is goin' to take a snooze," Captain Ben said. "Even the crew. Cap-tain Masters has give orders to that effect. Well, they deserve it, the poor lads." Smothering a yawn, he turned and hobbled off.

Fifteen minutes later Elizabeth lay on her berth in the cabin sound asleep.

Almost immediately she heard the muffled sound of oars working smoothly in well-oiled oarlocks.

When the girl awoke the red rays of the setting sun streamed through the port-hole.

Conscious that some one was pound-ing on the door, she sat up and rubbed her eyes.

"Who is it?" she called softly.

"It's Jay," said a voice which shook with anger. "I came to wake you. What do you think happened while we were all asleep?"

"I haven't an idea. What?" the girl asked.

"Why, that Cockney sailor sneaked off to Whimpus Island in one of our life-boats and he hasn't come back."

"What of it? Probably he's taking a little row. He'll be back for supper," she said.

A bitter, incredulous laugh rasped through the keyhole. "I fancy not," Jay said calmly. "He's taken his whimpus with him."

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### CHAPTER VII

"AYE, AYE, SIR—JUST FISH"

ELIZABETH dressed quickly and hurried on deck. In spite of Jay's disappointment, she felt relieved at the disappearance of the sailor and his whimpus. She had great difficulty in hiding her real feelings from the group of excited, angry men whom she encountered near the empty davits where the missing life-boat had reposed.

"This is a pretty kettle of fish, missy!" Captain Ben cried in his high treble. "But I never liked that Britisher from the first."

"I can't see his game," Mr. Wilkinson said irritably. "How can he double-cross us? We've got the yacht; and, without that, all the treasure in the world wouldn't do him any good."

"He's got something up his sleeve," Jay muttered.

"Funny we can't see him on the island," Mr. Wilkinson said thoughtfully. "He's probably hiding on the other side of that mound."

"Or in the treasure-cave," Captain Ben suggested. "That's where he's at—fillin' his pockets with diamonds, I wouldn't wonder."

Elizabeth shaded her eyes and gazed over the now calm stretch of water toward Whimpus Island. To the west, a red sullen sun swam on the horizon. It colored the coral with a last faint glow before it sank beneath the surface of the sea. The wind had died away. Not a breath of air ruffled the placid surface; and the red rags, which had once served as a part of Black Tom's wardrobe, hung disconsolately from the flagpole.

Suddenly the girl uttered a shrill cry. "Why, there's the boat now!" she said. "No, two of them—one right behind the other!"

Mr. Wilkinson raised the binoculars to his eyes in some excitement. After a moment he lowered them with an exclamation of disgust. "It's only Masters," he told his daughter. "We sent him to look for Farley in the other life-boat."

"Yes, but there are two boats coming this way."

"Masters has Farley's boat in tow. He probably found it on the island."

"Well, the man can't dodge us!" Jay cried. "He'll stay on the island till we say the word. I think we've got him where we want him."

"Perhaps he drowned," Captain Ben suggested. "A lot of them sailors can't swim. I recollect one time off Gibraltar there was just such another feller—"

But Mr. Wilkinson interrupted the old fisherman with scant ceremony. Raising his voice to a bellow, he hailed Captain Masters who was not more than a stone's throw from the *Adventurer*.

"Is Farley on the island?"

"He must be there, sir," Captain Masters answered through his speaking-trumpet. "We found his boat pulled up on the shore."

"Hiding in the cave," Mr. Wilkinson muttered. "Well, we'll starve him out. But I don't see his little game."

"Nor I," Jay agreed. "He stands to win nothing by acting this way. But don't you think we could find the cave without him or his whimpus?"

"Not me," said Captain Ben. "It's like lookin' for a needle in a haystack. That there island is hollowed out with caves, thousands and thousands of 'em. We ain't got no chance without a whimpus."

For the next few days a cloud of despondency hung over the *Adventurer*. In vain the coral island was kept under strict surveillance, not a vestige of Bill Farley was to be seen; in vain exploring parties ransacked it from end to end, no cave in any way resembling Black Tom's description was to be found. At the end of the week, even Jay had given up hope. Undoubtedly Bill Farley and his secret had died together.

On the following Monday Mr. Wilkinson made known his intention of quitting the island and starting home. "We're just wasting our time here," he told Jay. "If Bill Farley were still alive, we'd have heard from him before this."

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"I suppose so," the young man muttered. "He must have fallen into some hole and broken his neck. But it seems a shame to turn back without getting a glimpse of the treasure."

Mr. Wilkinson nodded solemnly. "I know. But what's to be done? I've told Masters to weigh anchor to-morrow."

At this moment Captain Ben's decrepit figure was seen approaching across the deck at a strange ambling trot. He was waving his arms about like a windmill; his long white hair was flying in the wind.

"Well, what is it?" Mr. Wilkinson asked.

The old man moistened his lips and launched out into speech. "I've been fishin' for the last few days while you all have been searchin' this island. There's some most curious fish in these parts—gay-colored, with tails most like a lady's fan and pop eyes like a frog. But they're tasty, too, when cooked with plenty of butter."

"Is that all you've got to tell us about—fish?" Jay cried impatiently. "I thought that perhaps you'd discovered something. 'So it's just fish, eh?'"

"Aye, aye, sir—just fish," said Captain Ben, a sly smile creeping under his nose. "Well?"

"Well, Mr. Wilkinson, this mornin' I lost my sinker; and, havin' nothin' handy but a gold goat which my sister's son give me for a watch-charm, I hitched it on my line till I could find somethin' better and threw it overboard. Now I didn't get a bite for nearly ten minutes; then, all of a sudden, somethin' gives that line a awful jerk. 'What's this?' I says to myself, for the coral fish don't pull near so hard. 'Perhaps a young shark has laid hold.' Well, I pulled that fish up on deck, although I had a sweatin' time of it, and what do you think it was gentlemen?"

"I'm sure I don't know," said Jay.

"Was it a shark?" Mr. Wilkinson asked.

Captain Ben surveyed his employer with an air of triumph. "Not so you could notice!" said he. "That there fish was nothin' more nor less than a whimpus."

"A whimpus!" cried Mr. Wilkinson.

"Yes, sir. As like to Bill's Lizzie as two peas. Just as ugly natured, too. She had laid hold of that gold goat; and, when I tried to pry it free, she begins bubblin' like a tea-pot and gnashin' her teeth. Well, I tied her up in a net and give her the goat to play with for a spell."

"Where is she now?" Mr. Wilki asked.

"Down in my quarters, sir. She's safe enough."

"If this is true," Jay cried with flashing eyes, "if Captain Ben has actually caught another whimpus, we don't need Bill Farley at all. We can take that whimpus on shore and let it lead us to its cave. We'll tie a string to its claw, eh?"

"Let's land on the island the first thing to-morrow morning," Mr. Wilkinson said.

"Not one or two of us, but every man on board. And we'll go armed. Whatever is in that cave must have finished Bill Farley off."

"Probably," Jay agreed. "But lead us to your whimpus, Captain Ben."

THE life-boat was lowered carefully into the sea. One by one the men, each armed with a revolver, climbed down the rope ladder and seated themselves. Captain Ben, Jay, and Mr. Wilkinson were the last to leave the deck. They all turned to Elizabeth for a final word of leave-taking.

"We'll be home in time for lunch," Jay said. "Do you see this, Bessie?" He held a large canvas bag aloft. "I brought it along so that I could bring back the diamonds and gold."

"Don't look so downhearted, Bessie," Mr. Wilkinson said good-humoredly. "I'd take you along if we didn't have a lot of climbing and wading in front of us. Too rough work for a girl, eh, Captain Ben?"

"True enough, sir."

"Have you got the whimpus safely aboard?"

"That I have, sir. I got her in a bird-cage one of the men had. These whimpus can cut up rough."

"What will I do if anything should happen to you, dad?" Elizabeth asked.

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"What could happen to us?" Mr. Wilkinson said reassuringly. "We're eight strong and all armed to the teeth. Don't worry, Bessie—we'll be back for lunch."

"All aboard!" cried Jay. "The sooner we start the sooner we'll be back with the booty."

But Captain Ben lingered for an instant after the other two had clambered down into the boat. "Don't you fret, missy," he said, giving her shoulder a furtive pat. "We'll make out all right. I've got a wise head on my shoulders."

But in spite of these reassuring words, Elizabeth felt a lump rising in her throat when she saw the life-boat push off and the oars flash in the early sunlight. Ever since the preceding afternoon, when the second whimpus had been caught and she had learned of the intended expedition, the girl had been the prey of wild fancies. All night, dark forebodings of she knew not what had haunted her pillow. And now a settled despondency enveloped her optimism like a wet blanket.

For some time she stood at the rail, watching the progress of the life-boat. Finally, after it had disappeared around one of the curving arms of Whimpus Island, she turned away with a sigh and entered her cabin.

Elizabeth glanced about in search of some refuge from herself. She saw a book lying on the table within arm's reach. Picking it up hurriedly, she opened it at random and began to read. Unfortunately for her peace of mind, the book happened to be a volume of Poe's verses. The particular poem she turned to was *The Bells* and those lines which run:

They are neither man nor woman—  
They are neither brute nor human—  
They are Ghouls—

She dropped the volume with a cry of disgust and hurried up to the main deck. It was well past noon. A blazing sun rode the sky, casting its rays on Whimpus Island which seemed to be wavering in the intense heat. Elizabeth gazed long in that direction, but she could see no vestige of humanity on the shimmering shore.

"It's nearly one o'clock," the girl murmured. "I've half a mind to go and see what's happened to them."

There was a small skiff on the after-deck which she had often used when at home. To-day the sea was so calm that a canoe could have ridden it with perfect safety. Acting on a sudden impulse, she lowered the skiff into the water and, in a moment more, was seated in the stern, paddling swiftly toward Whimpus Island.

In less than fifteen minutes the skiff grounded on the shore and Elizabeth began her search.

Whimpus Island extended for nearly three miles. In breadth, however, it rarely exceeded two hundred yards. The walking was very rough. There were all manner of hummocks, which rose up like bumps on a bald head, and fissures in the coral which had to be taken into account.

Elizabeth was a strong, active girl, but she was nearly worn-out before she had circled the island. Every now and then she stopped to rest. At these times she called aloud, whereupon her voice would be caught up by every cave and echoed back hollowly. But no human voice answered hers; no human figure met her eye in all that weary tramp. Indeed, a blight seemed to rest on the island. Unlike any other which she had ever seen, no sea-gulls whined about its cliff and no grasses grew even where there was a stretch of solid soil.

"They must still be in the cave," Elizabeth murmured in a vain effort to fight off growing depression. "It won't do any good hunting for them. I'll go back to the boat and wait there."

When she came to this decision, she was standing on the hummock from which Black Tom's gaudy nether garments fluttered brazenly in the wind. The girl, tired in both body and mind, seated herself for an instant beneath this barbaric emblem and rested her chin in her hands. Several paces from her, a long red fissure in the coral seemed to grin at her as though it were a human mouth.

Suddenly she heard a strange sound

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which made her start and look up. It was a dull droning like the humming of innumerable bees, not unmusical and rather soothing except for an occasional loud snort which broke into it like a peremptory command. These sounds evidently issued from the fissure already alluded to.

"What can it be?" Elizabeth wondered. She walked over to the fissure and tried to peer down.

Now the dull buzzing sounds grew louder. Suddenly there came such a loud snort from the shadowy depths that Elizabeth involuntarily recoiled.

"Sea-lions!" she murmured. "I've heard them snort just like that in the zoo. The buzzing sound must be water running into some cave. No doubt the tide rises and falls."

At last she retraced her steps to where she had left the skiff, and, with a heavy heart, paddled back to the *Adventurer*. As she neared the yacht, hope rose up in her. Perhaps they had returned while she had been out of sight on the other side of the island; perhaps they were safe on board, laughing at her fears.

Making the skiff fast, she clambered aboard the *Adventurer* and was greeted by silence and shadows. A glance at the empty davits where the life-boat usually reposed, blighted her hopes. She experienced a moment of complete weakness. Sinking down on the hard deck, she began to sob.

Night was slowly falling. A gray mist stole up silently from the water, enveloping Whimpus Island in an impenetrable curtain of mystery. The sun sank with startling suddenness as though its fiery light had been extinguished by the touch of that calm, luminous sea. A legion of languid shadows stole about the hysterical girl on noiseless feet. They bent backward and forward like flowers fondled by the breeze; they pointed at Whimpus Island with ghostly fingers; they were like embodied dreams which seek release.

But Elizabeth wept on, quite unheeding their silent supplications; wept on, while the stars opened timidly like frightened eyes; wept on, while the moon, grinning,

rose up triumphantly as though to say: "Well, what did I tell you? Here we are on the other side of the world. Look where I am looking, and you will see something very strange. Come, this is a surprise!"

### CHAPTER VIII

#### A WOMAN AND A WHIMPUS

THE hours which followed the disappearance of the treasure-hunters, seemed like so many years to Elizabeth. All alone on the *Adventurer*, a prisoner in a floating prison, she experienced a thousand and one terrors which threatened her very reason.

At one moment, she would abandon herself to despair; at the next, a sudden sound—the swishing of water against the ship's side, the creaking of an overtaxed beam—would make her leap to her feet in a frenzy of hope.

A hundred times during that first terrible night, she thought she heard the squeaking of oar-locks. Then she would hurry up on deck, her heart beating wildly, expecting to see the life-boat pull up alongside. At each disappointment, her spirits would sink again into the darkest depths of despondency.

The next morning she paddled her skiff to shore and searched the island from end to end. She returned sadly to the ship.

On the third day all hope deserted her. Straining her eyes across the silver-shod sea, she saw the island like a sinister red question-mark standing out against a pale blue page. Not a vestige of life was stirring there. Black Tom's tattered garments—how dear, how human a symbol after all!—waved in melancholy triumph over a hot, blistering waste of coral.

Perhaps it was this still vivid remnant of a brave man who had gone to his everlasting rest, perhaps it was a fine frenzy of despair, but certain it is that Elizabeth took her courage in both hands and went out alone to battle against the whimpus.

Very calmly, though with a wildly beating heart, she went down to Captain Ben's quarters, ransacked his belongings and re-

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turned on deck with a strong fishing-line. Her next problem was to bait the hook properly. She examined her trinkets, one by one, and finally decided on the ring which Jay had given her on the day of their engagement. Why did she choose this ring among all the others? Was it because she loved it best; or, perhaps, because it symbolized her love which was as keen and brave as a sword?

Elizabeth lowered her bait carefully over the side. Bending forward, she saw it slip into the water, which was as clear as crystal; saw it sink down slowly into the depths, saw a host of flaming darts shooting this way and that—coral fish, which were all colors of the rainbow—and finally saw it resting on a strip of snow-white sand. For several minutes she stood there, immovable, staring down; and then she uttered a low exultant cry.

Several dark gliding shapes began to approach the glittering bait. They formed about it in a solemn circle as though deciding. Elizabeth caught a glimpse of slowly moving tails, beneath a long, silky substance which trailed out behind and which glimmered dully. Surely these were whimpus. She even caught a glimpse of an outstretched, avaricious claw. What was in that held them back? Why didn't they bite?

She leaned forward further still and saw the answer to her question mirrored on the placid water. Her own face looked back at her. Yes, evidently the whimpus had seen her. Now they were pointing upward with their clawlike fingers, now they were stealing off in a stately procession. Soon they had disappeared.

"Perhaps they are as afraid of me as I was afraid of them," Elizabeth told herself.

This thought gave her a new confidence and a new idea. Pulling the line up, hand over hand, she hurried into her cabin, and, opening one of the port-holes wide, threw her bait out into the sea. Then she seated herself and waited.

In her present position she could not be seen from the water. If they had not gone too far away, perhaps they would return

and nibble, now that she had disappeared. At any rate, it was just possible.

For five minutes, ten minutes, Elizabeth sat as silent as a statue, with a white face and flashing eyes; and then, just as she was about to pull the line in and cast again, she felt a violent jerk which nearly pulled her to her feet. The line had suddenly grown taut and it took all her strength to hold it.

And then the struggle began. Elizabeth was an athletic girl. Her muscles served her well that day. Little by little, with gasping breath and straining arms, she fought it out. Often she gained a yard, only to lose it again. But now her fighting blood was up; she knew no weakness or fear.

Gradually, inch by inch, the girl drew the whimpus to the surface of the water and then above it. Now it was dangling in the air; now it shot through the port-hole like an arrow and fell, flapping and scratching, to the floor.

Then, at last, the whimpus relinquished its frenzied hold on the glittering bait. Moving its small, round head from side to side, it clawed its tangle of golden hair from its face and stared at Elizabeth. Slowly the large blue eyes became dilated with fear, the large loose-lipped mouth fell open, disclosing sharp yellow fangs, the tail flapped wildly, and both claws were raised on high like terror-stricken hands.

And Elizabeth looked at this monster concocted in the laboratories of the sea—at this creature, half fish and half vampire; at this composition of scales and flesh—with horror, it is true, but without fear. Her imagination had long ago pictured it. She had seen it so often in her dreams, that now the reality was not so difficult to view.

And thus it was that a woman and a whimpus faced each other for the first time since the world began—while the clock in the cabin ticked on contentedly; while the chairs presented their stolid wicker backs like disinterested strangers; while the sea, as though amused at what it saw, tickled the yacht's sides, and, laughing merrily, sped by.

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### CHAPTER IX

#### TREASURE TROVE

ELIZABETH was the first to act. A colossal calmness had descended upon her which had crystallized her every thought, her every sensation, into a well-formulated plan. She must not fail now. She realized with a perfect clarity of vision that all her hopes of ultimate happiness, her life and the lives of her dear ones, depended on an immediate exertion of her mental and physical powers. She loathed this abysmal monster on the floor with both a fleshly and spiritual loathing, but she must not falter in her self-appointed task.

There was a large wicker lunch-basket on the chair beside her. Picking it up, she raised the lid and took a step forward.

And the whimpus, which, up to this, had been in an attitude of frozen horror, its clawlike hands raised above its head—now seemed to read its adversary's intent. Hissing faintly, its fishy eyes covered by a gray film of fear, it squirmed backward as Elizabeth advanced till finally its flapping tail touched the wall. There it paused and, with gnashing teeth and extended nails, awaited the attack.

But the girl did not hesitate. Stepping bravely forward, she bent down and attempted to force the creature into the lunch-basket. Hissing, it squirmed to one side and escaped. Once more she essayed her task; and this time the whimpus's sharp teeth were embedded for a moment in her arm.

Now a blind fury drove Elizabeth on. As she felt the sudden pain, her left hand found the monster's throat and tightened there till it relinquished its hold to gasp for breath, till its tongue protruded like a scarlet streamer, till its eyes were nearly popping from its head. And then she lifted it from the floor; lifted it and held it at arm's length. Her fingers, like steel rings, still encircled its slender throat.

But as the whimpus's pale, leprous face turned scarlet, as its blood-shot eyes rolled upward till nothing was visible of them but their crimson-threaded whites, she relaxed

her hold. It would never do to kill it outright. It must serve her first; it must guide her to her loved ones.

The whimpus squirmed only very feebly now. Elizabeth had no difficulty in placing it in the lunch-basket, where it lay flapping faintly. Her next task was to tie the fishing-line securely about its waist, where the fish's tail joined the woman's body. Now it could not escape, but its swimming powers would remain unimpeded.

She then closed the lid on her prisoner, secured it, and carried the lunch-basket up on deck.

She tied a handkerchief about the wound, and climbed down the ladder, still holding the lunch-basket, and into the skiff. Slipping the oars into place, she bent her strong, supple back to the task and was soon propelling the boat swiftly toward the island.

When the skiff was finally grounded on the shore, she sprang out with all the eagerness of one who goes willingly to battle.

Elizabeth opened the lunch-basket and drew out the whimpus. The monster by this time had regained some of its strength. As she held it suspended in mid air on the end of the fishing-line, it squirmed frantically, gnashed its teeth, and emitted a strange hissing sound.

For a moment she swung it back and forth to see that the line held; then she threw it from her into the sea.

At first the whimpus swam straight out with incredible swiftness—so fast, indeed, that she was put to it to give it free play—but after it had traversed a hundred yards or so, it turned and began to creep back further down the shore. Fortunately the fishing-line was very long; but, at that, she was soon forced to follow it along the beach.

In this way Elizabeth half circled the island. At last she came to a tangle of salt grass which grew in profusion against one of the coral cliffs. To her amazement the fishing-line passed through this tangle as if the creature on the other end had clambered back on shore. And yet this seemed

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impossible, for the shoulder of the island at this point was precipitous.

As she paused before the green, swaying door of salt grass, there came another tug on the line which showed her that the whimpus was still in active flight. Pushing the nodding sea-foliage aside with her left hand, she uttered an ejaculation of surprise.

There, in the coral wall, was a cave hollowed out as though by human hands. Undoubtedly this subterranean passageway led into the very heart of the island. Perhaps the whimpus was leading her into the treasure-chamber where, dead or alive, she might find the missing passengers of the *Adventurer*.

Elizabeth, with a wild beating heart, stepped through the dark portal and was immediately swallowed up in the gloom. Not a light glimmered; soon the opening in the cave was lost to view. Walking in pitch blackness, a stream of running water above her ankles, the taut line leading her forward as a blind man is guided by holding to the leash of some intelligent dog, she stumbled on for a hundred yards or more. Suddenly a strange sound came to her out of the darkness far ahead.

Elizabeth paused and listened, in spite of a sudden angry tug on her wrist. There it was again—only louder now. A drowsy, humming sound it was, followed almost immediately by a loud snort.

It is no telling whether Elizabeth could have mustered up enough courage to go further had not the whimpus at that moment given the line such a frenzied jerk that she was carried forward a step in spite of herself. This step was the deciding one. There was no use turning back now. Behind her lay loneliness, starvation, death; before her? Well, that might be quicker, at any rate.

The frightened girl waded onward through the blackness, while the strange sounds grew louder and louder. Now a gray shaft of light stole around a bend in the passage. She reached it; she turned an abrupt shoulder of rock and uttered a cry which echoed through the vault. She was

destined never to forget the sight which met her eyes.

The passageway here terminated in a spacious hall. Through a fissure in the ceiling, javelins of flaming sunlight poured down on a strip of shimmering sand which barely raised its head above the shallow water. And on this sand, piled up in a glittering heap and indiscriminately mingled, were precious stones, pieces of colored glass, yellow bars of gold, brass door-knobs, a child's toy sword, several helmets which the soldiers of Cæsar might have worn, rattles with colored beads, a crown set with gigantic emeralds which might have adorned some fair Egyptian's brow. But one and all caught the shafts of sunlight and reflected them, casting a luminous light on the dark, dripping walls and on the pale sheet of water.

It was not the sight of these precious stones and glittering gewgaws which wrung the cry from Elizabeth. No, it was the group which sat about this treasure in a solemn circle—these men, with their chins resting on their breasts; these skeletons from whom hung in tatters the clothing of an earlier age; these gleaming skulls and moldy thigh-bones, more aged relics still, which time had crumbled into little powdery heaps beneath the weight of its relentless hand. And also it was that outer ring of custodians which guarded both—that swimming ring of whimpus, whirling round and round in a magic circle and emitting that strange, unearthly humming sound as they went—those singular creatures that were neither brute nor human, their large blue eyes fixed with a glassy stare on what rested on that strip of sand, their long, golden hair floating behind them in a filmy gauze.

Scarcely had Elizabeth's cry echoed through the chamber than a change took place. The humming died away as though by magic. Now a hundred pairs of terror-stricken eyes were turned on her, a hundred pairs of terror-stricken clawlike hands were raised on high, a hundred scaly tails churned the water into foam. Once, twice, the whimpus sped around the strip of sand



and then straight toward her and the passageway.

She floundered to one side; the fishing-line dropped from her nerveless hand. The next instant they were past her, gliding by swiftly and out into the passageway. Leaving a trail of foam, they vanished in the gloom. She was left entirely alone with the dead.

But, ah, no, they were not all dead! What was that? Surely it was a human snore—a snore so awe-inspiring, so sonorous, that from a distance it had seemed the snorting of an animal in pain.

Elizabeth stepped cautiously forward. The light reflected from the heap of treasure was blinding. She shaded her eyes with her hand.

Could it be? Yes, it was. There was no doubt about it. The snorer was Captain Ben! There he sat, his cavernous mouth gaping, his hairy fists doubled on his knees. And next to him, his head resting on his shoulder, a strang expression of physical loathing on his face, sat—Jay! Surely there was her father on his right, sleeping soundly, his chin resting on his breast! And the other sleepers were the crew of the *Adventurer*. None were dead as yet—thank God!—not one.

Elizabeth put her hand on Captain Ben's shoulder and shook him. "Wake up!" she cried. "Wake up!"

The old man's stentorian snore ceased on the instant. He raised his face and Elizabeth saw that it was bedewed with perspiration. "Don't you touch me!" he muttered. "Can't you see I'm an old man? I—I—"

"It's Bessie!" the girl cried. "Don't you know me?"

Suddenly the light of recognition flared up in the old fisherman's eyes. "Oh, missy," he said feebly, like a frightened child, "take me out of here. I want to go home, missy."

But Elizabeth was shaking Jay. "Wake up! Wake up!"

The young man opened his gray eyes. "Oh!" he cried. "Get me out of here! Oh, Bessie, dearest girl, it's you! You don't know what a horrible dream I've had!"

But Elizabeth had turned to her father "Wake up, dad!" she cried.

"What do you want?" the financier muttered. "Oh, Dolly, Dolly, shameful Dolly!"

"Wake up, dad!"

And then Mr. Wilkinson opened his eyes and stared solemnly at his daughter. "I've had a nightmare, Bessie," he said. "Get me out of here if you can. I'm about all in!"

But Elizabeth woke the others first. Captain Masters and his crew. Last of all, she came to Bill Farley. He was sitting beside a skeleton which still wore a tattered sailorsuit. The cockney had a sentimental smile playing beneath his bulbous nose. One of his arms were buried to the elbow in a heap of precious stones; the other clasped the body of a dead whimpus to his breast. His eyes were swallowed in cavernous hollows; his lips were a chalky white.

"Wake up!" Elizabeth cried bravely. although the man's face frightened her. "Wake up!"

Bill Farley was silent. But his smile broadened and twitched his upper lip above two yellow fangs.

"Wake up!" she cried again, shaking him violently.

The sailor did not move, but his eyes flickered open for an instant. "I 'ears you, ma'am," he said very faintly. "Call louder, ma'am. A girl such as you can pull a chap outer 'ell, if she tries real 'ard. Call louder, ma'am."

Once more Elizabeth's voice echoed through the chamber. "Wake up!" she cried. "It's time we went home!"

Again Bill Farley's white lips moved. "It ain't a bit of use, ma'am. I'm goin' 'ome, but not with you. Black Tom 'ere is more my kind. 'E and me—them whimpus 'as got us, soul and body. Lizzie, 'ere, she kept on singin' to me on the *Adventurer*. It weren't me that double-crossed yer, ma'am, it was 'er. Gawd! What was a poor sailor-man to do? She 'ad a 'old on me most as strong as a gal; and she was all for gettin' 'ome. I guess I—"

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The muffled voice died away; the long, lean head rolled over on one shoulder; a frozen, sentimental smile was still stamped on the chalky lips.

"It ain't no use, missy," Captain Ben id, touching her on the arm. "That feller's dead. Let us clear outer here afore them things come back. I had a horrid dream, missy!"

### CHAPTER X

#### THREE WEEKS LATER

THE *Adventurer*, her engine beating rhythmically like a human heart, plowed through the shadowy sea. To the west a last faint, crimson streak in the sky showed where the sun had struggled for the mastery and died. Now night ruled the world.

Elizabeth, Captain Ben, Mr. Wilkinson, and Jay, sat on the after deck. A silence had fallen between them which was broken only by the faint gurgling of the fisherman's ancient pipe as he inhaled silver threads of smoke into his lungs. The girl was the first to speak.

"You haven't told me how you happened to fall asleep there," she said with some asperity. "That would be the last thing I'd do after finding all those precious stones."

Captain Ben cleared his throat; Mr. Wilkinson rose and walked to the rail; Jay seemed engrossed in a silent contemplation of the stars.

"Well, aren't any of you going to tell me?"

Captain Ben took the pipe out of his mouth and yawned. "Yes, missy," he said, "I'll spin you the yarn. But remember you're a gal, and there's lots of things gals can't seem to get into their heads."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that, Captain Ben."

"Well, it's as true as gospel, missy. Just you take them whimpus for instance. They couldn't do you no harm 'cause you're a gal and they ain't got no power over gals. You was stronger than they was, and they know'd it. There ain't a whimpus li''

what can hold her own against a decent gal like you, missy. They're common critters, mostly."

"But I want to know how you happened to fall asleep in that cave."

"Aye, aye, missy, I'll tell yer. The whimpus what had us in tow led us into that cave as pretty as you please. When we seen all them diamonds and things, we didn't stop for nothin'—just waded through them swimmin' whimpus and climbed up on the sand and begin to play with the jewels like we was babies. Even the skeletons didn't scare us none—though Bill Farley give me kind of a start when I seen that silly grin on his mug. Well, you know the sound them whimpus made while they was swimmin'?"

"Yes," said Elizabeth. "It got on my nerves. It was a most unpleasant sound."

Captain Ben shook his aged head. "It might have sounded unpleasant to you, missy, 'cause you're a gal; but it didn't to us. Lord, no! It was a soothin' sound—a most soothin' sound! Well, pretty soon I give up countin' diamonds and take a look about me. What do you think I saw, missy? Why, there was your pop, Mr. Jay, and them sailors, all fast asleep! They had kinder silly grins on their faces—leastwise, so I thought."

"You old liar!" cried Jay with some heat. "I heard that snore of yours before I even closed my eyes."

"And I, too," Mr. Wilkinson muttered. "He was asleep before any of us."

But Captain Ben went on as though he had not heard them. "Well, I kinder wondered why they should all go off to sleep like that. But pretty soon that hummin' sound grew louder and crept into my head—the same as gas does when some dentist feller goes to yank yer tooth. I tried to fight it, missy, but it weren't possible. Pretty soon, before I realized it, I slipped off into a dream."

"A dream? What kind of a dream? That's what I want to find out. When you woke up, you all said that you had had such horrible dreams."

The three men exchanged

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glances. Captain Ben rose and knocked the ashes out of his pipe. "You ask your pop, missy," he said. "He's a whole lot better at tellin' things than me."

Mr. Wilkinson frowned. "I don't remember anything about it," he muttered, "not a thing. But I think I'll go up and ask Masters where we are. He said we might sight Fire Island Light before the moon rose."

"I'll go with yer, sir," said Captain Ben, hobbling after his employer. "It takes the young fellers to remember them dreams right. Mr. Jay, I reckon, can tell about his'n like it was a story out of one of them books you're always readin', missy."

"What *was* your dream, Jay?" Elizabeth asked after the two elder men had gone.

The young man's eyes avoided hers.

"I can't tell you, Bessie," he said. "That dream was too much a part of myself to share it with another. There come such dreams in a man's life—dreams, distorted and terrible, which one must keep always in the dark closet of one's mind. Women should be satisfied with realities—a man's dreams must always be his own."

"I suppose you're right. But it must

have been horrible dreams which drove you all out of the cave without the treasure."

"They *were* horrible dreams, Bessie—at least, mine was." Jay paused and stroked his chin meditatively. "But it cured me, Bessie."

"Cured you?" the girl asked in surprise. "What did it cure you of?"

"It cured me of that wild craving for adventure which used to drag me from place to place as a kitten drags a mouse. This time I've absorbed enough excitement for the rest of my life. You'll find that when I get my feet on dry ground I'll turn out to be the most thoroughly domesticated husband in the world."

"I'll be so glad of that," Elizabeth said earnestly. "If that happens, I will never ask you about your dream; if that happens, I shall know that I have really conquered the whimpus."

There was a moment's silence; and then, from the bow of the *Adventurer*, came a hail which brought them to their feet. It was Captain Ben shouting through Masters's speaking-trumpet.

"Land, ho!" the old man cried in a shrill falsetto. "Land ho, missy!"