BAUM LYMAN FRANK

SAM STEELE'S ADVENTURES IN PANAMA

Lyman Baum

Sam Steele's Adventures in Panama

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=25021331
Sam Steele's Adventures in Panama:

Содержание

CHAPTER I	4
CHAPTER II	13
CHAPTER III	21
CHAPTER IV	38
CHAPTER V	49
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	56

Capt. Hugh Fitzgerald Sam Steele's Adventures in Panama

CHAPTER I
I UNDERTAKE A HAZARDOUS VOYAGE

The bark *Nebuchadnezar* came staggering into Chelsea harbor in a very demoralized condition. Her main and mizzen masts were both gone, the bulwarks were smashed in, the poop swept away, and she leaked so badly that all the short-handed crew were nearly ready to drop from the exhausting labor of working the pumps. For after weathering a dreadful storm in which the captain and mate were washed overboard, together with five of the men, those remaining had been forced to rig up a square-sail on the foremast and by hook or crook to work the dismantled hulk into harbor, and this they did from no love of the ship but as a matter of mere self-preservation, the small boats having all been lost or destroyed.

As soon as they dropped anchor in the harbor they fled from the crippled ship and left her to her fate.

It fortunately happened that an agent of the owners, a man named Harlan, lived at Chelsea and was able to take prompt action to save the company's property. The *Nebuchadnezar* was loaded heavily with structural steel work from Birmingham, which had been destined for San Pedro, California, which is the port of entry for the important city of Los Angeles. It was a valuable cargo, and one well worth saving; so Mr. Harlan quickly sent a lot of men aboard to calk the sprung seams and pump her dry, and within twenty-four hours they had her safe from sinking, although she still looked more like a splintered tub than a ship.

And now the agent spent a whole day exchanging telegrams with the chief agents of the Line in New York. It appeared that to unload the heavy structural beams, which were of solid steel, and ship them by rail across the continent would entail a serious loss, the freight rates being enormous for such a distance. There was at the time no other ship procurable to carry the cargo on to its destination. Either the old *Nebuchadnezar* must be made seaworthy again, and sent on its way around the Horn to San Pedro, or the company was in for a tremendous loss.

Harlan was a man of resource and energy. He promptly informed his superiors that he would undertake to fit the ship for sea, and speedily; so he was given permission to "go ahead."

New masts were stepped, the damages repaired, and the bark put in as good condition as possible. But even then it was a sad parody on a ship, and the chances of its ever getting to the port of destination were regarded by all observers as extremely doubtful.

Having done the best in his power, however, Mr. Harlan came to my father and said:

"Captain Steele, I want you to take the *Nebuchadnezar* to San Pedro."

The Captain smiled, and answered with his usual deliberation:

"Thank you, Mr. Harlan; but I can't by any possibility get away this winter."

You see, we were just building our new vessel, the *Seagull*, which was to be our future pride and joy, and my father did not believe the work could progress properly unless he personally inspected every timber and spike that went into her. Just now the builders were getting along finely and during the coming winter all the interior fittings were to be put in. I knew very well that nothing could induce Captain Steele to leave the *Seagull* at this fascinating period of its construction.

Mr. Harlan was very grave and anxious, and spoke frankly of the difficulty he was in.

"You see, sir, my reputation is at stake in this venture," he explained, "and if anything happens to that cargo they will blame me for it. The only way to avoid a heavy loss is to get the old hull into port, and I am aware that to accomplish this task a man of experience and exceptional judgment is required. There is not another captain on the coast that I would so completely and confidently trust with this undertaking as I would you, sir; and we can afford to pay well for the voyage."

My father appreciated the compliment, but it did not alter his

resolve.

"Can't be done, Mr. Harlan," he said, pressing the ashes into the bowl of his pipe and looking around the group of intent listeners with a thoughtful expression. "Time was when I'd have liked a job of that sort, because it's exciting to fight a strong ocean with a weak ship. But my whole heart is in the *Seagull*, and I can't an' won't leave her."

Just then his eyes fell upon me and brightened.

"There's no reason, howsomever," he added, "why Sam can't undertake your commission. We won't be likely to need him this winter, at all."

Mr. Harlan frowned; then looked toward me curiously.

"Would you really recommend a boy like Sam for such an important undertaking?" he asked.

"Why not, sir?" replied my father. "Sam's as good a navigator as I am, an' he's a brave lad an' cool-headed, as has been proved. All he lacks is experience in working a ship; but he can take my own mate, Ned Britton, along, and there's not a better sailing-master to be had on the two oceans."

The agent began to look interested. He revolved the matter in his mind for a time and then turned to me and asked, abruptly:

"Would you go, sir?"

I had been thinking, too, for the proposition had come with startling suddenness.

"On one condition," said I.

"What is that?"

"That in case of accident – if, in spite of all our efforts, the old tub goes to the bottom – you will hold me blameless and look as cheerful as possible."

The agent thought that over for what seemed a long time, considering the fact that he was a man of quick judgment and action. But I will acknowledge it was a grave condition I had required, and the man knew even better than I did that under the most favorable circumstances the result of the voyage was more than doubtful. Finally he nodded.

"I do not know of any one I would rather trust," said he. "You are only a boy, Sam Steele; but I've got your record, and I know Ned Britton. Next to getting Captain Steele himself, the combination is as good as I could hope to secure for my company, and I'm going to close with you at once, condition and all."

Britton, who was himself present at this conference, shifted uneasily in his chair.

"I ain't right sure as we can ship a proper crew, sir," he remarked, eyeing me with the characteristic stare of his round, light blue eyes, which were as unreadable as a bit of glass.

"Well, we can try, Ned," I answered, with some concern. "I shall take Nux and Bryonia along, of course, and we won't need over a dozen able seamen."

I must explain that the Nux and Bryonia mentioned were not homeopathic remedies, but two stout, black South Sea Islanders who bore those absurd names and had already proven their loyalty and devotion to me, although they were the especial

retainers of my uncle, Naboth Perkins.

"What became of the crew that brought the ship in?" asked my father.

"Deserted, sir, an' dug out quick's scat," answered Ned.

"Why?"

"Said as nothing but bad luck followed the ship. She were a thirteener, sir, and bound fer to get in trouble."

"How's that?"

"Why, I talked with the second mate, who brung the ship in. He said they had sailed from Liverpool on a Friday, the thirteenth o' the month. There was thirteen aboard; it were the Cap'n's thirteenth voyage; an' the *Nebuchadnezar*, which had thirteen letters in its name – bein' as how it were mis-spelled by its builders – was thirteen year old to a day. That was bad enough fer a starter, as everybody can guess. Thirteen days out they struck trouble, an' it clung to 'em as desp'rit as their own barnacles. You couldn't hire one o' that crew to go aboard agin, sir, fer love or money."

This dismal revelation struck a chill to all present, except, perhaps, Mr. Harlan and myself. I am superstitious about some things, I acknowledge, but thirteen has for me always been a number luckier than otherwise. However, I knew very well that sailors are obstinate and fearful; so I turned to the agent and said:

"You must paint out that name *Nebuchadnezar* and replace it with any other you like. Do it at once, before we attempt to ship a crew. With that accomplished, Ned won't have much trouble

in getting the men he wants."

"I'll do it," replied Mr. Harlan, promptly. "I'll call her the *Gladys H.*, after my own little daughter. That ought to bring her good luck."

Ned bobbed his head approvingly. It was evident the idea pleased him and removed his most serious objection to the voyage.

"And now," continued the agent, "it is only necessary to discuss terms."

These proved liberal enough, although I must say the money was no factor in deciding me to undertake the voyage. I had been quite fortunate in accumulating a fair share of worldly wealth, and a part of my own snug fortune had gone into our new *Seagull*, of which I was to be one-third owner.

So it was really a desire to be doing something and an irrepressible spirit of adventure that urged me on; for, as my father said, a struggle with old ocean was always full of surprises, and when we had such frail support as the crippled *Nebuchadnezar*, the fight was liable to prove interesting.

But that preposterous name was painted out the following day, and before I trod the deck for the first time the bark had been renamed the *Gladys H.*, and was resplendent in fresh paint and new cordage. The old hulk actually looked seaworthy to a superficial observer; but Ned Britton went below and examined her seams carefully and came back shaking his head.

"If the weather holds good and the cargo steady," he said to

me, “we may pull through; but if them big iron beams in the hold ever shifts their position, the whole hull’ll open like a sieve.”

“Don’t whisper that, Ned,” I cautioned him. “We’ve got to take chances.”

He was not the man to recoil at taking chances, so he kept a close mouth and in three days secured all the sailors we needed.

They were a fairly good lot, all experienced and steady, and when I looked them over I was well pleased. One or two who were new to our parts grinned rather disrespectfully when they noted my size and youth; but I paid little attention to that. I was, in reality, a mere boy, and the only wonder is that they consented to sail under my command.

My mate, however, looked every inch the sailor, and won their immediate respect, while my father’s ample reputation as a daring and skillful captain caused the men to be lenient in their judgment of his son.

It was to be a long cruise, for Mr. Harlan had instructed me to skirt the coast all the way to Cape Horn, keeping well in to land so that in an emergency I could run the ship ashore and beach her. That would allow us to save the valuable cargo, even if we lost the ship, and that structural steel work was worth a lot of bother, he assured me.

“When you get to the Cape,” said the agent, “take your time and wait for good weather to round it. There’s no hurry, and by the time you arrive there the conditions ought to be the most favorable of the year. Once in the Pacific, continue to hug

the coast up to San Pedro, and then telegraph me for further instructions. Of course you know the consignment is to the contracting firm of Wright & Landers, and when you arrive they will attend to the unloading."

I got my things aboard and found my room very pleasant and of ample size. I took quite a library of books along, for the voyage would surely consume most of the winter. We were liberally provisioned, for the same reason, and our supplies were of excellent quality.

My two black Islanders, Nux and Bryonia, were calmly indifferent to everything except the fact that "Mars' Sam" was going somewhere and would take them along.

Bry was our cook, and a mighty good one, too. With him in charge of the galley we were sure to enjoy our meals. Nux acted as steward and looked after the officers' cabins. He was wonderfully active and a tower of strength in time of need. Both men I knew I could depend upon at all times, for they were intelligent, active, and would be faithful to the last.

We arranged to sail with the tide on a Wednesday afternoon, the date being the nineteenth of September. On that eventful morning every preparation was reported complete, and I rowed to the shore for a final conference with the agent and a last farewell to my father.

CHAPTER II
I SHIP A QUEER PASSENGER

The ship-yards were on this side of the harbor, and presented a busy scene; for besides our own beautiful *Seagull*, whose hull was now nearly complete and so graceful in its lines that it attracted the wondering admiration of every beholder, several other ships were then in the yards in course of construction.

It was in one of the builders' offices that I met my father and Mr. Harlan, and while we were talking a man came in and touched his cap to us, saying:

"May I speak to Captain Steele?"

He was about thirty years of age, somewhat thin and lank in appearance, and would have been considered tall had he stood erect instead of stooping at the shoulders. His face was fine and sensitive in expression and his eyes were large and gray but dreamy rather than alert. Gray eyes are usually shrewd; I do not remember ever before seeing so abstracted and visionary a look except in brown or black ones. The man's hair was thick and long and of a light brown – nearly "sandy" – color. He dressed well but carelessly, and was evidently nervous and in a state of suppressed excitement when he accosted us. I noticed that his hands were large and toil-worn, and he clasped and unclasped them constantly as he looked from one to another of our group.

"I am Captain Steele," said my father.

"Then, sir, I desire to ask a favor," was the reply.

"State it, my man."

"I want you to take me and my automobile with you on your voyage to Los Angeles."

Mr. Harlan laughed, and I could not repress a smile myself.

"Then I'm not the Captain Steele you want," said my father. "This is the one you must deal with," pointing his finger in my direction.

The stranger turned, but to my satisfaction seemed in no way surprised or embarrassed by being confronted with a boy.

"It will be a great favor, sir," he continued, earnestly. "I beg you will grant my request."

"An automobile!" I exclaimed.

"Yes, sir."

"Your request is unusual," I said, in order to decline gracefully, for something about the fellow was strangely appealing. "We are not a passenger ship, but a slow freighter, and we are bound for a long voyage around the Horn."

"Time does not greatly matter," he murmured. "Only one thing really matters at all."

"And that?"

"The expense."

We stared at him, somewhat perplexed.

"Permit me to explain," he went on, still gazing at me alone with his beseeching eyes. "I have invented an automobile – not

strictly an automobile, it is true; but for want of a better name I will call it that. I have been years experimenting and building it, for it is all the work of my own hands and the child of my exclusive brain. It is now just finished – complete in every part – but I find that I have exhausted nearly every available dollar of my money. In other words, sir, my machine has bankrupted me."

He paused, and catching a wink from Mr. Harlan I said in an amused tone:

"That is an old story, sir."

"You doubt it?"

"No; I mean that it is quite natural."

"Perhaps," he replied. "You see I had not thought of money; merely of success. But now that at last I have succeeded, I find that I have need of money. My only relative is a rich uncle living at Pasadena, California, who is so eccentric in his disposition that were I to appeal to him for money he would promptly refuse."

"Most rich men have that same eccentricity," I observed.

"But he is quite a genius commercially, and if he saw my machine I am confident he would freely furnish the money I require to erect a manufactory and promote its sale. I assure you, gentlemen," looking vaguely around, "that my machine is remarkable, and an original invention."

We nodded. There was no object in disputing such a modest statement.

"So I wish to get myself and my automobile to Los Angeles, and at the least possible expense. The railroads demand a large

sum for freight and fare, and I have not so much money to pay. By accident I learned that your ship is going to the very port I long to reach, and so I hastened to appeal to you to take me. I have only two hundred dollars in my possession – the last, I grieve to say, of my ample inheritance. If you will carry us for that sum to your destination, I shall indeed be grateful for the kindness."

Really, I began to feel sorry for the poor fellow.

"But," said I, "I cannot possibly take you. We sail this afternoon and the hatches are all closed and battened down for the voyage."

"I do not wish the machine put in the hold," he answered, with strange eagerness. "All I ask is a spot in which to place it on the deck – anywhere that will be out of your way. I will make it secure, myself, and take every care of it, so that it will cause you no trouble at all."

"I'm afraid you could not get it to the ship in time."

"It is already loaded upon a flat-boat, which will take it to the *Gladys H.* in an hour, once I have your permission."

I looked at him in astonishment.

"You seem to have considered your request granted in advance," I remarked, with some asperity.

"Not that, sir; I am not impertinent, believe me. But I enquired about Captain Steele and was told that he is a good man and kind. So, that I might lose no time if I obtained your consent, I had the machine loaded on the flat-boat."

Mr. Harlan laughed outright. Acting upon a sudden impulse I

turned to him and said:

"May I decide as I please in this matter?"

"Of course, Sam," he replied. "It is your affair, not mine."

I looked at the stranger again. He was actually trembling with anxious uncertainty.

"Very well," I announced, "I will take you."

"For the two hundred dollars?"

"No; I'll carry you for nothing. You may need that extra money at your journey's end."

He took out his handkerchief and wiped his brow, upon which beads of perspiration were standing.

"Thank you, sir," he said, simply.

"But I must warn you of one thing. The bark is not in what we call A-1 condition. If she happens to go to the bottom instead of San Pedro I won't be responsible for your precious machine."

"Very well, sir. I will take as many chances as you do."

"May I ask your name?"

"Moit, sir; Duncan Moit."

"Scotch?"

"By ancestry, Captain. American by birth."

"All right; make haste and get your traps aboard as soon as possible."

"I will. Thank you, Captain Steele."

He put on his cap and walked hurriedly away, and when he had gone both Mr. Harlan and my father rallied me on account of my queer "passenger."

"He looks to me like a crank, Sam," said the agent. "But it's your fireworks, not mine."

"Whatever induced you to take him?" Captain Steele enquired, wonderingly.

"The bare fact that he was so anxious to go," I replied. "He may be a crank on the automobile question, and certainly it is laughable to think of shipping a machine to Los Angeles on a freighter, around the Horn; but the poor fellow seemed to be a gentleman, and he's hard up. It appeared to me no more than a Christian act to help him out of his trouble."

"You may be helping him into trouble, if that confounded cargo of yours takes a notion to shift," observed my father, with a shake of his grizzled head.

"But it's not going to shift, sir," I declared, firmly. "I'm looking for good luck on this voyage, and the chances are I'll find it."

The agent slapped me on the shoulder approvingly.

"That's the way to talk!" he cried. "I'm morally certain, Sam, that you'll land that cargo at San Pedro in safety. I'm banking on you, anyhow, young man."

I thanked him for his confidence, and having bade a last good-bye to my father and my employer I walked away with good courage and made toward my boat, which was waiting for me.

Uncle Naboth was waiting, too, for I found his chubby form squatting on the gunwale.

Uncle Naboth's other name was Mr. Perkins, and he was an important member of the firm of "Steele, Perkins & Steele,"

being my dead mother's only brother and my own staunch friend. I had thought my uncle in New York until now, and had written him a letter of farewell to his address in that city that very morning.

But here he was, smiling serenely at me as I approached.

"What's this foolishness I hear, Sam?" he demanded, when I had shaken his hand warmly.

"I'm off on a trip around the Horn," said I, "to carry a cargo of building steel to the Pacific coast in that crippled old bark, yonder."

His sharp eye followed mine and rested on the ship.

"Anything in it, my lad?"

"Not much except adventure, Uncle. But it will keep me from growing musty until Spring comes and the *Seagull* is ready for launching. I'm dead tired of loafing around."

He began to chuckle and cough and choke, but finally controlled himself sufficiently to gasp:

"So'm I, Sam!"

"You?"

"Tired as blazes. New York's a frost, Sam. Nothin' doin' there that's worth mentionin'. All smug-faced men an' painted-faced women. No sassiety, more policemen than there is sailors, hair-cuts thirty-five cents an' two five-cent drinks fer a quarter. I feel like Alladin an' the Forty Thieves – me bein' Alladin."

"But, Uncle, it wasn't Aladdin that the Forty – "

"Never mind that. Got a spare bunk aboard, Sam?"

I laughed; but there was no use in being surprised at anything Uncle Naboth did.

"I've got a whole empty cabin – second mate's."

"All right. When do we sail?"

"Three o'clock, Uncle Naboth – sharp."

"Very good."

He turned and ambled away toward the town, and, rather thoughtfully, I entered my boat and was rowed out to the *Gladys H.*

CHAPTER III
THE MOIT CONVERTIBLE AUTOMOBILE

The flat-boat came alongside within the hour. On it was a big object covered with soiled canvas and tied 'round and 'round with cords like a package from the grocer. Beside it stood Moit, motionless until the barge made fast and Ned Britton – who at my request had ordered the windlass made ready – had the tackle lowered to hoist it aboard.

Then the inventor directed his men in a clear-headed, composed way that made the task easy enough. The big bundle appeared not so heavy as it looked, and swung up without much strain on the tackle.

I found a place for it just abaft the forecastle, where it would not interfere with the sailors in working the ship. In a brief space of time Duncan Moit had screwed hooks in the planking and lashed his bulky contrivance so firmly to the deck that no ordinary pitch or roll of the ship could possibly affect its security.

Then he carried his trunk and several packages to his cabin, which I had assigned him next my own, and after that I lost sight of him in the responsible duties of our preparations to hoist anchor.

Luncheon was served while we waited for the tide, but there

was as yet no sign of Uncle Naboth. I really did not know whether to expect him or not. He might have changed his mind, I reflected; for unless it was a business matter my uncle and partner was wont to be extremely erratic in his decisions. And he had no business at all to join me on this voyage except, as he had said, that he was tired of the land and wished to relieve his restlessness by a smell of salt water.

He was no sailor at all, nor even a navigator; but he had sailed so many years as supercargo and trader that he was seldom contented for long on land, and like myself he dreaded the long wait until Spring when our beautiful new craft would be ready for her maiden trip.

So for a time I thought it probable that he would come alongside; and then I thought it probable he would not. If he ran across Captain Steele, my father was liable to discourage him from making so long and so useless a voyage when no profit was to be had from it. My case was different, for I was a boy still full of a youthful energy and enthusiasm that needed a safety-valve. Moreover, I was pardonably proud of my new position, being for the first time the captain of a ship in name and authority, although I was forced to acknowledge to myself that Ned Britton was the real captain and that without him I would be very helpless indeed.

Two o'clock came, and then three o'clock; but there was no evidence of Uncle Naboth.

I gave a sigh of regret and unfeigned disappointment then, and

nodded to Ned to weigh anchor, for the tide was beginning to turn.

My new men worked cheerily and with a will, and soon the anchor was apeak, our mainsail set and we were standing out to sea on our doubtful attempt to round the Horn and reach the blue waters of the Pacific.

We had left the bay and were standing well out from the coast, when I happened to glance over the rail and notice a small launch coming toward us from the harbor at full speed. They were unable to signal from that distance, but I brought a powerful glass and soon made out the form of Uncle Naboth standing upright in the middle of the little craft and gracefully waving a red handkerchief.

I had Ned luff and lay to, laughing to think how nearly the little uncle had missed us, and before long the launch covered the distance between us and came alongside.

Uncle Naboth was gorgeous in appearance. He was dressed in a vividly checked suit and wore a tourist cap perched jauntily atop his iron-gray locks. His shirt bosom was wonderfully pleated, his shoes of shiny patent-leather, and he wore yellow kid gloves that wrinkled dreadfully. Moreover – the greatest wonder of all, to me – my uncle was smoking a big, fat cigar instead of his accustomed corn-cob pipe, and he had a kodak slung over one shoulder and a marine-glass over the other.

First of all my uncle sent his traps up the side. Then he began a long but calm argument with the crew of the launch, who were

greatly excited, and this might have continued indefinitely had not Ned become impatient and yelled a warning that he was about to tack. At this Uncle Naboth thrust some money in the hand of the skipper and leisurely ascended the ladder while a chorus of curses and threats fell upon his unheeding ears.

"Nearly missed you, Sam, didn't I?" he said, nodding cheerfully as the sails filled and we headed into the breeze again. "Close shave, but no alum or bay-rum."

"What made you late, Uncle?"

"Had to do a lot to git my outfit ready," he said, puffing his cigar, smoothing out his gloves and at the same time casting a critical eye over the deck. "First time in my life, nevvy, that I've went to sea on a pleasure-trip. No business to look after, no worry, no figgerin'. Jest sailin' away o'er the deep blue sea with a jolly crew is the life for me. Eh, Sam?"

"Right you are, Uncle. You're just a passenger, and a mighty welcome one. I'm glad you caught us."

"Stern chase, but not a long one. What do you s'pose, Sam? I had to pay them pirates in that half-grown steamboat thirty dollars to get me aboard."

"Thirty dollars!"

"Dreadful, wasn't it? And then they wanted sixty. Took me for a tourist gent 'cause I looked the part. But I was bound to come, an' they was onto my anxiousness, so it might be expected as they'd soak me good an' plenty. Where'd you say you was bound for, Sam?"

"Down the coast, around the Horn, and up the Pacific to San Pedro."

"Sounds interestin'."

His bright little eye had been observant.

"What's aboard, my lad?"

"Steel beams for some new buildings in Los Angeles."

"Loaded rather heavy, ain't she?"

"Too heavy, Uncle."

"H-m-m. Not any too tight, either, I take it. Hull old an' rotten; plenty o' paint to cover up the worm-holes."

"Exactly, sir."

"Will you make it, Sam?"

"Can't say, Uncle Naboth. But I'll try."

"Cargo insured?"

"No; that's the worst of it. The owners insure themselves, because the tub won't pass at Lloyd's. If we sink it's a big loss. So we mustn't sink."

"Iron won't float, nevvy."

"I'm going to hug the coast, mostly. If trouble comes I'll beach her. You may be in for a long cruise, Uncle."

He nodded quite pleasantly.

"That's all right. I take it we'll manage to get home by Spring, an' that's time enough fer us both. But I can see she ain't a race-hoss, Sam, my boy."

Indeed, the ship was not behaving at all to suit me. With a favorable breeze and an easy sea the miserable old hulk

was sailing more like a water-logged raft than a modern merchantman.

Her sails and cordage were new and beautiful, and her paint spick and span; but I noticed my sailors wagging their heads with disappointment as the *Gladys H.* labored through the water.

Uncle Naboth chuckled to himself and glanced at me as if he thought it all a good joke, and I the only victim. But I pretended to pay no attention to him. Being, as he expressed it, a "loafin' land-lubber," I installed him in the last of the roomy cabins aft, all of which opened into the officers' mess-room. Ned Britton had the cabin opposite mine, and Mr. Perkins the one opposite to that occupied by Duncan Moit. For my part, I was pleased enough to have such good company on a voyage that promised to be unusually tedious.

Moit had kept well out of our way until everything was snug and ship-shape, and then he came on deck and stood where he could keep a tender eye on his precious machine. I introduced him to Uncle Naboth and the two "passengers" shook hands cordially and were soon conversing together in a friendly manner.

I had decided to take my sailors into my confidence in the very beginning, so I called all hands together and made them a brief speech.

"My lads," said I, "we need not look forward to a very good voyage, for you have doubtless discovered already that the *Gladys H.* is not a greyhound. To be honest with you, she's old and leaky, and none too safe. But she's got a valuable cargo aboard, that

must be safe delivered if we can manage it, and we are all of us well paid to do our duty by the owners. My instructions are to hug the land and make a harbor if bad weather comes. At the worst we can run the ship on the shingle and save the cargo in that way – for the cargo is worth a dozen such tubs. It's a somewhat risky undertaking, I know, and if any of you don't like your berths I'll put you ashore at the first likely place and you can go home again. But if you are willing to stick to me, I'll take as good care of you as I can, and your money is sure because the Interocean Forwarding Company is back of us and good for every penny. What do you say, my lads?"

They were a good-natured lot, and appreciated my frankness. After a little conference together the boatswain declared they were all content to see the venture to the end and do the best they could under the circumstances. So a mutual understanding was established from the beginning, and before the end came I had cause to be proud of every man aboard.

The weather was warm and pleasant, and as I sat with our passengers and Ned on the deck in the afternoon Uncle Naboth got his eye on the overgrown grocery package and said to Moit:

"What sort of an automobile have you got?"

The man had been dreaming, but he gave a start and his eyes lighted with sudden interest. The abstracted mood disappeared.

"It is one of my own invention, sir," he replied.

"What do you call it?"

"The Moit Convertible Automobile."

"Heh? Convertible?"

"Yes, sir."

"I guess," said Uncle Naboth, "I'm up agin it. 'Convertible' is a word I don't jest catch the meaning of. Latin's a little rusty, you know; so long since I went to school."

"It means," said Moit, seriously, "that the machine is equally adapted to land and water."

My uncle stared a little, then looked away and began to whistle softly. Ned Britton sighed and walked to the rail as if to observe our motion. For my part, I had before entertained a suspicion that the poor fellow was not quite right in his mind, so I was not surprised. But he appeared gentlemanly enough, and was quite in earnest; so, fearing he might notice the rather pointed conduct of my uncle and Ned, I made haste to remark with fitting gravity:

"That is a very desirable combination, Mr. Moit, and a great improvement on the ordinary auto."

"Oh, there is nothing ordinary about the machine, in any way," he responded, quickly. "Indeed, it is so different from all the other motor vehicles in use that it cannot properly be termed an automobile. Some time I intend to provide an appropriate name for my invention, but until now the machine itself has occupied my every thought."

"To be sure," I said, rather vaguely.

"Most automobiles," began my uncle, lying back in his chair and giving me a preliminary wink, "is only built to go on land, an' balks whenever they gets near a repair shop. I was tellin' a feller

the other day in New York, who was becalmed in the middle of the street, that if he'd only put a sail on his wagon and wait for a stiff breeze, he could tell all the repair men to go to thunder!"

"But this has nothing to do with Mr. Moit's invention," I said, trying not to smile. "Mr. Moit's automobile is different."

"As how?" asked my uncle.

Mr. Moit himself undertook to reply.

"In the first place," said he, his big eyes looking straight through me with an absorbed expression, as if I were invisible, "I do not use the ordinary fuel for locomotion. Gasoline is expensive and dangerous, and needs constant replenishing. Electricity is unreliable, and its storage very bulky. Both these forces are crude and unsatisfactory. My first thought was to obtain a motive power that could be relied upon at all times, that was inexpensive and always available. I found it in compressed air."

"Oh!" ejaculated Uncle Naboth.

I am sure he knew less about automobiles than I did, for I owned a small machine at home and had driven it some while on shore. But Mr. Perkins prided himself on being familiar with all modern inventions, and what he did not know from personal experience he was apt to imagine he knew.

"Compressed air," he observed, oracularly, "is what blows the sails of a ship."

The inventor turned on him a look of wonder.

"This seems to me like a clever idea," I hastened to say. "But I can't see exactly, sir, how you manage to use compressed air

for such a purpose."

"I have a storage tank," Moit answered, "which is constantly replenished by the pumps as fast as the air is exhausted, which of course only occurs while the machine is in action."

"But you need something to start the engines," I suggested. "Do you use gasoline for that purpose?"

"No, sir. I have a glycerine explosive which is so condensed that an atom is all that is required to prime the engines. In a little chamber that contains about a pint I can carry enough explosive to last me for a year. And wherever there is air I have power that is perpetual."

"That's great!" cried Uncle Naboth, with an enthusiasm so plainly assumed that Ned and I had much ado to keep from laughing outright.

"In other ways," continued Duncan Moit, "I have made marked improvements upon the ordinary motor car. Will you allow me, gentlemen, to show you my machine, and to explain it to you?"

We were glad enough of this diversion, even Ned Britton, who could not have run a sewing-machine, being curious to examine our crazy passenger's invention.

Moit at once began to untie the cords and remove the soiled canvas, which consisted of parts of worn-out sails stitched clumsily together. But when this uninviting cover was withdrawn we saw with astonishment a machine of such beauty, completeness and exquisite workmanship that our exclamations

of delight were alike spontaneous and genuine.

Moit might be mad, but as a mechanic he was superb, if this was indeed a creation of his own hands.

An automobile? Well, it had four massive wheels with broad rubber tires, a steering gear (of which only the wheel was visible) and a body for the passengers to ride in; but otherwise the world-pervading auto-fiend would not have recognized the thing.

It seemed to be all of metal – a curious metal of a dull silver hue – not painted or polished in any place, but so finely constructed that every joint and fitting appeared perfect. It was graceful of design, too, although the body was shaped like the hull of a boat, with the wheels so placed that the structure was somewhat more elevated from the ground than ordinarily. This body was about a foot in thickness, having an inner and outer surface composed of beautifully rivetted plates of the strange metal.

Moit explained that part of this space was used for vacuum chambers, which were kept exhausted by the pumps when required and made the machine wonderfully light. Also, within what corresponded with the gunwale of a boat, were concealed the parts of the adjustable top, which, when raised into position and hooked together, formed a dome-shaped cover for the entire body. These parts were almost entirely of glass, in which a fine wire netting had been imbedded, so that while the riders could see clearly on all sides, any breakage of the glass was unlikely to occur. In any event it could only crack, as the netting would still

hold the broken pieces in place.

The engines were in a front chamber of the body. There were four of them, each no bigger than a gallon jug; but Moit assured us they were capable of developing twenty-five horse-power each, or a total of one hundred horse-power, owing to the wonderful efficiency of the compressed air. All the other machinery was similarly condensed in size and so placed that the operator could reach instantly any part of it.

The entrance was at either side or at the back, as one preferred, but the seats were arranged in a circle around the body, with the exception of the driver's chair. So roomy was the car that from six to eight passengers could be carried with comfort, or even more in case of emergency.

All of these things were more easily understood by observation than I can hope to explain them with the pen. Perhaps I have omitted to describe them to you as clearly as I should; but I must plead in extenuation a lack of mechanical knowledge. That you will all ride in similar cars some day I have no doubt, and then you will understand all the details that I, a plain sailor, have been forced to ignore because of my ignorance of mechanics.

"But," said Uncle Naboth, whose eyes were fairly bulging with amazement, "I don't yet see what drives the blamed thing through water."

Moit smiled for almost the first time since I had known him, and the smile was one of triumphant pride.

He entered the automobile, touched some buttons, and with a whirring sound a dozen little scoop-shaped flanges sprang from the rim of each wheel. There was no need for farther explanation. We could see at once that in water the four wheels now became paddle-wheels, and their rapid revolution would no doubt drive the machine at a swift pace.

The paddles were cleverly shaped, being made of the same metal employed everywhere in the construction of this astonishing invention, and they stood at just the right angle to obtain the utmost power of propulsion.

"Aluminum?" questioned Mr. Perkins, pointing to the metal.

"No, sir. This is perhaps my most wonderful discovery, and you will pardon me if I say it is a secret which I am unwilling at this time to divulge. But I may tell you that I have found an alloy that is unequalled in the known world for strength, durability and lightness. It weighs a little more than pure aluminum, but has a thousand times its tensile strength. You may test one of these blades, which seem to the eye to be quite delicate and fragile."

Uncle Naboth leaned over and gingerly tested one of the wheel blades with his thumb and finger. Then he exerted more strength. Finally he put his heel upon it and tried to bend it with the weight of his body. It resisted all efforts with amazing success.

And now the inventor pushed some other buttons, or keys, and the metal blades all receded and became once more a part of the rims of the wheels.

"When we get to San Pedro, gentlemen," said he, "it will give

me pleasure to take you for a ride in my machine, both on land and water. Then you will be sure to appreciate its perfection more fully."

He began to replace the canvas cover, apologizing as much to his beloved machine as to us for its shabbiness.

"All of my money was consumed by the machine itself," he explained, "and I was forced to use this cloth to make a cover, which is needed only to protect my invention from prying eyes. The metal will never rust nor corrode."

"Is this material, this alloy, easy to work?" I asked.

He shook his head.

"It is very difficult," he returned. "Steel crumbles against it with discouraging readiness, so that my tools were all of the same metal, annealed and hardened. Even these had to be constantly replaced. You must not imagine, sir, that I obtained all of this perfection at the first trial. I have been years experimenting."

"So I imagine, Mr. Moit."

"By a fortunate coincidence," he went on, dreamily, "my money, which I had inherited from my father, lasted me until all the work was complete. I had thought of nothing but my machine, and having at last finished it and made thorough tests to assure myself that it was as nearly perfect as human skill can make it, I awoke to find myself bankrupt and in debt. By selling my tools, my workshop, and everything else I possessed except the machine itself, I managed to pay my indebtedness and have two hundred dollars left. This was not enough to get myself and

my car shipped to California by rail; so I was at my wits' end until you, sir," turning to me, "kindly came to my rescue."

During the pause that followed he finished covering up his machine, and then Uncle Naboth asked, bluntly:

"If you are sure the blamed thing will work, why didn't you run it overland to California? That has been done more'n once, I'm told, and as you use compressed air the expense wouldn't be a circumstance."

That had occurred to me too, and I awaited the man's reply with much curiosity.

"Sir," he answered, "you must not forget that I have devoted years to this work – years of secret and constant toil – and that my whole heart is involved in the success of my perfected machine. But you can readily understand that I have not dared to patent it, or any of its parts, until all was complete; for an imperfect patent not only fails to protect one, but in this case it would give other designers of automobiles the ideas I had originated. A patent is never a safeguard if it can be improved or stolen. As I have said, when at last my work was finished I had no money with which to obtain patents, of which no less than nineteen are required to protect me."

"And have you, at this time, no patents at all?" I asked, surprised at such neglect.

He shook his head.

"Not one. There, gentlemen, stands one of the most important mechanical inventions the world has ever known, and its inventor

has no protection whatever – as yet. If I attempted to run the machine overland to the Pacific coast, a dozen automobile experts would see it and promptly steal my ideas. Such a risk was too great to run. I must manage to reach my rich and selfish uncle, prove to him how wonderful my invention is, offer him a half interest in it, and so procure the money to protect it and to establish a manufactory. Do you understand now why I have acted in so puzzling a way – puzzling, at least, to one not aware of my dilemma?"

"It is quite clear to me," I replied, beginning to think my passenger was not mad, after all. "But have you not been foolish to confide all this to us?"

He smiled pleasantly, and the smile made his face really attractive.

"I am not especially stupid, believe me," said he, "and I am a fair judge of human nature. You will pardon me if I say that not a man on this ship is at all dangerous to me."

"How is that?" I asked, slightly discomfitted.

"No man among you is competent to steal my invention," he asserted, coolly, "even if you were disposed to do so, which I doubt. It would require a dishonest person who is a mechanical expert, and while there are many such between Chelsea and California, I am sure there is none on this ship who would wrong me, even if he possessed the power. I feel entirely secure, gentlemen, in your company."

This was diplomatic, at least, for we were naturally pleased

at the tribute to our good faith, even if inclined to resent the disparagement of our mechanical genius. However, we regarded Duncan Moit in a more friendly light and with vastly increased respect from that time forth.

It was growing dark by this time, and presently Nux announced that dinner was served. So we repaired to the mess cabin, and while testing Bryonia's superb talents as a cook beguiled the hour by canvassing the future possibilities of the Moit Convertible Automobile.

CHAPTER IV
WE COME TO GRIEF

Fortune seemed to favor the voyage of the *Gladys H.* All the way to Hatteras the weather was delightful and the breeze fresh and constant. There was not a moment when the sails were not bulging to some extent and in spite of the old ship's labored motion we made excellent time.

However, I followed my instructions, keeping well in toward the coast, and so crept steadily down to Key West.

Here an important proposition confronted us: whether to enter the Gulf of Mexico and follow its great circle near to the shore – a method that would require weeks – or run across to Cuba and then attempt the passage of the Caribbean by the short cut to Colon or Porto Bella. We had canvassed this alternative before I left harbor; but Mr. Harlan had maintained that I must decide the question for myself, being guided by the actions of the bark and the condition of the weather.

Both these requirements seemed favorable for the short cut. The ship had behaved so far much better than I had expected, and the good weather seemed likely to hold for some time longer.

So after a conference with Ned Britton – for Uncle Naboth refused to "mix up in the business" or even to offer an opinion – I decided to take the chances and follow the shortest route. After

reaching Colon I would keep close to land way down to the Horn.

So we stood out to sea, made Cuba easily, and skirted its western point to the Isles de Pinos. Still the skies were clear and the breeze favorable, and with good courage we headed south in a bee-line for Colon.

And now we were in the Caribbean, that famous sea whose very name breathes romance. It recalls to us the earliest explorers, the gold seekers and buccaneers, the fact that scarce an inch of its rippling surface is unable to boast some tragedy or adventure in the days of the Spanish Main, when ships of all nations thronged the waters of the West Indies.

For three whole days luck was our bedfellow; then, as Uncle Naboth drily remarked, it "went a fishin'" and left us to take care of ourselves.

With gentle sighs our hitherto faithful breeze deserted us and our sails flapped idly for a time and then lay still, while the ship floated upon a sheet of brilliant blue glass, the tropic sun beat fiercely down upon us, and all signs of life and animation came to an end.

No sailor is partial to calms. A gale he fights with a sense of elation and a resolve to conquer; a favoring breeze he considers his right; but a glassy sea and listless, drooping sails are his especial horror. Nevertheless, he is accustomed to endure this tedium and has learned by long experience how best to enliven such depressing periods.

Our men found they possessed a violinist – not an unskilled

fiddler by any means – and to his accompanying strains they sang and danced like so many happy children.

Uncle Naboth and Ned Britton played endless games of pinochle under the deck awning and I brought out my favorite books and stretched myself in a reclining chair to enjoy them.

Duncan Moit paced deliberately up and down for the first two days, engrossed in his own musings; then he decided to go over his machine and give it a careful examination. He removed the cover, started his engines, and let them perform for the amusement of the amazed sailors, who formed a curious but respectful group around him.

Finally they cleared a space on the deck and Moit removed the guy-ropes that anchored his invention and ran his auto slowly up and down, to the undisguised delight of the men. He would allow six or eight to enter the car and ride – sixteen feet forward, around the mainmast, and sixteen feet back again – and it was laughable to watch the gravity of their faces as they held fast to the edge, bravely resolving to endure the dangers of this wonderful mode of locomotion. Not one had ever ridden in an automobile before, and although Moit merely allowed it to crawl over its confined course, the ride was a strange and fascinating experience to them.

I must allow that the performances of this clever machine astonished me. The inventor was able to start it from his seat, by means of a simple lever, and it was always under perfect control. The engines worked so noiselessly that you had to put your ear close in order to hear them at all, and the perfection of

the workmanship could not fail to arouse my intense admiration.

"If this new metal is so durable as you claim," I said to Moit, "the machine ought to last for many years."

"My claim is that it is practically indestructible," he answered, in a tone of conviction.

"But you have still the tire problem," I remarked. "A puncture will put you out of business as quickly as it would any other machine."

"A puncture!" he exclaimed. "Why, these tires cannot puncture, sir."

"Why not?"

"They are not inflated."

"What then?"

"It is another of my inventions, Mr. Steele. Inside each casing is a mass of sponge-rubber, of a peculiarly resilient and vigorous character. And within the casing itself is embedded a net of steel wire, which will not allow the vulcanized rubber to be cut to any depth. The result is an excellent tire that cannot be punctured and has great permanency."

"You do not seem to have overlooked any important point," I observed, admiringly.

"Ah, that is the one thing that now occupies my mind," he responded, quickly. "That is why I have been testing the machine today, even in the limited way that is alone possible. I am haunted by the constant fear that I *have* overlooked some important point, which another might discover."

"And have you found such a thing?"

"No; to all appearances the device is perfect. But who can tell what may yet develop?"

"Not I," with a smile; "you have discounted my mechanical skill already. To my mind the invention seems in every way admirable, Mr. Moit."

For nine days we lay becalmed, with cloudless skies above and a tranquil sea around us. During the day we rested drowsily in the oppressive heat, but the nights were always cooler and myriads of brilliant stars made it nearly as light as day. Ned had taken in every yard of canvas except a square sail which he rigged forward, and he took the added precaution to lash every movable thing firmly to its place.

"After this, we've got to expect ugly weather," he announced; and as he knew the Caribbean well this preparation somewhat dismayed me. I began to wish we had entered the Gulf of Mexico and made the roundabout trip; but it was too late for regrets now, and we must make the best of our present outlook.

Personally I descended into the hold and examined with care the seams, finding that the calking had held securely so far and that we were as right and tight as when we had first sailed. But even this assurance was not especially encouraging, for we had met with no weather that a canoe might not have lived through without shipping more than a few drops of sea.

The ninth day was insufferably hot, and the evening brought no relief. Ned Britton's face looked grave and worried, and I

overheard him advising Duncan Moit to add several more anchor ropes to those that secured his machine.

We awaited the change in the weather anxiously enough, and toward midnight the stars began to be blotted out until shortly a black pall overhung the ship. The air seemed vibrant and full of an electric feel that drew heavily upon one's nerves; but so far there had been no breath of wind.

At last, when it seemed we could wait no longer, a distant murmur was heard, drawing ever nearer and louder until its roar smote our ears like a discharge of artillery. The ship began to roll restlessly, and then the gale and the waves broke upon us at the same instant and with full force.

Heavily weighted and lazy as the bark was, she failed to rise to the first big wave, which washed over her with such resistless power that it would have swept every living soul away had we not clung desperately to the rigging. It seemed to me that I was immersed in a wild, seething flood for several minutes; but they must have been seconds, instead, for presently the water was gone and the wind endeavoring to tear me from my hold.

The square sail held, by good luck, and the ship began to stagger onward, bowing her head deep and submitting to constant floods that washed her from end to end. There was not much that could be done to ease her, and the fervid excitement of those first hours kept us all looking after our personal safety. Along we went, scudding before the gale, which maintained its intensity unabated and fortunately drove us along the very course we had

mapped out.

The morning relieved the gloom, but did not lessen the force of the storm. The waves were rolling pretty high, and all faces were serious or fearful, according to the disposition of their owners. In our old *Saracen*, or even the *Flipper*, I would not have minded the blow or the sea, but here was a craft of a different sort, and I did not know how she might stand such dreadful weather.

I got Ned into the cabin, where we stood like a couple of drenched rats and discussed the situation. On deck our voices could not be heard.

"Are the small boats ready to launch?" I asked.

"All ready, sir; but I doubt if they'd live long," he replied. "However, this 'ere old hulk seems to be doin' pretty decent. She lies low, bein' so heavy loaded, an' lets the waves break over her. That saves her a good deal of strain, Sam. If she don't spring a-leak an' the cargo holds steady, we'll get through all right."

"Tried the pumps?"

"Yes; only bilge, so far."

"Very good. How long will the gale last?"

"Days, perhaps, in these waters. There's no rule to go by, as I knows of. It'll just blow till it blows itself out."

He went on deck again, keeping an eye always on the ship and trying to carry just enough canvas to hold her steady.

Duncan Moit and Uncle Naboth kept to the cabin and were equally unconcerned. The latter was an old voyager and realized

that it was best to be philosophical; the former had never been at sea before and had no idea of our danger.

On the third morning of this wild and persistent tempest the boatswain came to where Ned and I clung to the rigging and said:

"She's leaking, sir."

"Badly?"

"Pretty bad, sir."

"Get the pumps manned, Ned," said I; "I'll go below and investigate."

I crawled into the hold through the forecastle cubby, as we dared not remove the hatches. I took along a sailor to carry the lantern, and we were not long in making the discovery that the *Gladys H.* was leaking like a sieve. Several of the seams that Mr. Harlan had caused to be calked so carefully had reopened and the water was spurting through in a dozen streams.

I got back to my cabin and made a careful examination of the chart. According to my calculations we could not be far from the coast of Panama. If I was right, another six hours would bring us to the shore; but I was not sure of my reckoning since that fearful gale had struck us. So the question whether or no the ship could live six hours longer worried me considerably, for the pumps were of limited capacity and the water was gaining on us every minute.

I told Uncle Naboth our difficulty, and Duncan Moit, who stood by, listened to my story with lively interest.

"Will you try to beach her, Sam?" enquired my uncle, with

his usual calmness.

"Of course, sir, if we manage to float long enough to reach the land. That is the best I can hope for now. By good luck the coast of Panama is low and marshy, and if we can drive the tub aground there the cargo may be saved to the owners."

"Ain't much of a country to land in, Sam; is it?"

"Not a very lovely place, Uncle, I'm told."

"It's where they're diggin' the canal, ain't it?"

"I believe so."

"Well, we may get a chance to see the ditch. This 'ere travellin' is full of surprises, Mr. Moit. I never thought to 'a' brung a guide book o' Panama, or we could tell exactly where they make the hats."

The inventor appeared ill at ease. I could understand the man's disappointment and anxiety well enough. To beach his beloved machine on a semi-barbarous, tropical shore was not what he had anticipated, and I had time to feel sorry for him while thinking upon my own troubles.

He followed me on deck, presently, and I saw him take a good look at the sea and shake his head despondently. The Convertible Automobile might work in ordinary water, but it was not intended for such mammoth waves as these.

Then he watched the men at the pumps. They worked with a will, but in that cheerless way peculiar to sailors when they are forced to undertake this desperate duty. The ocean was pushing in and they were trying to keep it out; and such a pitiful struggle

usually results in favor of the ocean.

Suddenly Moit conceived a brilliant idea. He asked for a length of hose, and when it was brought he threw off the covering of his machine and succeeded in attaching the hose to his engines. The other end we dropped into the hold, and presently, despite the lurching and plunging of the ship, the engines started and a stream the full size of the hose was sucked up and sent flowing into the scruppers. It really did better work than the ship's pumps, and I am now positive that this clever arrangement was all that enabled us to float until we made the coast.

In the afternoon, while the gale seemed to redouble its force, we sighted land – low, murky and uninteresting, but nevertheless land – and made directly for it.

Darkness came upon us swiftly, but we held our course, still pumping for dear life and awaiting with tense nerves the moment of impact.

What this shore, of which we had caught a glimpse, might be like I did not know, more than that it was reported low and sandy at the ocean's edge and marshy in the interior. There were a few rocky islands at the south of the isthmus, and there might be rocks or breakers at any point, for all we knew. If the ship struck one of these we were surely doomed.

On and on we flew, with blackness all round us, until on a sudden the bow raised and our speed slackened so abruptly that we were all thrown prostrate upon the deck. The mainmast snapped and fell with a deafening crash, and slowly the ship rolled

to starboard until the deck stood at a sharp angle, and trembled a few brief moments, and then lay still.

The voyage of the *Gladys H.* was at an end.

CHAPTER V
MAKING THE BEST OF IT

"Are you there, Sam?"

"Yes, Ned."

"Safe and sound?"

"I think so."

Overhead the wind still whistled, but more moderately; around me I could hear the men stirring, with an occasional groan. We had come from the tempest-tossed seas into a place of comparative quiet, which just now was darker than the pocket of Erebus.

I found the after cabin and slid down the steps, which inclined sidewise. Inside, however, the hanging lamps had withstood the shock and still cast a dim light over the room. I found Uncle Naboth reclining upon a bench with his feet braced against the table, while he puffed away complacently at one of his enormous cigars.

"Stopped at a way station, Sam?" he enquired.

"So it appears, Uncle."

"Any damage?"

"Can't tell, yet. Were you hurt?"

He exhibited a great lump on his forehead, but smiled sweetly.

"You should 'a' seen me dive under the table, Sam. It were a

reg'lar circus, with me the chief acrobat. Where are we?"

"I'm going to find out."

I unhooked both the lanterns and started up the companion-way with them. Rather than remain in the dark Uncle brought himself and his cigar after me.

I gave Ned one of the lights and we began to look about us. Duncan Moit lay unconscious beside his machine, the engines of which were still running smoothly. I threw back the lever and stopped them, and then a couple of seamen carried the inventor into the cabin. Black Nux had lighted another lantern, and with my uncle's assistance undertook to do what he could to restore the injured man.

Ned and I slid aft and found the stern still washed by a succession of waves that dashed over it. Walking the deck was difficult because the ship listed from stem to stern and from port to starboard. Her bow was high and dry on a sand-bar – or such I imagined it to be – but it was only after I had swung a lantern up a halyard of the foremast, so that its dim rays would illumine the largest possible area, that I discovered we had plunged straight into a deep inlet of the coast. On one side of us appeared to be a rank growth of tangled shrubs or underbrush; on the other was the outline of a forest. Ahead was clear water, but its shallow depth had prevented our proceeding farther inland.

Either the gale had lessened perceptibly or we did not feel it so keenly in our sheltered position. An examination of the men showed that one of them had broken an arm and several others

were badly bruised; but there were no serious casualties.

The ship was now without any motion whatever, being fast on the bottom of the inlet. The breakers that curled over the stern did her no damage, and these seemed to be gradually lessening in force.

Ned sent his tired men to their bunks and with the assistance of Bryonia, who was almost as skillful in surgery as in cooking, prepared to set the broken arm and attend to those who were the most bruised.

I went to the cabin again, and found that Uncle Naboth and Nux had been successful in restoring Duncan Moit, who was sitting up and looking around him with a dazed expression. I saw he was not much hurt, the fall having merely stunned him for the time being.

"The machine – the machine!" he was muttering, anxiously.

"It's all right, sir," I assured him. "I shut down the engines, and she seems to have weathered the shock in good shape."

He seemed relieved by this report, and passed his hand across his brow as if to clear his brain.

"Where are we?" was his next query.

"No one knows, sir. But we are landed high and dry, and I'm almost sure it is some part of the coast of Panama. To-morrow morning we can determine our location more accurately. But now, Mr. Moit, I recommend that you tumble into your bunk and get all the rest you can before daybreak."

The strain of the last few days had been severe upon all of us,

and now that the demand for work or vigilance was removed we found that our strength had been overtaxed. I left Ned to set a watch, and sought my own bed, on which I stretched myself to fall asleep in half a minute.

"Wake up, Mars' Sam," said Nux, shaking me. "Breakfas' ready, seh."

I rubbed my eyes and sat up. The sun was streaming through the cabin window, which was on the port side. Around me was a peculiar silence which contrasted strongly with the turmoil that had so long buffeted my ears. The gale had passed on and left us to count the mischief it had caused.

"What time is it, Nux?"

"Eight o'clock, Mars' Sam."

I sprang up, now fully conscious of the night's tragedy, which sleep had for a time driven from my mind. Nux stood with my basin and towel and his calmness encouraged me to bathe before I went on deck.

In the mess-cabin I found that the table legs had been propped up with boxes to hold it level, and that a hot breakfast had been prepared and was now steaming on the table. Around the board were gathered Ned Britton, Uncle Naboth and Duncan Moit, all busily engaged in eating. They greeted me cheerfully and bade me sit down and join them.

"How is everything, Ned?" I enquired, anxiously.

"Bad as can be, an' right as a trivet, Sam," he replied. "The *Gladys H.*'ll never float again. Her bottom's all smashed in, an'

she's fast in the mud till she goes to pieces an' makes kindlin'-wood for the Injuns."

"Then the cargo is safe, for the present?"

"To be sure. It can't get lost, 'cause it's a chunk o' steel, and the ship's planks'll hold it in place for a long time. It'll get good and soaked, but I've noticed it's all painted to keep it from rustin'. This ain't San Pedro, whatever else it is, and the voyage has miscarried a bit; but them beams is a good deal better off here than at the bottom o' the sea, so I take it we've done the best we could by the owners."

I sat down and took the coffee Nux poured for me.

"How about the crew?" I asked. "Are the men all right?"

"No body hurt but Dick Lombard, and his arm'll mend nicely."

"Have you any idea where we are, Ned?"

"Stuck in a river, somewhere. Wild country all around us, but I guess we can find a way out. Lots o' provisions and a good climate. We may say as we're in luck, Sam."

I shook my head dismally. It did not appear to me that luck had especially favored us. To be sure, we might have gone to the bottom of the Caribbean in the gale; but it struck me we had landed the cargo in an awkward place for the owners as well as for ourselves. Mr. Harlan would have done better had he not taken the long chance of our making the voyage to San Pedro successfully.

"Well, I cannot see that we have failed in our duty, in any

way," I remarked, as cheerfully as I could, "so we may as well make the best of it."

"This bein' a tourist, an' travellin' fer pleasure," said Uncle Naboth, "is more fun than a kickin' mule. Sam's got to worry, 'cause he's paid fer it; but we passengers can look on an' enjoy ourselves. Eh, Mr. Moit?"

"It is a serious situation for me," replied the inventor. "Think of it, gentlemen! The most wonderful piece of mechanism the world has yet known is stranded in a wilderness, far from civilization."

"That is your own fault," remarked Ned, bluntly.

"Not that, sir; it is fate."

"The machine is all right," said I. "You will have no trouble to save it."

"As for that, I must, of course, make the best of the adverse circumstances that have overtaken me," he replied, with more composure than I had expected. "It is not my nature to be easily discouraged, else I could never have accomplished what I have in the perfection of any inventions. My greatest regret, at this moment, is that the world will be deprived, for a longer period than I had intended, of the benefits of my Convertible Automobile."

"Having never known its excellent qualities, sir, the world can wait," asserted Uncle Naboth, philosophically. I have noticed one can be quite philosophical over another's difficulties.

Having hurried through my breakfast, which our faithful

Bryonia had prepared most excellently in spite of the fact that his galley was at an angle of nearly forty-five degrees, I went on deck to obtain for the first time a clear view of our surroundings.

The tide had changed and the wind fallen. We lay in the center of a placid river – high and dry, as Ned had said – with the current gently rippling against our bow. Not more than ten yards to the right was a low, marshy bank covered with scrub underbrush of a tropical character. On our left, however, and some fifty yards distant, lay a well defined bank marking the edge of the stately forest which I had observed the night before. The woodland gradually sloped upward from the river, and above it, far to the south, a formidable range of mountains was visible.

Between us and this left bank the water seemed a fair depth, but it was quite shallow on our right. It seemed wonderful that any gale could have sent so big a ship so far up the river; but I remembered that the billows had followed us in, and doubtless their power alone had urged us forward.

Here we were, anyway, and here the *Gladys H.* must remain until demolished by time, tide or human endeavor.

For the rest, the air was warm and pleasant, with a blue sky overhead. Aside from the loss that would follow the salvage of the valuable cargo we had good reason to thank Providence for our fortunate escape from death.

I felt that I had done as much to promote the interests of the owners as any man could do; but the conditions had been adverse, and the responsibility was now theirs, and not mine.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.