

Sullivan Francis William

The Harbor of Doubt



Francis Sullivan

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CHAPTER I

MALICIOUSLY ACCUSED

“Let them think what they like. If I had died I would have been a hero; because I lived I suppose there is nothing in the history of crime that I have not committed.”

Young Captain Code Schofield sprang out of the deep, luxurious chair and began to pace up and down before the fire. He did not cast as much as a glance at the woman near him. His mind was elsewhere. He had heard strange things in this talk with her.

“Well, captain, you know how it is on an island like this. The tiny thing of everyday life becomes a subject for a day’s discussion. That affair of six months ago was like dropping a tombstone in a mud-puddle—everything is profoundly stirred, but no one gets splattered except the one who dropped it. In this case yourself.”

Schofield stopped in his tracks and regarded his hostess with a look that was mingled surprise and uneasiness. She lay back in a *chaise-longue*, her hands clasped behind her head, smiling up at the young man. The great square room was dark except for the firelight, and her yellow dress, gleaming fitfully in it, showed the curving lissomeness of her young body.

“Mrs. Mallaby,” he said, “when you say clever things like that I don’t know what to do. I’m not used to it.” He laughed as though half-ashamed of the confession.

“Appreciate them,” she directed shortly with a fleeting glance from her great dark eyes.

“Do you demand all my time?” he asked and flushed. The well-turned compliment caught her unawares and she admitted to herself that perhaps she had underrated this briny youth who was again beginning to interest her extremely.

But with the sally he seemed to have forgotten it and recommenced pacing the floor, his hands in his pockets and his brows knit. His mind had gone off again to this other vastly important thing.

She noticed it with a twinge of vexation. She vastly preferred the personal.

“What was it old Jed Martin said to you this afternoon?” he asked.

“That if the opinions of old sailors were of any account Nat Burns could get up a pretty good case against you for the loss of the *May Schofield*.”

“I suppose he meant his own opinion. He’s an old sailor now, but if he lives to be a hundred and fifty he’ll never be a good one. I could beat his vessel if I was on a two-by-four with a pillow-case for a mains’l. I can’t understand why he has turned against me.”

“It isn’t only he, it’s—”

“I know it!” he burst out passionately. “It’s the whole island of Grande Mignon from Freekirk Head to Southern Cross. Not a man nor woman but has turned against me since that awful day.

“Great God! what do they think? That I wrecked the poor old *May* for the fun of the thing? That I enjoyed fighting for my life in that sea and seeing the others drown with my very eyes? Don’t they suppose I will carry the remembrance of that all my life? My Heaven, Elsa, that was six months ago and I have just begun to sleep nights without the nightmare of it riding me!”

“Poor boy!”

Her voice calmed him like a touch on a restive horse, and yet he unconsciously resented the fact that it did. “I haven’t been blind, Code, and I have heard and seen this thing growing. It is hard for a fisherman to lose his ship and not suffer for it afterward at the hands of inferior sailors. I’ve

known you all my life, Code, and I believe in you now just as I did that day in school you took the whipping I should have got for passing you a note.

“You haven’t heard the last of the *May Schofield*, and you won’t until you lay the ghost that has come out of its grave. But whatever you do or wherever you are, I want you to remember that I stand ready to help you in every way I can. All this”—she swept her arm about the richly furnished room—“is worthless to me now that Jim is gone, unless I can do some good for those I like. Please, Code, will you feel free to call on me if you need help?”

The flush that had receded returned with a flood of color that made his face beneath its fair hair appear very dark.

“Really, Elsa,” he stammered, “that’s awfully handsome of you, but I hope things won’t go so far as that. I can never forget what you have said.”

Elsa Mallaby had always been like that to him. Even when she married “Hard-Luck” Jim Mallaby she had always seemed to regard Code Schofield as the one man in Freekirk Head. But Jim, being too busy with his strange affairs, had not noticed.

Jim it was who, after twenty years of horrible poverty and ill-luck, had caught the largest halibut ever taken off the Banks and made thousands of dollars exhibiting it alive. And it was this same Jim who, for the remaining ten years of his life, turned to gold everything he touched.

Mallaby House was his real monument, for here, on the great green hill that overlooked the harbor, he had erected a mansion that made his name famous up and down the Bay of Fundy. And here, seven years ago, he had brought Elsa Fuller as his bride—Elsa Fuller who was the belle of Freekirk Head, and had been to Boston to boarding-school.

It was to Mallaby House that Code Schofield had come to dinner this night. He had not wanted to come and had only agreed when she bribed him with a promise of something very important she might reveal.

The revelation was hardly a pleasure. Nothing had been a pleasure to him since that day six months ago when his old schooner, dismasted and leaking in a gale, had foundered near the Wolves, two sharp-toothed islands near Grande Mignon. Four islanders had been lost that day, and he alone had lived through the surf.

“What else did old Jed Martin say, Elsa?” he asked suddenly.

She knitted her brows and stared into the fire. Why would he always go back to that?

“He said that the *May Schofield* should have been able to live out that gale easily if she had been handled right, old as she was. She *was* pretty old, wasn’t she?”

“Fifty years. She was twenty when dad got her—he sailed her twenty-eight and I had her for two.”

“You got a good deal of insurance out of her, didn’t you, Code?”

“Ten thousand dollars—her full value.”

“And you bought the *Charming Lass* with that, didn’t you?”

“Yes—that and two thousand that dad had saved. Why?”

“Old Jed Martin said something about that, too.”

Schofield’s face paled slightly and his mouth closed tightly, exhibiting the salience of his jaw.

“So that’s it, eh? Thinks I ran her under for the insurance—the old barnacle. Is that around the island, too?”

“I guess it must be, or I shouldn’t have heard about it. You didn’t, of course, did you, Code?”

“I hardly expected you would ask that, Elsa. Why, I loved that old schooner like I love—well, my mother.”

“I believe you, Code; you don’t need to ask that. I just wanted to hear you deny it. But you know there were some queer things about her sinking just then, when she was supposed to be in good condition. Nat Burns—”

“Ha! So he is in it, too. What does he say?”

“He says that her insurance policy was just about to run out. Is that so?”

“Yes.”

There was a tone of defiance in his answer that caused her to look up at him quickly. His blue eyes were narrowed and his face hard.

“And it wasn’t such a hard gale, was it?”

“No. I’ve weathered lots worse with the *May*. I can’t explain why she sank.”

“And Michael Burns, who was aboard of her, was the insurance inspector, wasn’t he?”

“Yes.” The reply was more a groan than a spoken word. He laughed harshly.

“I can see Nat Burns’s hand in all this,” he cried. “Why didn’t I think of it before? He will dog me till I die because his father lost his life aboard my schooner. Oh, I had no idea it was as bad as this!”

He sank down into the chair again and stared gloomily into the fire.

“I’m glad I came to-night,” he said at last. “I didn’t know all these things. How long has this talk been going round?”

“Not long, Code.” Her voice was all sympathy. “It is simply the result of brooding among our people who have so little in their lives. I’m sorry. What will you do? Go away somewhere else?”

He looked at her quickly—scorn written upon his face.

“Go away,” he repeated, “and admit my own guilt? Well, hardly. I’ll stay here and see this thing through if I have to do it in the face of all of them.”

“Splendid, Code!” she cried, clapping her hands. “Just what I knew you would say. And, remember, I will help you all I can and whenever you need me.”

He looked at her gratefully and she thrilled with triumph. At last there was something more in his glance than the purely impersonal; he had awakened at last, she thought, to what she might mean to him.

There followed one of those pauses that often occur when two people are thinking intensely on different subjects. For perhaps five minutes the cheerful fire crackled on uninterrupted. Then, suddenly recollecting himself, Code sprang to his feet and held out his hand.

“Half-past ten,” he said, glancing at the mahogany chime-clock on the mantelpiece. “I must really go. It has been kind of you to have me up to-night and tell me all these—”

“Inner secrets of your own life that you never suspected before?” she laughed.

“Exactly. You have done me a service like the good old friend you always were.”

She took his hand, and he noticed that hers was a trifle cold. They started toward the hallway.

From the broad veranda of Mallaby House the view extended a dozen miles to sea. Beneath the hill on which the mansion stood the village of Freekirk Head nestled against the green. Now the dim, yellow lights of its many lamps glowed in the darkness and edged the crescent of stony beach where washed the cold waters of Flag’s Cove.

To the left at one tip of the crescent the flash of Swallowtail Light glowed and died like the fire in a gigantic cigarette. To the right, at the other, could be seen the faint lamps of Castalia, three miles away.

For a minute they stood drinking in the superb beauty of it all. Then Elsa left him with a conventional word, and Schofield heard the great front door close softly behind her.

Silently he descended the steps, when suddenly from the town below came the hideous, raucous shriek of a steam-whistle.

He stood for a minute, astonished, for the whistle was that of the steamer *Grande Mignon*, that daily plied between the island and the mainland. Now the vessel lay at her dock and Code, as well as all the island, knew that her wild signaling at such an hour foreboded some dire calamity.

Swiftly buttoning his coat, he started on a run down the winding, rocky path that led from Mallaby House. He cast one more glance toward the roofs of the village before he plunged among the pine and tamarack, and in that instant caught a red glow from the general direction of the fish wharfs.

CHAPTER II

THE RED PERIL

Five minutes of plunging and slipping brought him down to the main road that gleamed a dim gray in the blackness. A quarter of a mile east lay the wharfs, the general store, and some of the best dwellings in Freekirk Head.

Ahead of him in the road he could see lanterns bobbing, and the illuminated legs of the men who carried them running. Behind he heard the muffled pound of boots in thick dust, and the hoarse panting of others racing toward the scene of the trouble. The frantic screeching of the steamer's whistle (that was not yet silent) had done its work well. Freekirk Head was up in arms.

Instinctively and naturally Code Schofield ran, just as he had run from his father's house since he was ten years old. His long, easy stride carried him quickly over the ground, and he passed two or three of those ahead with lanterns. They shouted at him.

"Hey, what's the trouble?" panted one. "Know anything about it?"

"No, but it might be the wharfs," he replied, without stopping. He veered out to the edge of the road so as to avoid any more queries. He looked with suspicion now on all these men.

Who of them, he wondered, was not, in his heart, convicting him of those things Elsa Mallaby had mentioned? His straightforward nature revolted against the hypocrisy in men that bade them treat him as they had done all his life, and yet think of him only as a criminal.

Suddenly the dull red that had glowed dimly against the sky burst into rosy bloom. A great tongue of fire leaped up and licked the heavens, while floating down the brisk breeze came the distant mingling of men's shouts. As he passed a white wooden gate he heard a woman on the porch crying, and a child's voice in impatient question.

Then for the first time he lost sight of his own distress and thought of the misery of his whole people. It was August, and the Indians should soon be coming from the mainland to spear porpoises.

The dulce-pickers on the back of the island reported a good yield from the rocks at low tide, but outside of these few there was wretchedness from Anthony's Nose to Southern Cross.

The fish had failed.

A hundred years and more had the Grande Mignon fishermen gone out with net and handline and trawl; and for that length of time the millions in the sea had fed, clothed, and housed the thousand on the island. When prices had been good there were even luxuries, and history tells of men who, in one haul from a weir, have made their twenty-five thousand dollars in an hour.

This was all gone now. The fish had failed.

Day after day since early spring the men had put to sea in their sloops and motor-dories, trawling and hand-lining from twenty miles out in the Atlantic to four and a half fathoms off Dutch Edge. The result was the same. The fish were poor and few. Even at Bulkhead Rip, where the sixty-pounders played among the racing tides, there was scarcely a bite.

A fisherman lives on luck, so for a month there was no remark upon the suddenly changed condition. But after that, as the days passed and not a full dory raced up to Bill Boughton's fish stand, muttered whispers and old tales went up and down the island.

It was recalled that the fish left a certain Norwegian coast once for a period of fifty years, and that the whole occupation of the people of that coast was changed. Was that to be the fate of Grande Mignon? If so, what could they do? Extensive farming on the rocky island was impossible, and not one ship had ever been built there for the trade. Where would things end?

So it had gone until now, in the middle of August, the people of Freekirk Head, Seal Cove, and Great Harbor, the main villages along the front or Atlantic side of the island, were face to face with the question of actual life or death.

So far the season's catch was barely up to that of a good month in normal times; credit was low, and salting and drying were almost useless, for the people ate most of their own catch. Things were at a standstill.

And now the fire on top of all!

Captain Code Schofield thought of all these things as he ran along the King's Road toward the fire. Now he was almost upon it, and could see that the fish stand and wharf of the two wealthiest men in the village were burning furiously. The roar of the flames came to him.

A hundred yards back from the water stood Bill Boughton's general store, and next it, in a row, dwellings; typical white fishermen's cottages with green blinds and a flower-filled dory in the front yard.

The King's Road divided at Bill Boughton's store, the branch leading down to the wharfs, while the main road went on to Swallowtail Light. Schofield plunged down the branch into the full glare of the fire, where a crowd of men had already gathered.

As good luck would have it there was not a vessel tied up to the stand, the whole fleet being made fast to its moorings in the bay. Code's first duty when he started running had been to make sure that his *Laughing Lass* was riding safely at her anchorage.

The burning wharfs faced south. The brisk breeze was southeast and bore a promise of possible rain. The steamer *Grande Mignon*, after giving the first warning, had steamed away from her perilous dockage to a point half a mile nearer the entrance to the bay, and now lay there shrieking until the frowning cliffs and abrupt hills echoed with the hideous noise.

"How'd it happen?" asked Schofield of the first man he met.

"Dunno exactly. Cal'late some tanks in the oilroom caught first. Can't do much with them wharfs, I guess."

"Who's in charge of things here?"

"The squire."

Schofield hurried away in search of Squire Hardy, head man of the village, and local justice of the peace. He found him working like a Trojan, his white whiskers ruffled into a circle about his face.

"Lend us a hand here, Code," yelled the squire, who with three other men was attempting to get a great circular horse-trough under a huge pump with a handle long enough for three men to lay hold of. Schofield fell to with a will and helped move the trough into place. The squire set the three men to the task of filling it and then went to Code.

"Any chance to save those wharfs, d'ye think?"

"No, squire. Better leave them and the fish-houses and work on Boughton's store and the cottages. They're right in the path of the wind. It'll be tough on Nailor and Thomas to lose their stand and houses, but you know what will happen if the fire gets into the dwellings."

"I thought so all along—curse me if I didn't!" yelled the judge, and then, turning toward a crowd of men who were looking apprehensively here and there, he shouted:

"All hands with the buckets now, lively!"

Suddenly the basement doors of Boughton's store were thrown open and a huge, black-bearded man with a great voice appeared there.

"Buckets this way!" he bellowed, in a tone that rose clearly above the roar and crackle of the fire. As the men reached him he handed out the implements from great stacks at his feet—rubber buckets, wooden buckets, tin and iron buckets, new, old, rusty and galvanized. It was Pete Ellinwood, the fire marshal of the village and custodian of the apparatus.

Because in the hundred or more years of its existence there has never been water pressure in *Grande Mignon*, the fighting of a fire there with primitive means has become an exact and beautiful science.

A few bold spirits had disputed the wisdom of Squire Hardy's orders to let the wharf and fish-house burn, and had attempted to give them a dousing. In less than five minutes they had retreated, singed and hairless, due to a sudden explosion of a drum of oil.

"Play on Bill Boughton's store!" came the order.

Already an iron ladder reached to the eaves of the building. Two men galloped up its length, dragging behind them another ladder with a pair of huge hooks at the end.

Clinging like monkeys, they worked this up over their heads and up the shingles until the hooks caught squarely across the ridge-pole of the house. Then, on hands and feet, they trotted up this and sat astride the ridge-pole. One of these was Code Schofield.

Other men now swarmed up the ladders, until there was one on every rung from the ground to the top of the house.

Below, a line of men extended from the foot of the ladder to the great circular horse-trough. Another line extended from the opposite side of the store also to the horse-trough, where three men worked the great pump.

Back twenty yards, along the King's Road, a white-faced row of women and children stood, ready to rush home and move their furniture into the fields.

Code, looking down, made out his mother and returned her friendly wave. Their house was across the road not a hundred feet away.

With a muffled roar another drum on the pier exploded. A great wave of molten fire shot out in the breeze, and the shingles on Bill Boughton's store, parched with the drought of a month, burst into quick flame.

The squire ran back to the water-trough.

"Dip!" he yelled. Big Pete Ellinwood, with the piles of buckets beside him, seized one and twitched it full.

"Pass!" screamed the squire as it came up dripping. Ellinwood's great arm swung forward to meet the arm of the man a yard away. The bucket changed hands and went forward without losing a drop.

Up it went swiftly from one to another, to the eaves, to the two men at the top.

Now the fire sent branches out from the burning wharf along the low frames where some of the season's miserable catch was drying in the open air after salting. The fish curled and blackened in the fierce heat.

Only two men were not in the bucket brigade. They were Nailor and Thomas, who stood watching the destruction of their whole property. They knew the squire had done well in saving the village rather than their own buildings. It was the tacit understanding in Freekirk Head that a few should lose rather than the many.

Code Schofield, from his perch on the Boughton roof-tree, looked down again to where he had last seen his mother. Once more he distinguished the tall figure with its white face looking anxiously up at him, and he waved his hand reassuringly. Then his eye was caught by two other figures that lurked in the first shadows farther up the King's Road. A moment later he made sure of their identity.

They were Nellie Tanner and Nat Burns.

For years there had been a dislike between the Burnses and the Schofields. Old Jasper Schofield, Code's father, and Michael Burns had become enemies over the same girl a quarter of a century before, and the breach had never been healed. Old Captain Jasper had won, but he had never forgotten, and Michael had never forgiven.

Quite unconsciously the feud had been passed on to the children of both (for Michael had married within a few years), and from school-days Code and Nat had been the leaders of rival gangs.

When they became young men they matched their season's catches and raced their father's schooners. They were the two natural leaders of the Freekirk Head young bloods, but they were never on the same side of an argument.

Schofield wondered why Nat Burns was not at the fire, as usual attempting to make himself leader of the battle without doing much of the work, and now the reason was apparent. He preferred to pursue his courting under the eyes of the village rather than to obey the unwritten law of service. And he was with Nellie Tanner!

Unlike most youths, there had never been a time in Code's life when he had passed the favor of his affections around. Since the time they were both five Nellie Tanner had supplied in full all the feminine requirements he had ever desired. And she did at this moment. But Nat Burns had seen a great deal of her in the last three months, he remembered, taking advantage of Code's desperate search for fish.

Once in this train his thoughts bore him on and on. Memories, speculations, and desires crowded his mind, and he forgot that beneath him the roof of Boughton's store was burning more and more briskly.

Suddenly the man beside him on the ridge-pole shook his arm.

"Say, Code!" he cried. "What's that burnin' over there? I didn't know the fire had gone across the street."

Schofield looked up quickly and followed the direction of the other's arm that pointed through the trees to the opposite side of King's Road and a little to westward.

"Good Lord!" he cried excitedly; "it's my own place, and my mother is all alone down there. Quick! Send somebody up here! I'm going!"

CHAPTER III

THE TEST

The man behind him climbed to the ridge-pole and Code began the descent, necessarily slow and careful because the ladders were loaded with men passing buckets. When he reached the ground he started for home on the run.

Opposite Boughton's general store was another shop that made a specialty of fishermen's "oilers," boots, and overalls. Two houses to the westward of that was the old Schofield place, a low, white house surrounded by a rickety fence and covered with ivy.

Once he reached the middle of the road Code saw that he had been mistaken in the location of the fire, for his mother's place was intact. The flame was coming, however, from the house next but one—Bijonah Tanner's place.

A crowd was gathering in the yard that was overgrown with dusty wire-grass, and the squire was pushing his way through to take charge. Code knew that only two days before Captain Bijonah and his wife had sailed in the *Rosan* to St. John's for lumber, leaving Nellie alone in charge of the three small Tanners. He wondered where they all were now.

He found his mother on the edge of the crowd that was helping to save the furniture, and learned that Nellie and young Burns had already arrived and were doing what they could.

From the first it was apparent that the place was doomed, for although there were plenty of men eager to form a bucket brigade, the supply of water was limited, and most of the buckets were at the larger fire.

But the squire was working wonders, and enlisted Code to help him.

In fifteen minutes the whole roof and attic were ablaze, and the men turned their attention to wetting down the near walls of the houses on each side. All the valuables and most of the simple furniture had been saved.

At the earliest moment Schofield escaped from the squire and sought out Nellie. He found her, hysterical, surrounded by a group of women, and hovered over by Nat Burns. With each hand she held a child close to her.

"Bige! Where is little Bige?" she was crying as Code came up. "Tom and Mary are here, but I've lost Bige. Oh, Nat! Where is Bige?"

"Bless me if I know," stammered Burns weakly. "Last I saw of him he was under that cherry-tree where you told him to stay until you got the others. It wa'n't more'n five minutes ago I seen him there. He must be around somewheres. I'll look."

Without another word he hurried off in a frantic search, looking to left and right, behind every bush, and among the crowd, bellowing the boy's name at the top of his voice.

Code walked up to the frantic girl and went straight to the point.

"Hello, Nellie!" he said. "Where do you cal'late little Bige might be? I hear you've lost him."

"Yes, I have, Code. I stood him under that cherry-tree and told him not to move. When I got back he was gone. He was seven, and just old enough to run around by himself and investigate things. Oh, I'm so afraid he's gone—"

"Listen!" Code's sharp, masterful tone put a sudden end to her sobbing. "Was there anything in the house he valued much?" Suddenly she drew in her breath sharply.

"Yes, yes," she cried, "his mechanical train. He asked me if I had got it and I said I had. He must have gone over to the furniture and found it hadn't been brought down. Oh, Code, Code—"

"What's the matter, Nellie?"

It was Nat Burns's hard voice as he elbowed roughly past Code and bent solicitously over the girl. He had heard her last words and the pleading in them, and his brow was dark with question and anger.

"Did you find him, Nat?" queried Nellie in an agony of suspense.

"No, I don't know where the little beggar can be," he replied; "I've—" The girl screamed and fainted.

"What's the matter here?" shouted Burns. "What's the matter with her?"

"The boy went back into the house for his toy engine and hasn't come out again," said Code, facing the other and regarding him with a level eye.

There was a dramatic pause. After Nat's proprietary interest in Nellie and her affairs it was distinctly his place to make the next move. Everybody felt it, and Code, subconsciously realizing this, said nothing.

It required another moment for the situation to become clear to Burns. Then, when he realized what alternatives he faced, he gradually grew pale beneath his deep tan and looked defiantly from one to another of the group about him.

"Rot!" he cried suddenly. "The boy can't have gone back. It wasn't five minutes ago I saw him under the cherry-tree. I haven't looked in this direction. Wait! I'll be back in a minute!" And again he was off in his frantic search, his voice rising above the roar of the fire.

Code waited no longer.

Snatching up a blanket from the ground, he raced toward the burning house.

The lower floor was still almost intact, but the upper floor and the roof were practically consumed. The danger lay not in entering the house, but in remaining in it, for although the roof had fallen in, yet the second floor had not burned through and was in momentary danger of collapse.

The spectators did not know what was in Code Schofield's mind until he had burst into the danger zone. Then, with the blanket wound about his arm and shielding his face he plunged toward the open doorway. It was as though he stood suddenly before the open door of a vast furnace.

The blast of heat seemed an impenetrable force, and he struggled against it with all his strength.

One more look, a mighty effort, and he was in the temporary shelter of the doorway. He drew a long breath and plunged forward.

He knew the plan of the Tanner house as he knew his own, and he remembered that in the rear was a room where the children played. The hall ran straight back to the door of this room; but there was no egress from the rear except through the kitchen, which adjoined the play-room.

The heat that beat down upon his head made him dizzy, and he could not see for the smoke that filled the hall. Instinctively he went down on his hands and knees, discarding the blanket, and crawled toward the rear.

He had scarcely reached the closed door of the play-room when, with a thunderous roar, the ceilings at the front of the house fell in, cutting off any escape in that quarter. He knew that at any moment the rest of the ceilings would collapse.

Half-strangled with the increasing smoke, he staggered to his feet and lunged against the door, forcing it open. The dim light from the one square-paned window showed a small form huddled on the floor, the mouth open, and a tiny locomotive gripped in one hand.

A rush of smoke and flame followed the violent opening of the door, and Code felt himself growing giddy. A swift glance behind showed a wall of fire where the hall had once been, and for the first time he realized the seriousness of the task he had taken upon himself. But there was no fear. Rather there came a sense of gladness that a fighter feels when the battle has at last come to close grips.

He swept the small form of Bige up into his arms and leaped to the window that was built low in the wall and without weights. To raise it and manipulate the catch was out of the question. With

all his strength he swung his foot against the pane squarely in the middle. Panes and frame splintered outward, leaving the casement intact except for a few jagged edges of glass.

Then, suddenly, as he dropped the boy to the ground outside, there came a blast of fire on the back draft created by the opening. Singed and strangling, with a last desperate effort he threw himself outward and fell on his shoulders beside little Bige.

Men who had heard the crash of glass when the window went out rushed forward and dragged man and boy to safety.

A quarter of an hour later, his head and neck bandaged with sweet-oil, Code made his way weakly to where Nellie sat among her belongings cradling in her arms the boy whom the doctor had just brought back to consciousness.

“He’s all right, is he?” asked Schofield.

She smiled up at him through her tears.

“Yes, the doctor says it was just too much smoke. Oh, Code, how can I thank you for this? And you are hurt! Is it bad? Can’t I do anything?”

She struggled to her feet, solicitude written on her face, for the moment even forgetting little Bige, who had begun to howl.

“No,” said Schofield, “you can’t do anything. It isn’t much. I’m only glad I succeeded. Don’t think anything about it.”

“Father and mother will never forget this, and I’m sure will do what they can to make it right with you.”

He looked at her as though she had struck him. Never in his life had she used that tone. Before the mute query of his eyes she turned her head away.

“What do you mean—by that?” he faltered, hardly knowing what he said.

“Nothing, Code, only—only—” She could not finish.

“What has happened, Nellie?” he began, and then halted, his gaze riveted upon her hand. A single diamond glittered from the dirt and grime that soiled her finger.

“That?” he gasped, stunned by a feeling of misery and helplessness.

“Nat and I are engaged,” she said in a low voice without answering his question. “Just since last night.”

There was nothing more to be said. The banal wishes for happiness would not rise to his lips. He looked at her intently for a moment, saw her eyes again drop, and walked away. He was suddenly tired and wanted to go home and rest. The reaction of his nervous and physical strain had set in.

The hundred yards to his own gateway was a triumphal procession, but he scarcely realized it. Somehow he answered the acclamations that were heaped upon him. He smiled, but he did not know how.

At the gate some one was waiting for him. At first he thought it was his mother, but he suddenly saw that it was Elsa Mallaby. He told himself that she must have come down to the village to watch the fire, and wondered why she was in that particular place.

“Code,” she cried, her face flushed with glad pride, “you were splendid! That was the bravest thing I ever heard of in my life. I knew you would do it!”

He smiled mechanically, thanked her, and passed on while she gazed after him, hurt and struck silent by the cold misery in his face.

“I wonder,” she said to herself slowly, “whether something besides what I told him has happened to him to-night?”

CHAPTER IV

REFUGEES

It was almost one o'clock in the morning when Code went into the parlor of his mother's cottage and sank down upon the ancient plush sofa. His eyes ached, and the back of his head and neck, where the fire had singed him, were throbbing painfully.

There was apparently no one at home.

Even little Josie, the orphan that helped his mother, seemed to have been drawn out into the road by the excitement of the night, and the house, except for a single lamp burning on the table, was in darkness.

He thought of going up-stairs to bed, but remembered that his mother was not in, and decided he would rest a little while and then go out and find her. Suddenly it seemed very luxurious and grateful to be able to stretch at full length after so much labor, and within a few minutes this sense of luxury had become a pleasant oblivion.

Voices and a bright light woke him up. Dazed and alarmed, he struggled to a sitting posture, but a gently firm hand pushed him down again and he heard his mother's voice.

"Lay down again, Code," she said. "You must be pretty well beat out with all you've done to-night. We've just got some friends for the night. Poor boy, let me see your burns!"

Schofield, who had guided schooners for years through the gales and shoals of the Bay of Fundy without a qualm, became red and ashamed at his mother's babying. Rubbing his sleepy eyes, he sat up again determinedly and made an effort to greet the company who, he knew, had come into the room with his mother.

Across the room, near the old melodeon, sat Nellie Tanner, holding little Bige and smiling wanly at him. The other two children leaned against her, asleep on either side.

"Don't get up, Code," she said. "You've earned your rest more than any man in Freekirk Head to-night. I'm afraid, though, we're going to make more trouble for you. Ma Schofield wouldn't let me go anywhere else but here till the *Rosan* gets back from St. John's.

"Oh, I hate to think of their coming! They'll sail around Flag Point and look for the kiddies waving in front of the house. And they won't even see any house; but, thanks to you, Code, they'll see the kiddies."

He knew by the tense, strained tone of her voice that she was very near the breaking-point, and his whole being yearned to comfort her and try to make her happy.

Cursing himself for a lazy dolt, he sprang up and walked over toward her.

"Now, you just let me handle this, Nellie," he said, "and we'll soon have Tommie and Mary and Bige all curled up on that sofa like three kittens."

With a sigh of ineffable relief she resigned the dead weight in her weary arms to him, and he, stepping softly, and holding him gently as a woman, soon had the boy more comfortable than he had been for hours. Mary and Tommie followed, and then Nellie, free of her responsibility at last, bent forward, put her elbows on her knees, and wept.

Code, racked and embarrassed, looked around for his mother, but that mainstay was nowhere in sight. He thought of whistling, so as to appear unconscious of her tears, but concluded that would be merely rude. To take up a paper or book and read it in the face of a woman's weeping appeared hideous, although for the first time in many months, he felt irresistibly drawn to the ancient and dusty volumes in the glass-doored bookcase.

He compromised by turning his back on the affecting sight, thrusting his hands in his pockets, and studying the remarkably straight line formed by the abrupt junction of the wall and the ceiling.

“Do you mind if I cry, C-Code?” sobbed the girl, apparently realizing their position for the first time.

“No! Go right ahead!” he cried as heartily as though some one had asked for a match. He was intensely happy that the matter was settled between them. Now the harder she cried the more he liked it, for they understood one another. So she cried and he walked softly about, his hands in his pockets and his lips puckered for the whistle that he did not dare permit himself.

Ma Schofield interrupted this near-domestic scene by her arrival, carrying a tray, on which were several glasses covered with a film of frost and out of which appeared little green forests. Code ceased to think about whistling.

“Oh, Ma Schofield, what have you done?” cried Nellie, her tears for the moment forgetting to flow as her widening eyes took in the delights of the frosted glasses and piles of cake behind them.

“Done?” queried ma. “I haven’t done anything but what my conscience tells me ought to be done. If yours cal’lates to disturb you some you can go right on up to your room, lamb, for you must be dead with lugging them children around.”

Nellie’s tears disappeared not to return. She shook her head.

“No, ma,” she said; “my conscience is just like them children—sleeping so hard it would take Gabriel’s trumpet to wake ’em up. It’s more tired than I am.”

“All right,” said ma, with finality; “we will now proceed to refresh ourselves.”

It was two o’clock before they separated for the remainder of the night.

Code’s room, with its big mahogany double bed, was given over to Nellie and the children while he gladly resigned himself to the humpy plush sofa.

By this time they had received news from half a dozen neighbors that Bill Boughton’s general store had been only half destroyed and that the contents had all been saved. The wharfs and fish-houses were at last burning and property on the leeward side of the flames was declared to be safe.

A general exodus began along the King’s Road.

Men who had galloped up from Great Harbor, with an ax in one hand and a bucket in the other, mounted their horses and rode away. Others from Hayward’s Cove and Castalia, who had driven in buggies and buckboards, collected their families and departed. The King’s Road was the scene of a long procession, as though the people of Freekirk Head were evacuating the town.

A detachment of men under Squire Hardy’s orders remained about the danger zone ready to check any further advance of the flames or to rouse the town to further resistance should this become necessary. But for the most part the people of the village returned to their homes.

Wide-awake and nervous, Schofield lay open-eyed upon the couch while unbidden thoughts raced through his brain.

The very fact of his sleeping on the plush couch was enough to bring to his mind the memory of one whom he had irretrievably lost on this memorable night. Was she not at this moment under his own roof, miserable and nearly destitute? He knew that, as long as he might live, his humble room up-stairs would never be the same again.

It had been made a place sweet and full of wonder by the very fact that she was in it. Never again, he knew, could he enter it without its being faintly fragrant of her who, all his life, he had considered the divinest created thing on earth. By her presence she had sanctified it and made of it a shrine for his meditative and wakeful hours.

Ever since they had gone to school together, hand in hand, the names of Nellie Tanner and Code Schofield had been linked in the mouths of Grande Mignon busybodies. Living all their lives two doors away, they had grown up in that careless intimacy of constant association that is unconscious of its own power until such intimacy is removed.

To-night the shock had come.

It was not that Code had taken for granted that Nellie would marry him. Never in his life had he told her that he loved her. It is not the habit of men who rove the seas to keep those they love constantly supplied with literature or confectionery, or to waste too many words in the language of devotion.

He admitted frankly to himself that he had always hoped to marry her when he had acquired the quarter interest in Bill Boughton's fishstand that had been promised him, but he had not told her so, nor did he know that she would accept him. The idea had been one to be thought of only at times of quietness and confidence in his future such as come to every man.

But he had not reckoned on Nat Burns. He had not realized quite to what an extent Burns had made progress. He recalled, now that it was brought forcibly home to him, that Nat had been constantly at the Tanners' for the last four or five months. But Code had thought nothing of this, for Nat had paid similar court at times to others of the girls of Freekirk Head. He was, in fact, considered the village beau.

And Nellie herself had told him nothing. There had been a modest shyness about her in their relations that had kept him at an exasperating and piquant distance.

Well, everything was over now, he told himself. He could take his defeat since Nellie did not care for him.

Then he suddenly recalled Burns's actions and manner of speaking during the harrowing moments of the fire.

"I wonder if Nat really loves her?" he asked himself. "And if not, why did he become engaged?"

CHAPTER V

STARTLING NEWS

The home-coming of Captain Bijonah Tanner and his wife did not provide the thrill looked for by the more morbid inhabitants of Freekirk Head. In the excitement of the fire all hands had forgotten that cable communication between Mignon and the mainland was unbroken.

The operator, in the pursuance of his duty, had sent word of the fire to Eastport, and then concocted some cable despatches for Boston and Portland papers that left nothing to be desired from the viewpoint of sensationalism. In his zeal for filling space and eking out his slender income, the operator left nothing standing on Grande Mignon except the eternal rocks and the lighthouse.

It was such an account that Bijonah Tanner fed upon that morning in the tiny cabin of the *Rosan*, and half an hour after he had read it he was under way. Special mention had been made of Code Schofield's rescue of little Bige, with a sentence added that the Tanner place had been wiped out.

With their minds filled with desperate scenes of cataclysm and ruin, the Tanners raced the complaining *Rosan* around Flag Point six hours later, only to fall upon one another and dance for joy at the sight of the village nestling as of yore against the green mountains and gleaming white in the descending sun.

An acrid smell and a smudge of smoke told of what had really been, and a black heap of ruins where the familiar house had stood for so long confirmed their fears for their own property; but to see the village content and smiling, except for a poor building or two, was joy enough to overbalance the personal loss.

So those who expected a tearful and emotional home-coming were disappointed.

Code met the dory that rowed ashore after Bijonah had made fast to his mooring in the little cove that was the roadstead for the fishing fleet. He had half expected to share the duty with Nat Burns since the recent change in his relations to the Tanners, but Burns did not put in an appearance, although it was three o'clock in the afternoon.

Bijonah shook hands with him, and Ma Tanner kissed him, the latter ceremony being a baptism of happy tears that all were safe and alive. Bijonah cleared his voice and pulled hard at his beard.

"Understand you're quite a hero, Code," he ventured bluffly, careful to conceal any emotion, but resolved to give the occasion its due.

"Oh, rot, captain!" said Code equally bluffly, and the ceremony was over.

But not so with Ma Tanner. She wept and laughed over the preserver of her offspring, and called him so many exalting names that he was glad to turn her over to Nellie and his mother at the Schofield gate.

Hot and flushed with the notoriety she had given him along the main road, he retired to the corner shop and drank wonderful cold ginger-beer out of a white stone jug until his temperature had returned to normal.

But later he returned to the house, and found the Tanners about to depart. The widow Sprague, near the Odd Fellows' Hall, who lived, as she expressed it, "all deserted and alone," had agreed to take the family into her rambling cottage. Luke Fraser had brought his truck-cart up alongside the rescued Tanner belongings, and they were already half loaded.

"Can you come down to the widdy's to-night, Code?" asked Bijonah. "I've got somethin' to tell ye that ought to int'rest ye consid'able."

"Yes, I'll be there about eight," was the reply as Schofield joined in loading the truck.

He found the captain that night smoking a pipe on the low front porch of the Widow Sprague's cottage, evidently very much at home. Bijonah motioned him to a chair and proffered a cigar with a slightly self-conscious air. Inside the house, Code could hear the sound of people moving about and

the voice of a woman singing low, as though to a child. He told himself without question that this was Nellie getting the kiddies to sleep.

“A feller hears queer things over in St. John’s sometimes,” announced Bijonah suddenly, sucking at his pipe.

“Yes.”

“An’ this time I heard somethin’ about you.”

“Me? I don’t know three people in St. John’s.”

“Guess I met one of the three, then.”

“Where? How? Who was it?”

Bijonah Tanner coughed and shifted uneasily in his chair.

“Wal,” he said, “I was takin’ a little turn along the water-front, just a *leetle* turn, as the wife will tell you, when I dropped into a—er—that is—a rum-shop and heard three men at the table next to mine talking about you.”

Schofield smiled broadly in the darkness. Bijonah’s little turns along the water-front of St. John’s or any other port had been the subject for much prayer and supplication in the hearts of many devout persons thoroughly interested in their neighbor’s welfare. And of late years Ma Tanner had been making trips with him to supply stimulus to his conscience.

“What were they talking about?” So far from being suspicious, Code was merely idly curious of the gossip about him.

“My boy,” said Tanner, suddenly grave, “I was the best friend your father had for forty years, and I’m goin’ to try and be as good a friend to his son. But you mustn’t mind what I tell ye.”

“I won’t, captain. Go ahead,” said Code, his interest awakening.

“Wal, them men was talkin’ about the loss of the old *May Schofield*, and one of ’em in particular allowed as how he didn’t think it should have foundered when it did. What d’ye think of that?”

Schofield had stiffened in his chair as though undergoing a spasm of pain. The sentences smote him between the eyes of his sensibilities. Had it come to this, that his name was being bandied dishonorably about the barrooms of St. John’s? If so, how and why?

“Then I suppose you’ve heard the talk in Grande Mignon before this?”

“Yes, Code, I have; and I’ve called every man a liar that said anything definite against you. I’m gettin’ old, but there ain’t very many men here able enough to shove that name back down my throat, an’ I notice none of ’em tried. It’s all idle talk, that’s all; an’ there ain’t a soul that can prove a single thing against you, even cowardice. An’ that’s more’n can be said o’ some men in this village.”

Code was grateful, and he said so. It was something to find a friend so stanch and loyal that suspicion had never even found soil in his mind where it might take root. Two such he had now: Elsa Mallaby and Bijonah Tanner.

“What else did those men say?” he asked in conclusion.

“If I remember right, an’ I was perfectly clear at the time, this is what one said: ‘Fellers,’ sez ’e to the other two, ’e sez—‘fellers, that young Captain Schofield in Freekirk Head is goin’ on the rocks, or I don’t hear what’s goin’ on in my office.’”

“Then they’re goin’ to sue him to recover part of his insurance on the old schooner *May Schofield*?” asks the second.

“If I didn’t hear the chief say that this mornin’ you can shoot me on sight!’ the first answers. An’ then for a while I couldn’t hear any more, an’ you can bet I was watchin’ the door somethin’ awful for fear ma would come in an’ spoil it all by draggin’ me off.”

“But who were these men?” asked Code. “Whom did they mean by the chief?”

“I was just gettin’ to that. After a while, from a little bit here an’ a little there, I made out that the first young feller was private secretary to the president of the Marine Insurance Company. That’s the firm that carried the old *May*, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

"I thought so. They've got my *Rosan*, too, though I wish mightily now that they hadn't. This feller is the private secretary to the president, an' the other two are clerks or something in the office. They may have been up to something crooked, and then again they may have just been talkin' things over as young fellers often do when they're interested in their work. Anyway, there's enough in what they said to set you thinkin', I cal'late."

"Yes," said Code slowly and grimly, "it is. I've only known that the island was talking since last night, and now I find St. John's is, too. It's spreading pretty fast, it seems; and I wonder where it will end?" He pondered silently for a while.

"If they sue to recover, what'll you do?" ventured Tanner hesitatingly.

"God knows!" answered Schofield and laughed bitterly. "I haven't got a thing on earth but the *Charming Lass*, an' this year I haven't caught enough fish to pay for my new mains'l. My credit is still good at Bill Boughton's, but that's all."

"But the cottage—"

"That is my mother's, and they could never get that. If they sue and I lose they must take the *Lass*, and after they've subtracted the judgment from the sale price I suppose I'll get the rest—maybe enough to buy a second-hand sloop."

"Yes, but that isn't the worst part of it, Code. As soon as they bring suit they will attach the schooner, so that even if the trial doesn't come up for weeks you still can't use her, and will have to sit around idle or go hand-lining in your dory. And you know what that means with winter comin' on."

"I know." He had seen hard winters that had tried the resources of the village to the utmost, but he had never faced one that promised to be like the next.

"Well, what would you advise me to do, captain?"

"Get out!" snapped Tanner. "Get a crew and take the *Lass* to sea. There's one thing sure, a lawyer can't serve you with a summons or anything else if he has to look for you on the Atlantic Ocean."

Schofield smiled. The remedy called for was heroic, truly; but was it honorable?

"I wonder if they can do that, anyway?" he asked. "After the *May* was lost the insurance people settled without a complaint. Can they rake up that matter again now?"

"By Jove! That reminds me. Them fellers discussed that very thing; an' the secretary said that if the law had been broke at the time of the sinkin'—I mean, if the schooner wasn't fit or had been tampered with—that it was within the law. But, o' course, somebody's got to make the complaint."

"That's just it," cried Code, springing up and throwing away the stump of his cigar; "somebody has got to make the complaint! Well, now, from what I can see, somebody's made it. All this talk could not have gone on in the island unless it started from somewhere. And the question is, where?"

They were interrupted by the sound of footsteps. In the darkness the figure of a man appeared approaching the house. A moment later the newcomer stepped on the low veranda, and both men recognized him.

It was Nat Burns.

"Is Nellie here?" he asked without the formality of the usual greetings.

"I cal'late she is, Nat," replied Tanner, rising to his feet. "Wait a minute an' I'll call her."

But he had not reached the door before the girl herself stepped out on the porch. She ran out eagerly, but stopped short when she saw Code in the darkness. Their meeting was obviously reserved.

In the interim Tanner walked to where Schofield stood, silent.

"I cal'late I can give you a pretty good idea where all this trouble started from," he growled in a low tone; but before he could go on Nellie interrupted him.

"Father," she said, coming forward with Nat, "I want to tell you something that we've all been too busy to discuss before this. Nat and I are engaged. He gave me the ring night before last when you were in St. John's. I hope you are pleased, father."

Bijonah Tanner remained silent for a moment, plainly embarrassed by the duty before him. Between most men who follow the sea and their daughters there is much less intimacy than with those who are in other walks of life. Long absences and the feeling that a mother is responsible for her girls are reasons for this; while in the case of boys, who begin to putter round the parental schooner from their earliest youth, a much closer feeling exists. Tanner could not bridge the chasm between himself and his daughter.

“Did you tell your mother?” he asked finally.

“Yes.”

“And was she satisfied?”

“Yes, indeed; she was very happy about it, and told me to come right down and tell you.”

“Wal, if it suits her it suits me,” was the dry conclusion. “I hope you’ll be happy. You’ve got a fine gal there, Nat.”

“I know I have, captain,” said Burns warmly; “and I’ll try to make her happy.”

“All right,” grunted Bijonah, and sank back into his chair. Between praising one man who saved his youngest boy, and congratulating another who was to marry his eldest girl, Captain Tanner’s day had been over full of ceremonial.

Face to face with the inevitable, Code Schofield offered sincere but embarrassed congratulations; and he was secretly glad that, when opportunity offered for him to shake Nat Burns’s hand, that young gentleman was busy lighting a cigarette.

The lovers went inside, and Code stood dejectedly, leaning against the railing. Tanner removed his pipe and spat over the railing.

“It’s too blamed bad!” he muttered.

“What?” asked Code, almost unconsciously.

“It’s too bad, I say. I used to think that mebbe Nellie would like you, Code. I’ve counted on it consid’able all my life. But it’s too late now. Young Burns’ll have to be one of the family from now on.”

“Thanks, captain,” said Schofield with forced cheerfulness. “I had hoped so, too. But that’s all past now. By the way, who was it you thought started all this trouble? I’d like to know that.”

“One of the family,” muttered Tanner, his thoughts still busy. Then, recollecting Schofield’s question, he appeared about to speak, hesitated, and at last said:

“Bless my soul and body if I know! No, I wouldn’t want to say what I thought, Code. I never was one to run down any man behind his back!”

Code looked in amazement at the old man, but not for long. A moment’s thought concerning Tanner’s recently acquired relation made his suspicion doubly sure that Nat Burns’s name had been on Bijonah’s tongue.

He immediately dropped the subject and after a little while took his departure.

CHAPTER VI

THE ISLAND DECIDES

In Freekirk Head, next morning, painted signs nailed to telegraph-poles at intervals along the King's Road as far as Castalia read:

MASS-MEETING TO-NIGHT

ODD FELLOWS HALL

8 O'CLOCK ALL COME

Who had issued this pronouncement, what it signified, and what was the reason for a town meeting nobody knew; and as the men trudged down to their dories drawn up on the stony beach near the burned wharfs, discussion was intense.

Finally the fact became known that a half-dozen of the wealthiest and best-educated men in the village, including Squire Hardy and the Rev. Adelbert Bysshe, rector of the Church of England chapel, had held a secret conclave the night before at the squire's house.

It was believed that the signs were the result, and intimated in certain obscure quarters that Pete Ellinwood, who had always claimed literary aspirations, had printed them.

Odd Fellows' Hall was the biggest and most pretentious building in Freekirk Head. It was of two stories height, and on its gray-painted front bore the three great gilt links of the society. To one side of it stood a wreck of a former factory, and behind it was the tiny village "lockup."

It marked the spot where the highway turned south at right angles on its wild journey southwest, a journey that ended in a leap into space from the three hundred foot cliffs of gull-haunted, perpendicular Southern Head.

The interior of the hall was in its gala attire. Two rows of huge oil-lamps extended down the middle from back to front; others were in brackets down the side walls, and three more above the low rostrum at the far end. The chairs were in place, the windows open, and the two young fishermen who acted as janitors of the hall stood at the rear, greeting those that arrived with familiar jocularly.

Into the hall, meant to accommodate two hundred, three hundred people were packed. The men in their rusty black, the women in their simple white or flowered dresses, the children brushed and pig-tailed, had all brought their Sunday manners and serious, attentive faces.

On the low platform presently appeared the Rev. Adelbert Bysshe and Squire Hardy. The rector was a young man with a thin, ascetic face. His mouth was pursed into a small line, and he wore large, round spectacles to aid his faded blue eyes. His clerical garb could not conceal the hesitating awkwardness of his manner, and the embarrassment his hands and feet caused him seemed to be his special cross in life.

When the audience had become quiet he rose and took his stand before them, lowering his head and peering over his glasses.

"Friends," he said, "we have gathered here to-night to discuss the welfare of Grande Mignon Island and the village of Freekirk Head."

A look of startled uncertainty swept over the simple, weather-beaten faces in front of him.

“You know that I am not exaggerating,” he continued, “when I say that we are face to face with the gravest problem that has ever confronted us. It has pleased God in His infinite Providence so to direct the finny tribes that the denizens of the deep have altered the location of their usual fishing-grounds.

“Day after day you men have gone forth with nets and lines like the fishers of old; day after day, also like some of the fishers of old, you have returned empty-handed. The salting-bins are not filled, the drying-frames are bare, the shipments to St. John’s have practically ceased.

“I do not need to tell you that this spells destitution. This island depends on its fish, and, since cod and hake and pollock have left us, we must cast about for other means of support.

“This meeting, then, after due deliberation last night and earnest supplication of the Almighty for guidance, has been called to determine what course we shall pursue.”

Mr. Bysshe, warm now and perspiring freely, retired to his seat and mopped his face. Across the audience, which had listened intently, there swept a murmur of low speech.

It is not given to most fisherfolk to know any more than the bare comforts of life. Theirs is an existence of ceaseless toiling, ceaseless danger, and very poor reward. Hardship is their daily lot, and it requires a great incentive to bring them to a full stop in consideration of their future.

Here, then, in Freekirk Head were three hundred fishermen with their backs against the wall—mutely brave because it is bred in the bone—quietly preparing for a final stand against their hereditary enemies, hunger and poverty.

The low murmur of awestruck conversation suddenly stopped, for Squire Hardy, with his fringe of white whiskers violently mussed, had risen to speak.

“Mr. Bysshe has just about got the lobster in the pot,” he declared, “but I want to say one thing more. Things were bad enough up to a week ago, but since the fire they have been a great deal worse. Mr. Nailor and Mr. Thomas, who owned the fish stand that burned, have been cleaned out. They gave employment to about twenty of you men.

“Those men are now without any work at all because the owners of the other fish stands have all the trawlers and dorymen they need. Even if they didn’t have, there are hardly enough fish to feed all hands on the island.

“More than that—and now I hope you won’t mind what I am going to say, for we’ve all been in the same boat one time or another—Mr. Boughton can’t be our last hope much longer. You and I and all of us have got long-standing credit at his store for supplies we paid for later from our fishing. The fire of the other night cost Mr. Boughton a lot, and, as most of his money is represented in outstanding credit, he cannot advance any more goods.

“Mr. Boughton is not here himself, for he told me he would never say that word to people he has always trusted and lived with all his life. But I am saying it for him because I think I ought to, and you can see for yourselves how fair it is.

“Now, that’s about all I’ve got to add to what Mr. Bysshe has said to you. Yes, there’s one thing more. Great Harbor and Seal Cove below us here are as bad if not worse off than we are. We cannot look for help in that direction, and I will be a lot thinner man than I am now before I ever appeal to the government.

“We’re not paupers, and we don’t want city newspapers starting subscription-lists for us. So, as Mr. Bysshe has said, the only thing for us to do is to get our eyes out of the heavens and see what we can do for ourselves.”

The squire sat down, pulling at his whiskers and looking apprehensively at the rector, of whose polished periods he stood in some awe.

The audience was silent now. The squire had brought home to these men and women some bald, hard facts that they had scarcely as yet admitted even to themselves. There was scarcely one among them whose account with Bill Boughton was fully satisfied, and now that this mainstay was gone the situation took on an entirely different aspect.

For some minutes no one spoke. Then an old man, bearded to the waist, got upon his feet.

"I've seen some pretty hard times on this island," he said, "but none like this here. I've thought it over some, and I'd like to make a suggestion. My son Will is over on the back of the island pickin' dulce. The market fer that is good—he's even got ten cents a pound this summer. This is the month of August and winter is consid'able ways off. How about all hands turnin' to an' pickin' dulce?"

This idea was received in courteous silence. There were men there who had spent their summers reaping the harvest of salty, brown kelp from the rocks at low tide, and they knew how impractical the scheme was. Although the island exported yearly fifteen thousand dollars' worth of the strange stuff, it was plain that should all the men devote themselves to it the return would by no means measure up to the labor.

One after another, then, the fishermen got to their feet and discussed this project. In this cause of common existence embarrassment was forgotten and tongues were loosed that had never before addressed a public gathering.

A proposition was put forward that the islanders should dispute the porpoise-spearing monopoly of the Quoddy Indians that were already sailing across the channel for their annual summer's sport, but this likewise met with defeat.

A general exodus of men to the sardine canning-factories in Lubec and Eastport was suggested, and met with some favor until it was pointed out that the small sardine herring had fallen off vastly in numbers, and that the factories were hard put to it to find enough work for their regular employees.

Self-consciousness and restraint were forgotten in this struggle for the common preservation, and above the buzz of general intense discussion there rose always the voice of some speaker with an idea or suggestion.

Code Schofield had come to the meeting with Pete Ellinwood and Jimmie Thomas, both dory mates at different times. They sat fairly well forward, and Code, glancing around during the proceedings, had caught a friendly greeting from Elsa Mallaby, who, with some of her old girlhood friends, sat farther back.

The solemn occasion for and spirit of the meeting had made a deep impression on him; but, as the time passed and those supposedly older and wiser delivered themselves merely of useless schemes, a plan that had come into his mind early in the evening began to take definite shape. As he sat there he pondered the matter over until it seemed to him the only really feasible idea.

Finally, after almost two hours of discussion with no conclusion reached, a pause occurred, and Code, to the amazement of his companions, got upon his feet. As he did so he flushed, for he wondered how many of those eyes suddenly fixed upon him were eyes of hostility or doubt. The thought stung him to a greater determination.

"I don't want to be considered bold after so many older men have spoken," he said, looking at the squire, "but I have a suggestion to make."

"Go ahead, make it," bellowed the squire cordially. "I wish more young men would give us their ideas."

"Thinking it over, I have come to this conclusion," proceeded Schofield. "There is only one thing the men on this island do perfectly, and that is fish. Therefore, it seems only common sense to me that they ought to go on fishing."

A ripple of laughter ran around the room that was now hot and stuffy from the glare and smell of the great oil-lamps. Code heard the laugh, and his brows drew down into a scowl.

"Of course, they cannot go on fishing here. But there are any number of places north and east of us where they can go on. I mean the Grand Banks and the Cape Shore in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. We have schooners and sloops, we have dories, and men, and can get provisions on credit, I should think, for such a cruise.

"That, then, is my idea—that the captains of Grande Mignon fit out their vessels, hire their crews on shares, and go out on the Banks for fish like the Gloucester men and Frenchmen. If we do it we're

going against the best in the world, but I don't believe there is a fisherman here who doesn't believe we can hold our own."

Suddenly far back in the room a woman arose.

She was young, and her face showed that once it might have been beautiful. Her frame was large and angular, and her rusty black clothes sat awkwardly upon it. But youth and beauty and girlish charm had gone from her long since, as it does with those whose men battle with the sea. She was a widow, and a little girl clung sleepily to her dress.

"Code Schofield," she cried, "what about the women? Ye ain't goin' off to leave us fight the winter all alone, are ye? Ye ain't goin' to sail them winter gales on the shoals, are ye? How many of ye do you s'pose will come back?" She shook off those near her who tried to pull her down into her seat.

"Last year they lost a hundred an' five out o' Gloucester, an' every year they make widders by the dozen. If it was set in India's coral strand ye'd know it was a fishin' town by its widders; an' Freekirk Head'll be just like it. I lost my man in a gale—" Her voice broke and she paused. "D'ye want us all to be widders?"

"How can ye go an' leave us? It's the women the sea kills with misery, not the men. What can we do when you're gone? There ain't any money nor much food. If there come a fire we'd all be cleaned out, for what could we do? If you'll only think of us a little—us women—mebbe you won't go." She sank down amid a profound silence.

"Poor thing!" rumbled Pete Ellinwood. "She shouldn't have come. Al Green was her man." Sobbing sounded in another quarter of the hall, and the men looked at one another, disconcerted. Still no one spoke. The matter hung in the balance, for all saw instantly that could the women be provided for this was the solution of the problem.

Though taken aback, Code stood to his guns and remained on his feet.

Suddenly in the middle of the hall another woman rose. Her motion was accompanied by the rustle of silk, and instantly there was silence, for Elsa Mallaby commanded considerable respect.

Code saw her with surprise as he turned. She noted his puzzled expression and flashed him a dazzling smile that was not lost, even in that thrilled and excited crowd. He answered it.

"I consider that Captain Schofield has solved the problem," she said in a clear, level tone. "There is no question but that the men of Grande Mignon should fit out their ships and fish on the Banks. There is also no question but that the objection Mrs. Green raised makes such a thing impossible. Now, I want to tell you something.

"I belong in Freekirk Head, and you have all known me since I was little. Hard-luck Jim Mallaby belonged in Freekirk Head and made his money out of the island. Jim's money is mine now, and you can rest assured that while the men are away fishing no woman or child on Grande Mignon shall go hungry while I am alive to hear of it.

"Some people hate me because I live in a big house and have everything. It is only natural and I expect it, but ever since Jim left me I have wondered how I could do the most good with his money here. I would like to *give* it; but if you won't have that, you can borrow it on a long-time loan without interest or security. Now I will go out and you can talk it over freely."

With a companion she walked up the aisle and to the door, but before she reached it Code Schofield was standing on a chair, his hat in his hand.

"Three cheers for Mrs. Mallaby!" he yelled, and the very building shook with the tumultuous response.

It was five minutes before the squire, purple with shouting for order, could be heard above the noise. Then, with hand upraised, he shouted:

"All in favor of Schofield's plan say ay!"

And the "ay" was the greatest vocal demonstration ever given in Freekirk Head.

CHAPTER VII A STRANGER

The ensuing week was one such as the village had never beheld. A visitor to the island might have thought that war had been declared and that a privateering expedition was being fitted out.

On the railroad near Flag Point there was always some vessel being scraped or painted. Supplies brought over from St. John's by the steamer *Grande Mignon* were stowed in lazarets and below. Rigging was overhauled, canvas patched or renewed, and bright, tawny ropes substituted for the old ones in sheet and tackle.

Every low tide was a signal for great activity among the vessels made fast alongside the wharfs, for the rise of the water was nearly twenty feet, and when it receded the ships stood upright on their keels and exposed their bottoms to scraper, calking mallet, and paint-brush.

In every house where father or son was expecting soon to sail the women were busy with clothing and general outfit. There was a run on the store carrying oilskins, sea-boots, oil-lamps, stoves, and general paraphernalia.

All these things were gotten on credit, for there is no such thing as a vessel returning empty-handed from the Banks, and Bill Boughton stood sponsor for most of them.

The owners of vessels divided their time between provisioning and overhauling their ships and the securing of crews. One rainy afternoon, when work had been generally suspended, a number of the men gathered inside Bill Boughton's store to wait for a let-up in the downpour, and the subject of crews was broached.

"How you comin' with your crew, Bige?" asked a tall, lanky man of Captain Tanner.

"First rate. Got a dozen men now an' that's about all the *Rosan* can take care of. At that somebody'll have to sleep on a locker, I cal'late."

"You're doin' well, Bige. I hear Jed Martin can't round up more'n eight, an' he's been as fur south as Great Harbor."

"D'ye wonder?" put in a third. "Jed ain't never set up grub that a shark would eat. I sailed with him once five year ago, an' that was enough fer me."

"Twelve men ain't much," put in Tanner. "Them Gloucester men sail with sixteen or eighteen right along, and I've heard o' one feller put out of T-Wharf, Boston, carryin' twenty-eight dories. Of course, them fellers lays to fill up quick and make short trips fer the fresh market. Ain't many of them briners."

"Don't believe there's anybody'll carry sixteen men out of here, is they?" came a voice from over in the corner.

"Sure!" The rumble and bellow of the reply denoted Pete Ellinwood where he sat on a cracker-box, his six and a half feet of length sprawled halfway from one counter to the other. "There's Nat Burns's *Hettie B.* She'll carry sixteen, and so will Code Schofield's *Laughing Lass*— mebbe more."

"Huh! Yes, if he can git 'em," sneered a voice.

"Git 'em! O' course he'll git 'em. Why not?" demanded Ellinwood, turning upon the other belligerently.

"Wal," replied the other, "they do say there's men in this village, and farther south, too, that wouldn't sail with Code, not fer a thousand dollars and all f'und."

"Them that says it are fools," declared Ellinwood.

"An' liars!" cut in Bijonah Tanner hotly. "Why won't they sail with the lad? He can handle a schooner as well as you, Burt, and better."

"Yas," said the other contemptuously; "nobody's ever forgot the way he handled the old *May 64 Schofield*. Better not play with fire, Bige, or you'll get your hands burned."

Pete Ellinwood got upon his feet deliberately. He was the biggest and most powerful man in the village, despite his forty-five years, and his “ableness” in a discussion—physical or otherwise—was universally respected.

“Look here you, Burt, an’ all the rest of you fellers. I’ve got something to say. Fer consid’able time now I’ve heard dirty talk about Code and the *May Schofield*—dirty talk an’ nothin’ more. Now, if any of you can prove that Code did anything but try and save the old schooner, let’s hear you do it. If not, shut up! I don’t want to hear no more of that talk.”

There was silence for a while as all hands sought to escape the gray, accusing eye that wandered slowly around the circle. Then from back in the shadow somewhere a voice said sneeringly:

“What ax you got to grind, Pete?”

A laugh went round, for it was common talk that, since the death of Jasper Schofield, Pete had expressed his admiration for Ma Schofield in more than one way.

“I got this ax to grind, Andrew,” replied Ellinwood calmly, “that I’m signed on as mate in the *Charming Lass*, an’ I believe the boy is as straight and as good a sailor as anybody on the island.” This was news to the crowd, and the men digested it a minute in silence.

“How many men ye got sailin’ with ye?” asked one who had not spoken before.

“Five outside the skipper an’ me,” was the reply, “an’ I cal’late we’ll fill her up in a day or so. Seven men can sail her like a witch, but they won’t fill her hold very quick. She’ll take fifteen hundred quintal easy, or I judge her wrong.”

A prolonged whistle from outside interrupted the discussion, and one man going to the door announced that it had stopped raining. All hands got up and prepared to go back to work. Only Bijonah Tanner remained to buy some groceries from Boughton.

“Steamer’s early to-day,” said the storekeeper, glancing at his watch. “She’s bringin’ me a lot of salt from St. John’s, and I guess I can get it into the shed to-night.”

Having satisfied Tanner, he went out of the store the back way and left the captain alone filling his pipe. A short blast of the whistle told him that the steamer was tied up, and idly he lingered to see who had come to the island.

The passengers, to reach the King’s Road, were obliged to go past the corner of the general store, and Bijonah stood on the low, wooden veranda, watching them.

Some two dozen had gone when his eye was attracted by a pale, thin youth in a light-gray suit and Panama hat. He thought nothing of him at first except to remark his clothes, but as he came within short vision Tanner gave a grunt of astonishment and bit through the reed stem of his corn-cob pipe.

He recognized the youth as the one he had seen in St. John’s and had referred to as the secretary to the president of the Marine Insurance Company.

Instantly the old man’s mind flashed back to what he had heard only a week before, which he had told Code. He stood looking after the stranger as though spell-bound, his slow mind groping vainly for some explanation of his presence in Freekirk Head.

He felt instinctively that it must be in connection with the case of Code Schofield and the *May*, and his feeling was corroborated a moment later when, from behind the trunk of a big pine-tree, Nat Burns stepped forward and greeted the other. They had apparently met before, for they shook hands cordially and continued westward along the King’s Road.

A few steps brought them opposite the gate to the Schofield cottage, and Bijonah, following their motions like a hawk, saw Nat jerk his thumb in the direction of the house as they walked past.

That was enough for Tanner. He was convinced now that the insurance man had come to carry out the threat made in St. John’s, and that Nat Burns was more intimately connected with the scheme than he had at first supposed.

Bijonah set down his package of groceries on the counter inside and turned away toward the wharf where the *Charming Lass* was tied up for a final trimming. She already had her salt aboard and

most of her provisions and was being given her final touches by Pete Ellinwood, Jimmie Thomas, and the other members of the crew that had signed on to sail in her.

Tanner hailed Ellinwood from the wharf and beckoned so frantically that the big man swarmed up the rigging to the dock as though he were going aloft to reef a topsail in a half a gale.

“Code’s in a pile of trouble,” said the old man, and went on briefly to narrate the whole circumstance of the insurance company’s possible move. “That feller came on the steamer this afternoon, an’ if he serves Code with the summons or attachment or whatever it is, it’s my idea that the *Lass* will never round the Swallowtail for the Banks. Where is the boy?”

“Went up to Castalia to see a couple of men who he thought he might get for the crew, but I don’t think Burns or any one else knows it. He wanted to make the trip on the quiet an’ get them without anybody’s knowing it if he could. But what do you cal’late to do, Bige?”

“By the Great Snood, I don’t know!” declared Tanner helplessly.

“Wal,” said Pete reassuringly, “you just let me handle this little trouble myself. We’ll have the skipper safe an’ clear if we have to commit murder to do it. Now, Bige, you just keep your mouth shut and don’t worry no more. I’ll do the rest.”

Feeling the responsibility to be in capable hands and secretly glad to escape events that might be too much for his years, Captain Tanner walked back to the road, secured his package of groceries at the store, and made his way home to the widow Sprague’s house.

For five minutes Pete Ellinwood lounged indolently against a spile, engrossed in thought. Then he put on his coat and crossed the King’s Road to the Schofield cottage.

He had hardly opened the gate when a strange youth in a gray suit and Panama hat came out of the front door and down the path. Pete recognized the newcomer from St. John’s, and the newcomer evidently recognized him.

“Ha! Captain Code Schofield, I presume,” he announced, thrusting his hand nervously into his pocket and bringing out a fistful of papers. So eager and excited was he that, unnoticed, he dropped one flimsy sheet, many times folded, into the grass.

“No, I’m not Schofield,” rumbled Ellinwood from the depths of his mighty chest. “Get along with you now!”

“Please accept service of this paper, Captain Schofield,” said the other, extending a legal-looking document, and shrugging his shoulders as though to say that Pete’s denial of identity was, of course, only natural, but could hardly be indulged.

“I’m not Schofield!” bellowed Pete, outraged. “My name’s Ellinwood, an’ anybody’ll tell you so. I won’t take your durned paper. If you want Schofield find him.”

The young man drew back, nonplussed, but might have continued his attentions had not a passer-by come to Pete’s rescue and sworn to his identity. Only then did the young lawyer—for he was that as well as private secretary—withdraw with short and grudging apologies.

Pete, growling to himself like a great bear, was starting forward to the house when his eye was caught by the folded paper that had dropped from the packet in the lawyer’s hand. He stooped, picked it up, and, with a glance about, to prove that the other was out of sight, opened it.

As he read it his eyes widened and his jaw dropped with astonishment. Twice he slowly spelled out the words before him, and then, with a low whistle and a gigantic wink, thrust the paper carefully into his pocket and pinned the pocket.

“That will be news to the lad, sure enough,” he said, continuing on his way toward the house.

The little orphan girl Josie admitted him. He found Mrs. Schofield on the verge of tears. She had just been through a long and painful interview with the newcomer, and had barely recovered from the shock of what he had to tell.

Code, since learning of what was in the air, had not told his mother, for he did not wish to alarm her unnecessarily, and was confident he would get away to the Banks before the slow-moving St. John firm took action.

Pete, smitten mightily by the distress of the comely middle-aged widow, melted to a misery of unexpressible tenderness and solicitude. In his words and actions of comfort he resembled a great, loving St. Bernard dog who had accidentally knocked down a toddling child and is desirous of making amends. Ma Schofield took note of his desire to lighten her burden, and presently permitted it to be lightened.

Then they talked over the situation, and Pete finally said:

“I’m sending Jimmie Thomas down to Castalia in his motor-dory to find Code. Of course, the skipper took his own dory, and we may meet him coming back. What we want to do is head him off an’ keep him away from here. Now, there’s no tellin’ how long he might have to stay away, an’ I’ve been figgerin’ that perhaps if you was to take him a bundle of clothes it wouldn’t go amiss.”

“I’ll do it,” announced ma sturdily. “Just you tell Jimmie to wait a quarter of an hour and I’ll be along. Now, Pete Ellinwood, listen here. What scheme have you got in your mind? I can see by your eyes that there is one.”

“May!” cried Pete reproachfully. “How could I have anythin’ in my mind without tellin’ you?”

Nevertheless, when he walked out of the cottage door it was to chuckle enormously in his black beard and call himself names that he had to deceive May.

He called Jimmie Thomas up from the duties of the paint-pot and brush, and gave him instructions as to what to do. They talked rapidly in low tones until Mrs. Schofield appeared; then Jimmie helped her into the motor-dory and both men pushed off.

“I cal’late I’ll have it all worked out when you come back, Jim,” said Pete as the engine caught the spark and the dory moved away.

Mrs. Schofield turned around and fixed her sharp, blue eyes upon the giant ashore.

“Peter!” she cried. “I knew there was some scheme. When I get back—”

But the rest was lost, for distance had overcome her voice. Ellinwood stood and grinned benignly at his goddess. Then he slapped his thigh with an eleven-inch hand and made a noise with his mouth like a man clucking to his horse.

“Sprightly as a gal, she is,” he allowed. “Dummed if she ain’t!”

CHAPTER VIII

JIMMIE THOMAS'S STRATEGY

On a chart the island of Grande Mignon bears the same relation to surrounding islands that a mother-ship bears to a flock of submarines. Westward her coast is rocky and forbidding, being nothing but a succession of frowning headlands that rise almost perpendicularly from the sea. It is one of the most desolate stretches of coast in moderate latitudes, for no one lives there, nor has ever lived there, except a few hermit dulce-pickers during the summer months.

Along the east coast, that looks across the Atlantic, are strung the villages, nestled in bays and coves. And it is out from this coast that the dozen little islands lie. First, and partially across the mouth of the bay where the fishing fleet lies, is Long Island. Then comes High Duck, Low Duck, and Big Duck. Farther south there are Ross's, Whitehead, and Big Wood islands, not to mention spits, points, and ledges of rock innumerable and all honored with names.

It was the fact of so many treacherous ledges and reefs to be navigated safely in a four-knot tide that was agitating the half-dozen "guests" at Mis' Shannon's boarding-house. It need hardly be said that Mis' Shannon was a widow, but her distinction lay in being called mis' instead of ma.

She made a livelihood by putting up the "runners" who made periodical trips with their sample cases for the benefit of the local tradesmen, and took in occasional "rusticators," or summer tourists who had courage enough to dare the passage of the strait in the tiny steamer.

The principal auditor of the harrowing tales that were flying about the table over the fish chowder was Mr. Aubrey Templeton, the young lawyer from St. John's who had arrived on the steamer that afternoon. Just opposite to Mr. Templeton at the table sat Jimmie Thomas, who, being a bachelor, had made his home with Miss Shannon for the last three years. And it was Jimmie who had held the table spell-bound with his tales of danger and narrow escapes.

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