

Bindloss Harold

Wyndham's Pal



Harold Bindloss
Wyndham's Pal

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=23159475

Wyndham's Pal:

Содержание

PART I	4
CHAPTER I	4
CHAPTER II	15
CHAPTER III	27
CHAPTER IV	37
CHAPTER V	47
CHAPTER VI	57
CHAPTER VII	67
CHAPTER VIII	77
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	83

Bindloss Harold Wyndham's Pal

PART I THE LURE OF AMBITION

CHAPTER I THE COMMODORE'S CUP

The breeze had dropped as the tide ebbed, and *Red Rose* plunged languidly across the shining swell. Faint mist obscured the horizon and the yachts engaged in the fifty-mile race had vanished, although Wyndham thought he had not long since distinguished a sail in the distance. He was curious about this because if he had seen canvas it was *Deva's*, and her skipper had probably seen *Red Rose*. The rest of the fleet was scattered about to the north. Wyndham had noted their positions carefully before the haze rolled up. He wanted to win and meant to leave nothing to chance.

In the meantime, the yacht crept slowly through the sparkling water, close-hauled to a light wind that Wyndham knew would not last. Her canvas, tapering in a tall white pyramid, swayed

with a regular heave against the sky. In her shadow, the sea was a cool, luminous green, but the sun was hot and Wyndham had taken off his coat. He wore a white jersey, blue trousers, and very neat white shoes. His age was twenty-six, his figure was thin but athletic, and the molding of his face was good. On the whole, he was a handsome man and was generally marked by a careless, twinkling smile. The smile, however, was to some extent deceptive, and at times his blue eyes were hard. Wyndham was popular; he had a way of inspiring confidence, and knew and used his talent.

Marston, who sat on the yacht's coaming, splicing a rope, trusted Wyndham far. Marston's round face was burned red and generally wore a look of tranquil good-humor; his mouth was large and his eyes were calm. People thought him dull and he was not clever, but Wyndham knew his comrade's stability. Although Bob was honest and trustful, he was firm. It was characteristic that the splice he slowly made was very neat.

Their paid hand was occupied at the clanking pump, for *Red Rose* had shipped some water while the breeze was fresh. This was not remarkable, since the boat was small, but Wyndham knew, though Marston did not, that a quantity of water had come in between her working planks. She was old and needed repairs Wyndham could not afford. For all that, he hoped to win the Commodore's cup. He had particular grounds for wanting the cup, and Wyndham's habit was to get what he wanted.

"I think the splice will stand," Marston said, throwing down

the rope.

"Your work does stand," Wyndham remarked.

"Oh, well," said Marston, deprecatingly, "I'm slow, but I like a good job. Saves time in the end, because you needn't do the thing again."

"You're a philosopher, Bob. My plan is generally hit or miss. But can you see *Deva*?"

Marston searched the horizon. The gently heaving sea was empty and *Red Rose* alone in a misty circle three or four miles across. Except for a few razor-bills, nothing but the ripple she trailed broke the reflection of the calm sky. Then his glance, traveling north, stopped and fixed on something faintly distinguishable against the thin mist.

"No," he said, "I don't see her. Thought I did some time since but she's faded. What's that in the distance on our starboard bow?"

"It's hard to tell. Might be a big black-backed gull resting on the water. The misty light magnifies things."

"Shall I get the glasses?"

"Not unless you want them. They're under the stuff we stowed away in the locker aft. If Charley has finished pumping, you might help him get out the spinnaker. We'll have the wind fair when the flood begins to run."

Marston and the fisher-lad vanished down the forecastle hatch, and Wyndham studied the distant object. He did not yet need the sail the others had gone for, but he was afraid of

Charley's keen eyes. A buoy indicating a shoal was not far off and the sailing directions for the race stated that all marks of this kind must be kept on the port hand, but Wyndham knew the coast and imagined the tide was still ebbing in a neighboring river mouth. The main stream ran north and would carry the boats off their course, but near the shore another stream ran west across some wide shoals. If he could steer *Red Rose* into this current, it would help her on while her rivals, farther off the land, drifted back. When the others came up with the sail Wyndham wondered whether Marston would ask for the chart, but he did not. The object they had seen had vanished, for although the wind was light the boat slowly forged ahead. The color of the smooth undulations indicated that the depth got less.

"Looks as if we were near West Hodden sand," Marston remarked. "They had a dispute at the committee about keeping us outside the bank. Makes a longer run, but some of the deep boats might have touched bottom if they'd tried to cross at low-water. Anyhow, it doesn't matter, so long as we all keep out."

Wyndham nodded and began to talk about something else.

"I hope we'll get fine weather, because I need bracing up. When you have not much money, business is a grind and I'm rather young to carry the responsibilities of the house. Things might have been easier, had Jim Wyndham not died two or three days after he fell ill."

Marston knew something about this. Wyndham Brothers was a small old-fashioned firm and Harry had recently taken control

on his uncle's sudden death. James Wyndham was extravagant and Marston imagined he had left his affairs involved. Marston had no occupation and all the money he needed. Moreover, he was Harry's friend.

"Well," he said, "if you're short of capital, I think some could be got. Sound investments don't pay much, and now and then I feel I'd like a venture."

"You're a good sort, Bob. For all that, you had better leave business alone, because you would get robbed. Of course, if I saw a safe and profitable speculation, I might let you join, but just now I'm occupied trying to put things straight. Some are badly tangled. I used to think I could carve my way to fortune if I got a chance, but so far it's been my luck to use broken tools."

Marston thought this was so. Harry was a good shot and racing skipper, but he had never had a first-class gun or boat. Still, he used the make-shifts well and sometimes beat better men.

"Yours is a pretty old house, isn't it?" Marston remarked.

"Wyndhams' was founded in the days of the slavers and privateers and has traded in West Africa and South America ever since. The house was famous, but its decline began when steamers knocked out the sailing ships. We stuck to the old vessels and own one or two small schooners yet, though they're only used for collecting cargo at beaches steamboats do not touch. Some of the documents I've recently studied tell a romantic tale. The Wyndhams were all adventurers and a number did not die in bed. One or two vanished abroad. As perhaps you

know, my uncle Rupert did."

"I heard something about this," said Marston. "What happened?"

"Nobody knows. He left the West Indian factory; sailed off in a canoe and was not seen again. Books and money were in order and his health was pretty good. There was no explanation; he vanished, that's all. I saw him once in England and thought him a sober business man. One got no hint of wildness, but the house's records indicate a vein of romantic extravagance in my ancestors. For all that, my father was a quiet country parson and I have felt nothing of the kind."

Marston pondered. He knew Harry Wyndham rather well and had noted, in moments of excitement and strain, a curious recklessness that was perhaps not altogether normal. For example, there was the race when *Red Rose* and another yacht met close-hauled. *Red Rose* was on the port tack, and the rule was she must give way, but, until the last minute, Harry sat unmoved at the tiller. Marston remembered the piled-up foam about the plunging hulls as the yachts converged, the slanted pyramids of sail that looked as if they must shock, and the horrible tension he had felt. Then, when collision was imminent, Wyndham gave the other room and afterwards laughed.

"I was tempted to find out how it would feel if we rammed her," he confessed.

This, however, was some time since, and Marston did not dwell on the incident. His temperament was essentially normal.

"No sign of a breeze from the east yet," he said.

"All the same, it will come," Wyndham rejoined.

Marston looked about. The sun was getting low and it was nearly calm. Now and then the topsail flapped and the mainsail hung slack. Blocks rattled as the heavy boom jerked about. The swell was smooth and in color a curious shining green, as if the light were reflected through it from beneath. It looked as if they were crossing a big sand, but Marston did not sound. Harry knew the coast, and the sailing directions required them to keep outside the shoals.

In the distance a steamer's smoke trailed across the sky; one heard her engines beat with a monotonous rhythm. In front, the mist was melting and vague gray hills were faintly distinguishable. The yacht's deck was damp, but for the rolling she hardly moved.

"We had better get some food," said Marston. "I'll light the stove."

He went to the cabin and when, after the rude meal, they lounged and smoked, the mist suddenly rolled away. Long hills, with woods among their folds, ran back on the port hand; in the distance, a big black headland cut against the sunset. The water astern was hazy and dotted by sails. It was now a glassy calm.

"We're nearer the coast than I reckoned, but the ebb has given us a big lift," Marston observed.

"The rest are a long way back, although I think they're moving."

"They've got the breeze and will bring it up," said Wyndham. "Hoist the spinnaker."

For the next few minutes Marston and the paid hand were occupied with the big triangular sail, which extended from the masthead to the end of a boom they thrust over the boat's side. A British yacht's spinnaker is not fitted with a gaff. At first the spinnaker hung slack, but presently lifted in gentle curves; then the water splashed against the planks and *Red Rose* began to move. She gathered speed. There was a humming noise astern, mast and rigging creaked, and foam leaped at the bows. It got cold, white ripples streaked the sea, and the wake ran back in a foaming wedge. The spinnaker swelled like a balloon and, with the tall mainsail on the other side, dwarfed the speeding hull.

The sun dipped, the dark sea stood up in ridges above *Red Rose's* rail, spray began to fly, and one heard the rush of wind and groaning of spars. The boat yawed about and steering needed skill, since, if Wyndham let her swerve, spinnaker or mainsail would swing across and mast or boom would go. For all that, he risked a glance over his shoulder now and then. Some of the boats were coming up; they were bigger craft and gave *Red Rose* time by the handicap. She, however, gave time to others, and must save it in order to win.

Wyndham let go while the sea got rough, for the flood tide now ran against the freshening wind. While he swayed with the tiller she plunged and rolled about, lifting her bows out of boiling foam and sometimes burying them deep. Water flowed across

her deck and presently began to splash beneath the cockpit floor, and Charley started the clanking pump. A full moon had risen and two big boats, with canvas that cut black against the silver light, were getting near.

"I think we'll save our time," Wyndham said.

Marston looked at the high topsail and bending spinnaker boom. He would have liked to haul the topsail down, but his comrade's voice had a strange gay note that he had heard before. Harry meant to carry on; he would drive the boat until something broke. Then Marston looked ahead. The big promontory was not far off and moonlight touched the towering crags. The sea was all white, for the current, setting strongly round the head, ran in angry combers against the wind.

"We are going to get wet in the tide-race," he said. "You might find slacker water if you edged her off a bit."

"And sail a longer course?" Wyndham rejoined. "We give *Deva* four minutes and she's not far astern."

Marston acquiesced. After all, his business was to obey. "Oh, well," he said, "Charley and I had better get out on the booms."

He beckoned the paid hand and they crawled along the deck. *Red Rose* rolled savagely and main boom and spinnaker boom tossed their ends aloft. The spars must be kept down, lest they swing across, and Marston, clasping the varnished pole with arms and legs, crawled out as far as he dared. Sometimes he swung high above the combers that rushed past below; and sometimes swung down until his body was wet by the foam. He could hold

on if Harry kept her straight, but if she swerved much the big sails would lurch across and he and Charley would hardly escape with broken bones. He looked aft. Wyndham's figure cut against the light; it was tense and his head was motionless, as if his glance was fixed. Marston knew he meant to bring *Red Rose* in on her time allowance or sail her under.

They drew round the head and reeled across a bay. A row of lights began to blink and two colored lanterns tossed. Marston saw the lights for a few moments when the spinnaker soared away from the boom. The race was nearly over, for the colored lights marked the flag-boat, anchored off the long iron pier. The committee had not given the yachts much room; perhaps they thought of their comfort and anchored the steamer near the beach so she would not roll about. Smart work would be needed to shorten sail before they struck the pier.

A shadow touched the spinnaker and Marston looked astern. A swaying pyramid of canvas shut out the moon and foam leaped about a plunging hull. *Ptarmigan* had crept up and would go past, but she was large and allowed *Red Rose* some time. Marston could not remember how much she allowed; all he could do was to hold on, for his arms ached and his head began to swim. A few minutes would finish the race, and he wondered dully what would happen then. There were, perhaps, two hundred yards between the flag-boat and the pier; they ought to haul down the spinnaker now, but Harry would carry on.

He saw *Ptarmigan's* topsail tilt downwards and dark figures

run about her deck. Her spinnaker collapsed like a torn balloon, but *Red Rose* leaped on, pressed by straining sail. Then there was a flash, and the report of a gun rolled among the crags ahead. They drove into the smoke, speeding side by side with *Ptarmigan*, and the flash of another gun pierced the dark. Marston, crawling in-board, dropped into the cockpit as the flag-boat swept astern, and for the next few minutes he was desperately occupied.

The spinnaker went into the sea, the topsail thrashed half-way up the mast, and *Red Rose* listed until the water was deep on her lee deck. A white sea swept her forward as they hauled down the staysail; and then, coming round, she plunged head to wind, a few yards from the dark ironwork of the pier. Wyndham came to help and soon afterwards they brought her to a safe anchorage. While they stowed the sails a gig crossed the bows and somebody shouted: "Well done, *Red Rose*! You're first by three minutes on handicap time."

Wyndham put on his jacket and lighted a cigarette. "Not bad for a boat I bought because she was outclassed. Sometimes I wonder what I could do if I had proper tools," he said. Then he laughed. "Anyhow, we had better start the pump."

CHAPTER II

MOONLIGHT AND GLAMOUR

Rockets leaped up from the old castle on the narrow flat between the woods and the strait. Colored fires burned behind the loopholes in the ruined walls, and an admiring crowd occupied the lawn that slanted to the water. The night was calm and when the band stopped the voices of a choir, singing old part-songs on the pier, carried well. There was a smell of drying seaweed, and the yachts' anchor-lights burned steadily in rows that wavered with the eddying tide. The last race was over and the townsfolk had given the crews a feast before the fleet dispersed.

Marston sat on a broken wall, talking to *Deva's* owner about the race along the coast. Elliot was a friend of Marston's. Chisholm, the commodore's young son, stood close by, smoking a cigarette.

"You beat us handsomely and Wyndham deserves the cup for his pluck in carrying on when we were forced to lower our topsail," Elliot admitted. "Still something was due to luck; you got the last of the stream along the shore when the tide running down the river carried the rest of us back."

"Wyndham has a talent for that kind of thing," said Marston. "Sometimes you feel he, so to speak, thinks like a fish. He doesn't need to calculate when the tide will turn and where he'll find slack water. He knows."

"Wyndham has a talent for getting what he wants," Chisholm interposed. "*Deva* ought to have beaten *Red Rose*."

"Aren't you rather young to judge?" Marston asked, with a touch of dryness.

"Oh, well," said the lad, "I like a man who loses now and then. You can understand that kind of fellow."

Elliot frowned. He could take a beating; but he was curious and looked at Marston thoughtfully.

"I suppose you didn't see the Knoll buoy?"

"We did not," Marston replied. "There was something on the water in the haze, but it was too small for the buoy. Wyndham thought it a gull, a big black-back; his sight is pretty good."

"How did the thing bear?"

Marston hesitated, because he saw where the question led, but he was honest.

"Nearly ahead; a point or two to starboard. Anyhow, it vanished, although, as we didn't change our course, we must have passed the spot rather close," he replied, forgetting that he was below when the object vanished.

"Then it was a gull," Elliot agreed, but Chisholm was not satisfied.

"Elliot's a sportsman; I don't know if I am or not, because I was on board *Deva* and feel hurt we didn't get the cup. Wyndham's a smart skipper, but his luck's too good. One's inclined to doubt a man who always gets a prize. My notion is, it isn't altogether due to skill. Besides, I think the commodore would have liked

Elliot to win the cup."

"You're not a tactful lad and perhaps you're not in very good form just now," Elliot remarked. "We'll go along and hear the band."

They went off and Marston lighted his pipe. He was rather angry with young Chisholm, because he was persuaded Wyndham had not seen the buoy. Harry was not the man to win a race by a shabby trick; Marston trusted his friends.

In the meantime, Wyndham and Flora Chisholm occupied a bench in a quiet corner of the castle wall. Now and then a colored fire blazed up on the battlements and red reflections flickered about the crowded lawn, but there were dark intervals when they saw the water sparkle and the black hills across the strait. When the band stopped, one heard the soft splash of the tide, and the choir singing old Welsh airs. Flora was young and felt the glamour of the calm moonlight night.

Moreover, there was something strangely romantic about Wyndham. He was handsome and marked by a dashing recklessness that rather carried one away. Flora liked his pluck and bold seamanship. Her father was an old navy man and the yacht club commodore, and she had inherited his love for the sea. She had watched the finish of the race from the flag-boat, and had seen *Red Rose* reel past, horribly pressed by sail. Fine skill and steady nerve were needed to bring the old boat in first.

Perhaps this was not important, but it was typical of Harry Wyndham; he ran risks and laughed. It was bracing to know him

and flattering to feel that he was drawn to her. Yet Flora had some doubts; after all, she had not known Wyndham long and he had drawbacks. He was poor, some of her friends distrusted him, and Chisholm had given hints – he approved Jim Elliot, and Flora thought Jim loved her. When Wyndham was away she hesitated and wondered whether she was rash; when he was near she thrilled and caution vanished. Presently she roused herself and began to talk.

Wyndham got a hint of strain and his heart beat. He imagined Flora was vaguely alarmed by his power to move her, but she did not go away. Although her fresh beauty had first attracted him, he soon saw she had qualities that strengthened her charm; she was proud, with a clean pride, honest, and plucky. All the same, he was poor; his people were known for their romantic extravagance and a touch of moral laxity. The business of which he had recently taken control languished and had not been very scrupulously carried on. Yet Wyndham was not daunted, and his love for the girl was sincere.

"Things will look different to-morrow when the boats have gone and the little town goes to sleep again," he said. "I feel doleful. The holiday's nearly over and soon after sunrise there'll be nothing left but a happy memory."

"Then you make an early start?"

"At half ebb; three or four o'clock. One wishes the night would last. Nights like this are not numerous."

"You ought to be satisfied. You won the cup."

"I meant to win. For one thing, you wished me luck."

Flora blushed and wondered whether he could see her face. "After all, that was not much help," she said. "My wishing you luck wouldn't alter the wind and tide."

"It gave me an object and a stimulus. We are a curious lot and much depends on our mood. When one's braced enough, obstacles don't count. One runs risks and wins."

Flora was fastidious and got a faint jar. Yet she knew he was not a boaster; he did what he said. Besides, she was flattered.

"You are stopping for a few days, with the Commodore?" he resumed.

Flora said she was and he frowned. "I must go. I ought not to have taken the holiday, but the temptation was strong. Now I must make up for the lost time."

"Your new business keeps you occupied?"

"Yes; it claims all my thought, though now and then I deny the claim. The sea pulls and a boat's a fascinating toy; but a time comes when one must put one's toys away."

"For all that, you came to the regattas and won the cup."

Wyndham smiled and, for the moon was bright, Flora noted the reckless sparkle in his eyes.

"You know why I came and why I won the cup," he said. "Perhaps I'm vain, but I wanted you to see I could beat the others whose toys are all that occupy them. I have not their luck, and my object for coming drives me back to town. If I'm to realize my ambitions, I have got to work."

"Then you are ambitious?" Flora remarked and looked away.

"Very," he replied quietly. "I know my drawbacks and they must be removed. I have inherited the responsibilities of an embarrassed house. My job's to repair its credit, wipe out debts, and make Wyndhams' respected, as it was respected once. A big job, but the ambition behind it gives me driving force."

He paused and gave her a steady look. "Your father's friends are merchants and shipowners. You know I have much to build up and something to live down."

Flora was quiet for a moment or two. She had heard her friends talk about Wyndhams' and it was plain that they thought the new head of the house something of an adventurer. For all that, she was moved. She liked his frankness and his resolution. Looking about, she saw Marston and a girl she knew cross the lawn, and was tempted to join them. Had it not been for the glamour of the moonlight and sparkling sea, she might have gone.

"I wish you luck again!" she said quietly.

"Ah," he said, "that will carry me far! Farther than you think, perhaps, because I am going away."

Flora moved abruptly and he saw she was disturbed.

"Where are you going? Will you stop long?" she asked, and Wyndham knew his chance had come. Her friends might blame him, but he meant to use his power.

"To begin with, I'm going to West Africa, and then to South and Central America. We have an old schooner in the Guinea coast and I expect to sail her across. She can creep into lagoons

and call at beaches the steamers do not touch. Somebody must pull the house's vanishing trade together and I am the head."

"But it's a long ocean passage and an unhealthy coast," Flora remarked, with a note of strain in her voice. Altogether she tried to be calm.

"All the same, I must go, and go soon," Wyndham replied.

He stopped because he knew he had said enough, and Flora pondered. She would miss him much and his going forced her to front a crisis she would sooner have put off. She knew he loved her and he had a strange fascination; he stood for romance and adventure, but she was fastidiously honest and now and then he jarred. She felt vaguely that there was something about him she did not like.

In the meantime, Marston and his companion came by again. The girl was a friend of Flora's, but she passed without a glance and Flora knew she disapproved. Somehow she wished her lover was like Bob Marston. Bob had no fascination; indeed, he was rather dull, but he was frank and honest and one trusted him. She knew she ought to join him and Mabel; there was danger in stopping, but she did not go. Harry would sail at daybreak and she would be lonely afterwards.

Marston and the girl went on, the music stopped, and Flora heard the drowsy splash of the tide. The moonlight sparkled on the strait and she felt a strange longing to be rash. One missed much unless one had pluck. Then Wyndham put his hand on her arm and gave her a long ardent look.

"I am going away," he said. "I must go. For your sake, I must try to mend my damaged inheritance. Will you marry me when I come back?"

Flora hesitated until he put his arm round her and her doubts vanished. Romance conquered and passion swept her away. She yielded when he drew her to him, and gave back his kiss. Then he let her go as people came towards them and they crossed the lawn.

"My dear!" he said triumphantly. "I can conquer all my difficulties now and make your friends approve. You have given me a power I never had; I feel I can't be stopped."

His eyes were very bright and he lifted his head. He looked unconquerable and his confidence was flattering. Flora's doubts had gone. He was her acknowledged lover and she was very staunch.

"I must see your father when he gets back to town," Wyndham said presently. "The committee will keep him until too late to-night."

"Yes," said Flora with faint misgivings, "you must see him soon."

Wyndham's eyes twinkled. "It's possible he will get a jolt. I'll own I was half afraid; but I fear nothing now."

"He loves me," Flora answered with a quiet look, and Wyndham said nothing, but pressed her arm.

They left the castle grounds for the quiet beach, and in the meantime Mabel Hilliard and Marston leaned against the rails on

the pier. For a time the girl watched the water foam among the pillars and then looked up.

"Why didn't you speak to Wyndham?" she asked.

Marston smiled. "I think the reason was plain; Harry didn't want us. Why didn't you speak to Flora?"

Mabel made a sign of impatience. "I wanted to, but this would have been different. Flora wouldn't have suspected you were meddling."

"I see," said Marston. "I'm known to be dull; but I'm not so dull that I miss your meaning. Well, you know Harry Wyndham's my friend."

They were lovers who used no reserve, and Mabel did not hesitate.

"Flora's my friend," she said. "Do you always trust Wyndham?"

"If I didn't trust him, he wouldn't be my friend."

"In some ways, you're very nice, Bob. But I'm afraid. Flora's attracted by Wyndham. I wish she were not."

"Why? Don't you like Harry?"

"It's rather that I love Flora. She's sincere and proud. She's fastidious; I think I mean she's scrupulously honorable."

"Then you imply that Harry is not?" Marston asked, with a touch of sternness.

"No, I don't altogether imply this; but I feel he is not the man for Flora."

"Well," said Marston quietly, "I have known Harry long. He's

clever and generous; he has pluck and when strain comes is his best. I know what some folks think about him, and Harry knows his handicap. The Wyndhams were rather a wild lot, the family business was drifting on the rocks, and the character of its recent head was not good. All this is a load for Harry, but he'll run straight, and I feel my job is to help him out."

Mabel was not much comforted, but she gave him a smile.

"If he is going to marry Flora, I want you to help him," she replied.

They went off and some time afterwards Wyndham came along the pier. The fireworks were over and the crowd had gone, but a group of men stood about some steps that led to a narrow stage where the yachts' boats were moored. The tide ran fast, foaming against the iron pillars, but the promenade above threw a dark shadow on the water. Wyndham stopped at the steps and tried to see if *Red Rose's* dinghy was tied among the rest. It was too dark; all he could distinguish was a row of boats that swung about. Then young Chisholm pushed past.

"The weed on the steps is slippery and I'm not going down. A yachtsman jumps into a punt," he said.

A yacht's punt is small and generally unstable, and to jump on board needs skill. Marston came up and seized Chisholm's shoulder.

"Don't be a fool, Jack!" he said. "It's six or seven feet. If you don't capsize her, you'll go through the bottom."

"Think I can't jump six feet?" the lad exclaimed, and

Wyndham imagined he had drunk some wine at the committee supper. "Anyhow, I'll try."

He shook off Marston's hand and leaped. His dark figure vanished and there was a splash below. Marston and the others climbed down the steps, but Wyndham jumped. He went under water and knew the risk he ran when he came up; he had known when he made the plunge. The tide swept him past the boats and broke angrily among the ironwork. One might get entangled and pulled down, and if a punt came to help, she would probably capsize when the current drove her against a brace.

For a moment or two he drifted, and then saw something dark wash about in a wedge of foam. It was Chisholm, clinging to an iron and trying to keep his head above water.

"Let go! I'll pick you up on the other side," shouted Wyndham, and the current swept them under a beam.

Then he grasped the lad's shoulder and steered him between two pillars. The splash of oars indicated that a boat was pulling round the pier. Wyndham's arm struck a cross-bar and next moment something caught his leg, but he went clear and, dragging Chisholm with him, drifted into the moonlight. He felt safe now; all they need do was to wait until the boat arrived. They were a hundred yards from the pier when she came up and Marston leaned over the bow.

"Let me have him," he said. "Back her and sit steady, Tom."

Wyndham knew he could trust Bob and let Chisholm go. Marston dragged him on board and then balanced the boat while

Wyndham lifted himself over the stern. Chisholm did not seem much the worse, for he began to squeeze the water from his clothes and laughed.

"Trouble was, the punt I jumped for wasn't there," he said. "Imagine I owe you something, Wyndham. The other fellows couldn't have got me while I stuck to the brace, and if I'd let go, I'd have gone under the irons."

"That's all right!" Wyndham remarked. "You'll look before you jump another time."

They put Chisholm on board a steam yacht and when they reached *Red Rose* Marston said, "It was lucky for Jack you were about. We couldn't have got in between the braces with the punt."

"It was a stroke of luck for both of us," Wyndham replied with a laugh.

CHAPTER III

CHISHOLM'S PERSUASION

Commodore Chisholm sat in his smoking-room and knitted his brows while Wyndham talked. The room was small and plainly furnished and the books on the shelves were all about the sea; narratives of old explorers' voyages, works on naval tactics, and yacht registers. Wyndham spoke fast and with marked eagerness, and when he was moved he had a strange power of persuasion, but now and then Chisholm frowned. Although he knew he must give way, he hesitated. There was something romantic and, so to speak, exotic, about Wyndham, and Chisholm liked sober English calm.

For all that, he loved his daughter, whom he had long indulged, and knew her mind. He had only two children, Jack and Flora, and his wife was dead. Chisholm had loved her well and married rather late. It was for her sake and because his pay was small he left the navy and took a post in the service of a public navigation board. Although he held his navy rank he was generally given his yachting title, the "Commodore." He was scrupulously just, frank, and rather slow; a man at whom his friends sometimes smiled but always trusted. Now he frankly wished his daughter had chosen another lover. It was not that he disliked the fellow; he knew his family history and what business men thought about Wyndham Brothers. Still, it looked as if Flora was satisfied.

"You ask me rather a hard thing," he remarked when Wyndham stopped. "However, if Flora agrees, I suppose I cannot refuse. It's obvious I owe you much."

"You mean my pulling Jack out of the water? I don't want to urge this. It was really nothing, and the lad swims well."

"There is some risk in trying to swim through a net of iron rods when a four-knot current runs through the holes; as I expect you knew when you plunged. Besides, it's plain Jack was excited and a little off his balance. The others went for a punt; you saw the real danger and steered him through."

Wyndham imagined Chisholm was struggling with his prejudices and trying to be just. He had a generous vein and the Commodore's honesty moved him.

"My strongest argument is that I love Flora," he declared.

"It counts for much," said Chisholm, who felt his sincerity. "Still, there are other matters one must talk about."

"That is so, sir," Wyndham agreed. "Well, I know I'm asking much and I'm handicapped. I'm poor; when I took the family business I took a load of debt and some distrust. We're not a conventional lot; we have long been reckless and adventurous."

He stopped for a moment, and then, while Chisholm approved his frankness, went on: "All the same, I'm young; the house's fortunes can be mended and its credit made good, and I have an object for putting my heart into the job. It will be something of a struggle, sir, but I've got a fighting chance, and with Flora's help I feel I'm going to win."

"How do you propose to mend the house's fortunes?" Chisholm asked.

"For a start, I've planned to visit our factories abroad, study our trade on the spot, and turn out incompetent agents. I'll begin in West Africa and then cross to the Caribbean. I expect to use our trading schooner."

Chisholm looked up, rather quickly, and Wyndham saw his interest was roused. When one talked about boats the Commodore was keen, and Wyndham's voyage was, so to speak, safe ground.

"It's a long run," Chisholm remarked.

"The slavers' road, sir," said Wyndham, who meant to lead him on. "A slow beat against the Guinea current until one clears the windward ports and works up to the Pambier; and then a fast reach across open water in the North-East Trades. The early adventurers used smaller boats than mine."

"They pushed off from the Azores and Canaries, north of your track, and carried the North-Easter farther across. If you get to leeward, you'll strike the equatorial calms. But what about your boat?"

"She's an old ninety-ton yacht, the *Columbine*, and was rather famous once."

"*Columbine*?" said Chisholm, who took down a yacht register. "Here she is! Good builders, men who stuck to oak and teak. But she's thirty years old."

Wyndham smiled. The Commodore was getting keen; he was

as enthusiastic as a boy when he talked about the sea.

"I understand she's pretty sound and I must use the tools I've got. Her draught is light. We can cross river bars and get into shallow lagoons. Our factories stand by the mangrove creeks the slavers haunted. Wyndhams' were slavers long since."

"An old house!" said Chisholm. "Your folks were pioneers. There's something in a long record; habits and characteristics go with the blood of an old stock."

"Sometimes that has drawbacks, sir," Wyndham remarked.

Chisholm did not follow him and Wyndham saw he was musing about the romance of the sea.

"But what about your crew?" the Commodore asked.

"I expect to keep the Liberian Krooboys now on board. A half-tamed, reckless lot, but every Krooboy's a sailor."

"I know; fine stuff, but needs management," Chisholm agreed. "I was on patrol along the Guinea coast – a long time since. Blazing sun, roaring bars, steaming mangrove swamps, and sickness. For all that, there's a fascination you get nowhere else, unless it's on the Caribbean and coast of Brazil. The world's alike on the lines of latitude and man's morals follow the parallels." He paused with a dreamy look and then resumed: "I'm getting old and have my duty; but if I could, I'd go with you."

For a time they talked about the voyage, and then, with a half-embarrassed smile, Chisholm pulled himself up. "I'm forgetting. There are things I ought to ask – "

Wyndham told him how much money he had, and when

Chisholm looked thoughtful, went on: "I don't expect your consent to our marrying yet. It's not long since I took control of the business and much depends on the arrangements I hope to make at our factories. Things will look better when I come back."

"It's possible. But you do not know."

"I really do know, sir," Wyndham declared. "You can make my ability to put things straight a stipulation, if you like. I'm willing to be tested. I feel I can't fail."

Chisholm studied him for a moment or two. Wyndham's eyes sparkled; he looked strangely forceful and resolute, and Chisholm thought he understood why Flora had been carried away. The fellow was handsome and romantic. Besides, he was a fine sailor, and Chisholm knew his pluck.

"Very well," he said. "We'll let it go like that. The wedding must wait until you come back, but I wish you luck."

Wyndham thanked him and when he went off Chisholm pondered. Perhaps he had agreed rather weakly; he had meant to be firmer, but Wyndham had led him to talk about his voyage. Anyhow, the fellow had charm. It was hard to refuse him and Chisholm had seen he was sincere. By and by he got up and lighted his pipe. The thing was done with and he had given his consent. Somehow he had been persuaded and after all if Flora was satisfied —

Chisholm had not stipulated that nobody should be told and Flora's friends had much to talk about. Mabel Hilliard was disturbed, and when Marston came to her mother's house one

evening took him to the garden.

"Bob," she said, "I suppose you know Wyndham is going to marry Flora?"

"I do know," said Marston. "In fact, I approve. Flora is nearly the nicest girl I've met. However, I imagine you're not satisfied."

"I am not. Flora has been my friend since we were children. I am very fond of her and think she is quite the nicest girl you have met."

"Bar one!" Marston interposed.

Mabel smiled. "Oh, well, I expect your judgment's biased, Bob. But let me go on, although it's rather awkward ground. Wyndham has charm, he's picturesque; something of the gentleman-adventurer type. I think that's what I mean."

"But you don't like the type? I thought it appealed to a girl's imagination. Anyhow, although we're getting conventionalized, there are gentlemen-adventurers and we have jobs for them yet."

"I am not romantic," Mabel replied, with a twinkling glance. "I like sober men, even if they're sometimes slow; men who keep a promise but don't protest much. One doesn't want to be dazzled. A steady light is enough."

Marston was silent for a moment or two. Mabel's trust moved him and he was half embarrassed. Then he said: "There's a remark of yours I can't let go. No ground you think you ought to venture on is awkward to us. Very well. You don't approve Harry's marrying Flora, but what line d'you want me to take? I can't give him up and you're not going to give up your friend. It

wouldn't be like you."

"I want you to stick to him closer than before. Flora and he may need us both. One feels that Wyndham's unstable, and you make good ballast, Bob."

"Well, I suppose I'm heavy enough and you have given me an easy job. It's curious, but not long since I told Harry I'd see him out if he wanted help and yesterday he hinted he'd like a partner for his voyage South. In a way, of course, I don't want to go."

Mabel hid her disturbance and mused. She was modern and sometimes frivolous, but she was very staunch and loved two people well. She did not want Bob to go and yet she thought he ought. Mabel had an instinctive distrust for Wyndham, although she liked him. She felt that with his temperament he would run risks in the South and he must be protected, for Flora's sake. Flora had promised to marry Wyndham and Mabel knew she would keep her word. Well, sober, honest Bob, who was really cleverer than people thought, was the man to take care of him.

"If Wyndham urges it, I must let you go," she said.

Marston gave her a steady glance, and nodded.

"I understand. Of course, I think your notion's ridiculous. Harry doesn't need a fellow like me, but you mean well. Although, in one way, I'd frankly like the trip, in another I'd much sooner stay."

"I know," said Mabel. "You're a dear, Bob."

Then she got up, smiling, and advanced to meet Chisholm and Flora, who came up the garden path.

Wyndham urged Marston to go with him, and a week or two afterwards Flora and Mabel stood on the deck of a paddle tug crossing a busy river mouth. The day was dull and a haze of smoke from two towns hung about the long rows of warehouses and massive river walls. Out in the stream, a small steamer with a black funnel and a row of white deckhouses moved seawards with the tide. The figures grouped along her rail got indistinct, but Flora's eyes were fixed upon two that stood away from the rest, until they faded. Then the African boat vanished behind the towering hull of an anchored liner.

Flora turned and lowered her veil, for her eyes were wet. Chisholm was on board the tug, but he was some distance off. Mabel was near, and her look was strained.

"In a way, it's only a long yachting trip," the latter remarked.

"No," said Flora; "we both know it is not. It's a rash adventure; Harry is going South, as his people all have gone, and some did not come back."

"Of course he'll come back! Travel's safe and easy now. They'll have no adventures, except perhaps, at sea."

"I'm not afraid of the sea," Flora said in a quiet voice. "It's the tropic coast; the big muddy rivers that get lost in the forest, and the dark lagoons among the mangrove swamps. The country's insidious; its influence is strong."

Mabel forced a smile. She thought Flora was not disturbed about the physical dangers, such as fever and shipwreck. It looked as if she knew her lover.

"Anyhow, Bob is going with Harry, and Bob is not romantic," she remarked. "In fact, he's the steadiest, most matter-of-fact man I know. Nothing excites Bob much. It's very hard to carry him away."

Flora gave her a grateful look. Since she must not criticize Harry, they could not be altogether frank, but she saw Mabel understood. The men they loved had very different temperaments, and Bob would be a useful counterbalance. He was sober and practical: one could trust him. It was hard to own that, in a sense, she could not trust Harry. He was rash, and Flora did not like the stories about the Wyndhams who had not come back. However, Bob was going, and she imagined she owed Mabel much.

"I like Bob," she said. "I expect it cost you something to send him with Harry."

"He wanted to go."

Flora put her hand in the other's arm. "But you might have stopped him."

"He's Harry's friend," said Mabel. "I am yours. After all, that counts for something, but we won't talk about it now. Your promising to marry Harry has drawn us closer. It's an extra tie, because all Bob's friends are mine."

The tug's whistle shrieked as she swung across the tide to the landing stage and Flora looked down the river. In the distance, where granite walls and warehouses got small and indistinct, the African boat melted into the smoke and mist. Flora felt strangely

forlorn and half afraid.

CHAPTER IV

THE MAN WHO VANISHED

Moonlight glittered on the West African river and it was very hot; the air was heavy, humid, and tainted by miasmatic vapors. Inside the lonely factory, moisture dripped from the beams and the big bare room that opened on the veranda smelt of mildew. Across the river, tangled mangroves loomed through drifting mist that hid the banks of mud about their long, arched roots. Wyndham's schooner, *Columbine*, rode in midstream, her tall masts and the graceful sweep of her rail cutting black against the silver light. Somebody on board was singing a Kroo paddling song with a strange monotonous air. In the distance one heard the rumble of heavy surf.

The factory was old and ruinous and the agent's hair was going white. He sat opposite Wyndham, at the end of a table about which documents were scattered; a cocktail jug and some glasses occupied the middle. Ellams was haggard and his skin was a jaundiced yellow. Marston lounged in a deck chair, with the perspiration running down his face, and smoked a cigarette.

"I think I have told you all you want to know, and I'm willing to give up my post," Ellams remarked. "Indeed, I'm beginning to feel I'm too old for the job. Few white men have lived as long in the fever swamps; as a rule an agent's run was very short when I first came out. We didn't bother about mosquitoes then.

The tropical-diseases people hadn't discovered the mischievous habits of *anopheles*."

"You were here with my uncle, I think?" said Wyndham.

"I was with him for a year or two," Ellams answered, in a reminiscent tone. "A strange man, in some ways! I expect it's long since you saw him?"

"He came to England when I was a boy."

Ellams smiled. "When I saw you cross the compound, I thought Rupert Wyndham had come back. Wait a moment; I have his portrait."

He brought a faded and mildewed photograph. Wyndham studied it, without speaking, and then gave it to Marston, who made a little gesture of surprise. He imagined Rupert Wyndham was about his comrade's age when the portrait was taken, and the likeness was strange. There was in both faces a hint of recklessness and unrest, although the hint was plainer in the portrait. It indicated that Rupert would venture much and take paths sober men did not tread. Somehow it disturbed Marston.

"I suppose you know he vanished in the West Indies?" Wyndham remarked.

"Yes," said Ellams quietly. "I half expected something like this –"

"Ah!" said Wyndham. "Well, we've done with business for to-night. Tell me about my uncle."

Ellams drained his glass and Marston noted that his hand shook. The man had obviously suffered much from ague and

fever.

"Rupert Wyndham was here before me," Ellams began. "Procter was agent when he arrived and Procter had got some native habits. That's a risk men who indulge their curiosity run in Africa. There's danger of forgetting one is white. I imagine it was unlucky Rupert began with Procter; his was a strange, adventurous temperament – "

"I'm told I have some of Rupert's characteristics," Wyndham remarked. "But go on."

"When your uncle came out, there was no rule but the negro headman's. British authority stopped a few miles from the outpost stockade, and traders made their own laws; they lived and drank hard. In some ways, things are not very different yet. We kill mosquitoes and dig drains, but Africa doesn't change.

"Well, Procter had gone the way some white men go, and when he died your uncle got a jar. Rupert had only known England and he was young, but I don't mean he was daunted. Rather he lost his balance and started on a line he ought to have left alone. Sometimes he talked about the thing. I suspect he knew the Leopards killed Procter."

"The *Leopards*?" Marston interrupted.

"The Ghost Leopards, a secret society. In this country, there are a number, run by the Ju-Ju priests. They're supposed to use magic, but they're a power in native politics and have given the British government trouble. Perhaps the Leopards are the strongest. The bushmen believe they can take the form of the

animals, and when they like make themselves invisible. Anyhow, the headman they don't approve seldom rules very long – "

Ellams paused for a few moments and resumed: "It was a hot night when Rupert Wyndham thought he heard Procter call. He said his voice was choked and faint. He got up; he occupied the room yonder – " Ellams indicated a door opposite and went on: "There was no light, but the moon shone through the window behind us. Rupert had only been awake a few moments and heard nothing but the faint cry. He ran out in his pyjamas and found Procter on the floor. Procter's body was warm, but when Wyndham tried to lift him he saw he was dead. He lay across the cracked board where Mr. Marston sits."

Marston half-consciously pushed back his chair. "But what indicated the Leopards?"

"There were strange marks on Procter's throat. Wyndham thought they looked like the marks of claws."

Marston pondered while Ellams filled his glass. He pictured the huddled figure in pyjamas lying across the rotten boards, and the marks on the throat. As a rule his nerve was good, but the picture daunted him and he did not like his comrade's strange, fixed look. In a sense, the story was ridiculous; that is, it would have looked ridiculous in England, but Africa was different. Theatrical tragedy was not strange there, and he did not think Ellams had exaggerated much.

"Well," said the latter, "in the morning Wyndham found the factory boys had gone. He was alone with Procter and could get

no help; besides, he had a dose of fever and when malaria grips you, your imagination works. He said perhaps the worst was the quietness and the buzzing of the flies. He dug a grave, but could not get Procter down the steps; fever makes one very limp, you know. Well, he sat there all day, keeping the flies off Procter, and in the evening a Millers' launch came up stream."

"A ghastly day!" said Marston, but Wyndham signed to Ellams.

"You haven't told it all. Go on."

"I'm an old servant and you're the head of the house," Ellams replied meaningly. "Well, I think that day left a mark on Rupert Wyndham. When I arrived he was moody and often brooded, but it looked as if he had a talent for managing the bushmen. They seemed to understand him and the business was growing fast. He began to go up river, although I imagine no other trader had reached the native market then. It was good for business; our oil was first quality and we got stuff, skins and sometimes ivory, Millers' and the Association couldn't buy. Besides, there were bits of pottery, brass, and silver work, the Fulah brought across the desert. Wyndham said the patterns were Sarascenic and the stuff was hundreds of years old. The house knew where to sell the goods at home. Once or twice we got Aggri beads."

"I didn't know about that," Wyndham remarked and turned to Marston. "In Africa, Aggri beads are worth almost any price you like to ask. We can't imitate them and don't know how they are made. It's very rare for a negro headman to let an Aggri go."

Ellams made a sign of agreement, and gave Wyndham an apologetic glance. "You see what this implies?"

"I think I see. My uncle was getting native habits; he was getting an influence – "

"He stopped away from the factory longer. Men with tattoo marks I didn't know came down and talked to him, and sometimes brought no trade. I thought he ran risks and warned him, but he laughed. It went on, and we were getting rich when the change began. Our trade did not fall off much, but one felt a difference – "

Ellams paused, and looked thoughtful when he resumed: "I can't altogether make things plain; there was a feeling of insecurity, and Wyndham's moodiness got worse. He did not go away so much, and locked his room door at night. I think he did not sleep and took some draught; not drugs white men use, but stuff the negroes make. When he did sleep, he was strangely hard to rouse. He was cool and as nearly fearless as any man I knew, but he began to look haggard and start at unexpected sounds. One morning I could not wake him and went round to the veranda window. Wyndham was fast asleep and a gun lay across his bed. He was a good shot with a pistol, but this was a heavy duck-gun that threw an ounce and a quarter of shot. Well, I was getting nervy, and the factory boys would not stop – it looked as if they knew something was wrong. I began to wonder how long Wyndham could keep it up."

The others were quiet when Ellams reached for the cocktail

jug and finding it empty filled his pipe. Marston had spent some weeks on the African coast and sympathized with the agent. When one had seen the country and breathed the foul miasma that saps the white man's strength, one could understand the strain Ellams talked about. It was a daunting country and the gloom of its steamy forests was the shadow of death.

"After all," said Ellams, "there was no theatrical climax. One day a launch brought us a cablegram. Wyndham was wanted at home, the ebb tide was running and a mailboat was due to call at Takana lagoon. In an hour *Columbine* dropped down stream and my notion is it was a relief to Wyndham the cablegram arrived. If it had not arrived, he would have stayed. He was that kind of man."

"Had you trouble afterwards?" Marston asked.

"I had not. It was as if a shadow had melted. The strain had gone."

"Then it looks as if my uncle, alone, were threatened." Wyndham remarked.

Ellams nodded. "Yes. I think it was, so to speak, a personal thing. For all that, our trade got slack and has not since touched the mark it reached in your uncle's time. Well, I think that's all, and perhaps I have talked too much."

"If you'll mix another cocktail, we'll go to bed," Wyndham replied and when, a few minutes afterwards, he went to his room stopped at the door.

"This is where Rupert Wyndham slept with the gun beside

him, I suppose?" he said. "I wonder what he dreamed about!"

For some time Marston did not sleep. As a rule, he did not indulge his imagination, but he had been disturbed by the agent's tale and there were strange noises. Some he thought were made by cracking boards and falling damp; others puzzled him and he found them daunting in the dark. They were like footsteps, as if somebody stole about the rooms. Marston had had enough of Africa and yet the country had a mysterious charm. White men stayed, knowing the risk they ran and without much hope of money reward, until they died of fever or their minds got deranged. The latter happened now and then. In order to keep sane, one must concentrate on one's business and refuse to speculate about the secret life of the bush. After all, there was much to speculate about —

Marston pulled himself up. He was a sober white man and had nothing to do with the negro's fantastic superstitions. Magic and witchcraft were ridiculous, but in a country where they were a ruling force it was not easy to laugh. He thought Rupert Wyndham had made rash experiments and had dared too much, and although this was perhaps not important, Harry had his uncle's temperament. The trouble was there. Still they would leave the river soon and it would be a relief to go to sea. The sea was clean and bracing.

Three or four days afterwards *Columbine* dropped down stream on the ebb. A big naked Krooboy held the wheel, another in the fore-channels swung the lead and called the depth in a

musical voice. The white factory got indistinct and melted into the swamps, the puffs of wind were fresher, and Marston was conscious of a keen satisfaction as the dreary mangroves slipped astern and yellow sand and lines of foam came into view ahead.

Wyndham, smoking a cigarette, leaned against the rail. He wore white duck without a crease and a big pale-gray hat. Marston thought he looked very English, with his keen blue eyes, light hair, and red skin, but his gaze was contemplative.

"You're not sorry to get away?" he presently remarked. "I wonder whether Rupert Wyndham was."

"I wonder why he stayed," said Marston. "Unless, of course, he was earning money."

"A plausible explanation, but I'm not sure it's good," Wyndham replied with a smile. "The head of our house was often extravagant but never, I think, a miser. We're not a greedy lot."

"You were traders; the object of trading is to get rich."

"I doubt if this was my uncle's, or some of my other ancestors' object, I think they valued money for what it would buy. Anyhow, they seldom kept it long."

"Since most of us value money for what it will buy, I don't understand," Marston rejoined.

"You bought a country house, a sober sportsman's life, and the liking of honest friends. Well, your investments were sound, but there are men of other temperaments they mightn't satisfy. I don't think they would have satisfied Rupert Wyndham."

"Then what did he expect to get in the swamps?"

"I don't know," said Wyndham, with a curious smile. "Perhaps strange experiences; perhaps knowledge and power. I imagine he knew he must buy them and was willing to pay."

"Power over tattooed bushmen!" Marston exclaimed. "What could they teach him?"

"Things we have begun to experiment with and their Ju-Ju men knew long since. The white man who knows the meaning of their tattoo marks has gone some distance; they're not all tribal signs. However, I don't know what Rupert Wyndham learned and it looks as if I shall not find out. Our object's very matter of fact; to earn as much money as possible."

"That is so. I mean to stick to it," said Marston firmly.

Wyndham laughed. "I expect you mean to see I take your line! Well, it's a good line. But we're getting near the bar. Suppose you fetch the chart?"

CHAPTER V

THE TORNADO

The night was hot and nearly calm, and Marston, sitting on the cabin skylight, languidly looked about. A Krooboy held the wheel, and his dark figure cut against the phosphorescent sea. *Columbine's* bulwarks were low and when she rolled the long, smooth swell ran level with their top. A dim glow came from the compass binnacle, but the schooner was close-hauled and the Kroo steered by the faint strain on the helm. The wind was light and baffling and *Columbine* beat against it as she worked along the coast.

She carried all her canvas and her high gaff-topsail swung rhythmically across the sky, shutting out the stars. Her dark mainsail looked very big and every now and then shook down a shower of dew as its slack curves swelled. A small moon touched the tops of the undulations with silver light, and when the bows went down the foam that leaped about the planks glimmered with green and gold. Booms and blocks rattled and timbers groaned.

Marston could not see the land, which was hidden by the sour, hot mist that at sunset rolls off the African coast. He did not want to see it; he hoped he had done with Africa, but he doubted. *Columbine* was on the track the keels of the old slavers plowed, and he felt that the shadow of the dark country might follow him across the sea. Long since, Africa had peopled

South America and the West Indies; Wyndham's ancestors had helped in that. One found mangrove swamps, fever, and negro superstition on the Caribbean coast, and it was significant that Rupert Wyndham had vanished there. The trouble was Harry had inherited something of his uncle's temperament. All the same, Marston had undertaken to stand by him and meant to do so.

The breeze got lighter, the wet canvas flapped, and *Columbine* hardly made steerage way. She rolled until her bulwarks touched the water and threw off fiery foam. One could not stand on her slanted deck, and blocks and spars made a hideous din. In the distance, the roar of surf rose and fell with a measured beat. Somewhere in the mist the big combers crashed upon a hammered beach. It did not matter if there was wind or not; the white band of surf had fringed the coast since the world was young.

Marston found his watch dreary. There was nothing to do; nothing, that he could see, threatened, and the scattered light clouds hardly moved across the sky. He was filling his pipe when he heard a step and saw Wyndham by the wheel. He knew him by his white duck; the negro crew did not wear much clothes.

"Hallo!" he said. "My watch is not up."

"I was awake," Wyndham replied. "Felt I ought to get on deck. The glass is falling."

"Did you feel you ought to come *after* you noted this?"

"Before," said Wyndham, dryly. "I didn't know the glass had dropped until I got a light, but it looks as if I might have stayed

below. However, since I have turned out, we'll haul down the main-topsail."

He gave an order and two Krooboys got to work. There was no obvious reason for lowering the sail, but when Wyndham ordered the negroes obeyed. Although they grinned with frank good-humor when Marston talked to them, he knew he did not share Wyndham's authority. Yet Harry was not harsh.

When the sail was lowered Wyndham looked about. Some of the scattered clouds had rolled together and the sky was black over the land. One could scarcely feel the light wind, but the surf had got louder. Its roar came out of the dark as if heavy trains were running along the coast.

"It looks ridiculous, particularly since I'd like to edge her farther off the beach, but I think we'll stow the mainsail and fore-staysail," Wyndham remarked.

Marston agreed. Although he could see no grounds for shortening sail, he trusted Wyndham's judgment, and the Krooboys got to work again. The ropes, however, were stiff and swollen with the dew, and the mainsail came down slowly. The heavy folds of canvas caught between the topping-lifts; the gaff-jaws jambed on the mast. Wyndham sent a man aloft to sit upon and ride down the spar, but this did not help much, and the boom along the foot of the sail lurched with violent jerks. Blocks banged and loose ropes whipped across the deck. The sweat ran down Marston's face; he wanted to finish the job. For one thing, *Columbine* was unmanageable while the half-lowered

canvas flapped about.

Stopping a moment for breath, he glanced over the rail. The long swell sparkled with small points of light that coalesced in sheets of green flame when the undulations broke against the schooner's side. The deck was spangled with luminous patches by the splashes and the wake that trailed astern was bright. *Columbine* stole through the water although the wind had nearly gone. It was not worth while to bring her head-to when they shortened sail.

Then the helmsman shouted and Marston felt one side of his face and body cool. The loose canvas flapped noisily. Its folds shook out and swelled, and Marston seized a rope. His skin prickled; he felt a strange tension and a feverish desire to drag down the sticking gaff. A few moments afterwards, something flickered behind the sail and a peal of thunder drowned the noise on board. When it died away, rolling hull, slanted masts, and the figures of the men stood out, wonderfully sharp, against a dazzling blaze that vanished and left bewildering dark. The next peal of thunder deafened Marston, who thought Wyndham shouted but heard no words. This did not matter, because he knew they must secure the sail before the tornado broke, and he pulled at the downhaul. He could not hear the wind for the thunder, but it had begun to blow.

The sail swelled between the confining ropes, there was a noise on one side of the yacht, water foamed along the planks, and she began to swing. It looked as if the steersman were putting

up the helm. The peak of the gaff was nearly down; with another good pull they could seize it and lash it to the boom. Then a dazzling flash touched the deck. Marston saw Wyndham run aft and push the Kroo from the wheel, but this was the last he saw clearly for sometime. He imagined the fellow had meant to run the yacht off before the squall; one could ease the strain of a sudden blast like that, but if the squall lasted, they could not shorten sail while she was before the wind. Now she was coming round. Wyndham had put the helm down. It looked as if he were too late.

The tornado broke upon her side and she went over until her lee rail was in the sea. There was a noise like a thunder-clap forward as a sail blew away; Marston thought it was the jib. He could see nothing. It had got impenetrably dark, but he had a vague notion that water rushed along the deck and the mainsail had broken loose and blown out between the ropes. Unless they could master it, the mast would go. He heard another report forward and thought somebody had loosed the staysail halyards and the sail had blown to rags. Although his eyes were useless, he knew what was going on.

But they must secure the main gaff, and clutching at the boom above his head, he swung himself up and worked along to its outer end, which stretched over the stern. A footrope ran below the spar; one could balance oneself by its help and he vaguely distinguished somebody close by. It was, no doubt, Wyndham, because his clothes looked white. There was no use in shouting.

The uproar drowned one's voice; besides, their job was plain. They must get a rope round the end of the gaff and lash it fast.

Marston's waist was on the boom; his feet stuck out behind him, braced against the rope. In front there was a dark gulf. This was, no doubt, the hollow of the sail, and the indistinct slanting line above was the gaff. He threw a rope across the latter, but the end did not drop, so that he could seize it under the sail; the wind blew it out, straight and tight. He tried again, farther aft, jostling against the figure that looked faintly white, and leaning down across the boom, caught the end of the rope. The other man helped him and when they had got a loop round the end of the gaff he stopped for breath. He was shaky after the effort, his heart thumped painfully, and his chest rose and fell. He imagined other men were on the boom, but he and his companion were all that mattered. They must lash the peak down before the sail blew out again. When this was done, the others could master the distended folds.

The wet rope tore his hands; he felt them get slippery with blood, but he held on and the man beside him helped. Marston knew he was not a Kroo. The Kroos were bold sailors, but their resolution had a limit. When a job looked hopeless they gave up; the man beside Marston was another type. While there was breath in his body he would stick to his task. The sail must be conquered.

Lightning played about them and Marston's eyes were dazzled by the changes from intolerable glare to dark. He trusted to

the feel of things and his seaman's knowledge of what was happening. He did not think, but worked half-consciously. They made the gaff fast, and then something broke and the heavy boom swung out over the sea. The jerk threw Marston's feet from the rope and his body began to slip off the boom. He saw fiery foam below, but as he braced himself for the plunge the next man seized him. It looked as if they must both slip off, for Marston found no hold for his hands on the smooth, wet spar. Perhaps the pressure of the wind saved them by forcing their limp bodies against the boom, for the other man steadied Marston until his foot touched the rope again.

For a moment or two they hung on, not daring to move and waiting until they gathered strength. Then they carefully worked their way to the inner end of the spar and dropped, exhausted, on the deck. There was however, no rest for them. The massive boom must be dragged back and dropped into its crutch. It could not be left to lurch about and smash all it struck. Marston was vaguely conscious that a gang of Krooboys ran to the mainsheet and Wyndham directed their efforts. He, himself, could do no more, and he leaned against the rail, breathing hard.

As his exhaustion vanished he began to note things. The men had secured the boom; but the schooner's bows looked bare and he remembered the jibs had blown away. The foresail was torn and half-lowered, and the gaff at its head was jambed. The torn canvas kept the vessel from falling off the wind, but would not bring her up enough for her to lie to. Masts and deck were

horribly slanted, the windward bulwark was hove high up, and luminous spray drove across its top. It looked as if she were going over and there was an appalling din, for the scream of the tornado pierced the thunder.

Then lightning enveloped the yacht and ran along the water. For an instant Marston saw Wyndham's white figure at the wheel, and then he groped his way towards him in the puzzling dark. Harry would need help, for Marston knew what he meant to do. Since *Columbine* would not come up, he was going to run her off before the wind in order to ease the horrible pressure that bore her down. The trouble was, the tornado blew from sea, and land was near. Marston seized the wheel, and using all his strength, helped Wyndham to pull it round. She felt her rudder and began to swing, lifting her lee rail out of the water. Then she came nearly upright with a jerk, and although the tornado was deafening, Marston thought he heard the water roar as it leaped against her bows.

The speed she made lifted her forward and a white wave curled abreast of the rigging. She was going like a train and Marston sweated and gasped as he helped at the wheel. There was nothing to do but let her run, although it was obvious she could not run long. A glance at the lighted compass indicated that she was heading for the land, where angry surf beat upon an inhospitable beach. If they tried to bring her round, the masts would go and she might capsize.

She drove on and presently the thunder stopped. Rain that fell

in sheets swept the deck and beat their clothes against their skin. One heard nothing but the roar of the deluge and the darkness could not be pierced. After a few minutes Marston felt the strain on the wheel get easier and lost the sense of speed. The deck did not seem to be lifted forward and he thought the bows had resumed their proper level. When he turned his head the rain no longer lashed his face, the foresail flapped, and the straining, rattling noises began again. It looked as if the wind had suddenly got light.

"Let's bring her round," he shouted and heard his voice hoarse and loud.

Wyndham signed agreement, they turned the wheel, and the crew ran about the deck. She came round and a few minutes afterwards headed out to sea, lurching slowly across the swell that now rolled and broke with crests of foam. The sky had cleared, but not far off an ominous rumble came out of the gloom astern.

"We'll wait for daybreak before we make sail," Wyndham remarked. "You can get below. My watch has begun."

"I suppose you were with me on the boom?"

"I was on the boom," said Wyndham. "Somebody else was near."

"Do you imply you didn't know whom it was when you held me up?"

"Oh, well," said Wyndham, laughing, "it's not important. Suppose I had grabbed a Krooboy who was falling? Do you imagine I ought to have let him go? Anyhow, we helped each

other. I don't expect I'd have reached the deck if I had been alone."

Marston said no more. One felt some reserve when one talked about things like that. He looked to windward, and seeing the night was calm, went below.

CHAPTER VI

THE MIDDLE PASSAGE

Marston lounged with languid satisfaction on a locker in the stern cabin. He had borne some strain and his body felt strangely slack although his brain was active. The cabin was small and very plain, because the yacht had been altered below decks when she was fitted for carrying cargo. Moisture trickled down the matchboarded ceiling, big warm drops fell from the beams, and a brass lamp swung about as she rolled. Marston, however, knew this was an illusion; the beams moved but the lamp was still.

There were confused noises. Water washed about inside the lurching hull, although a sharp clank overhead indicated that somebody was occupied at the pump; water gurgled, with a noise like rolling gravel, outside the planks. Timbers groaned, a seam in the matchboarding opened and shut, and a dull concussion shook the boat when her bows plunged into the swell. The swell was high, although the wind had dropped. Marston knew these noises and found them soothing. They belonged to the sea, and he loved the sea, although he had not long since fought it for his life. Now the strain was over, he felt the struggle with the tornado had braced and steadied him.

In the tropics, it was the land he did not like. Perhaps he was getting morbid, for after all he had not seen much of the African coast and yet it frankly daunted him. His confused

recollections were like a bad dream; muddy lagoons surrounded by dreary mangroves from which the miasma stole at night, hot and steamy forests where mysterious dangers lurked, and rotting damp factories from which the burning sun could not drive the shadow that weighed the white man down. Marston was not imaginative, but he had felt the gloom.

He pondered about it curiously. The shadow was, so to speak, impalpable; vague yet sinister. Now and then white men rebelled against it with noisy revels, but when the liquor was out the gloom crept back and some drank again until they died. Yet the coast had a subtle charm, against which it was prudent to steel oneself. The shadow was a reflection of the deeper gloom in which the naked bushmen moved and served the powers that rule the dark.

Fever-worn traders declared there were such powers. One heard strange stories that the men who told them obviously believed. It looked as if the Ju-Ju magicians were not altogether impostors; they knew things the white man did not and by this knowledge ruled. Their rule was owned and firm. Marston had thought it ridiculous, but now he doubted. There was something behind the hocus-pocus; something that moved one's curiosity and tempted one to rash experiment. Marston knew this was what he feared. Harry was rash and had rather felt the fascination than the gloom.

Marston banished his disturbing thoughts and began to muse about their struggle with the sail. Harry was a normal, healthy white man then. It was rather his sailor's instincts than conscious

resolution that led him to keep up the fight when it looked as if he must be thrown off the boom. He would have been thrown off before he owned he was beaten. One did things like that at sea, because they must be done, and did not think them fine. Marston reviewed the fight, remembering his terror when he slipped and how his confidence returned after Harry seized his arm. The thought of the lonely plunge had daunted him; it was different when he knew he would not plunge alone. If Harry and he could not reach the deck, they would drop into the dark together. That was all, but it meant much. For one thing, it meant that Marston must go where his comrade went, although he might not like the path. In the meantime he was tired and got into his bunk.

When he went on deck in the morning the breeze was fresh and *Columbine* drove through the water under all plain sail, for they had some spare canvas on board. The sky was clear and the sun sparkled on the foam that leaped about the bows and ran astern in a broad white wake. The old boat was fast and there was something exhilarating in her buoyant lift and roll. Marston and Wyndham got breakfast under an awning on deck. Wyndham wore thin white clothes and a silk belt. His skin was burned a dark red and his keen blue eyes sparkled. One saw the graceful lines of his muscular figure; he looked alert and virile.

"You're fresh enough this morning," Marston remarked. "My back is sore and my arms ache. It was a pretty big strain to secure the gaff."

Wyndham laughed. "If the sail had blown away from us, the

mast would have gone and the boat have drifted into the surf."

"I suppose we knew this unconsciously. Anyhow, I didn't argue about the thing."

"You held on," said Wyndham. "Well, I expect it's an example of an instinct men developed when they used the old sailing ships. They must beat the sea or drown, and sometimes the safety of all depended on the nerve of one. I expect it led to a kind of class-conscientiousness. The common need produced a code."

"The instinct's good. Somehow, all you learn at sea is good; I mean, it's morally bracing."

Wyndham smiled and indicated a faint dark line that melted into the horizon on the starboard hand.

"It's different in Africa, for example?"

"Oh, well," said Marston cautiously, "Africa has drawbacks, but if you don't get fever and are satisfied to look at things on the surface, you might stay there sometime and not get much harm."

Wyndham saw Marston meant to warn him and was amused. Bob was rather obvious, but he was sincere.

"Suppose you're not satisfied with things as they look on the surface and want to find out what they are beneath?" he asked.

"Then I think you ought to clear out and go back to the North."

"A simple plan! As a rule, your plans are simple. I'm curious, however, and sometimes like to indulge my curiosity. It's easily excited in Africa. There is much the white man doesn't know; he's hardly begun to grasp the negro's point of view."

"The negro has no point of view. He gropes in the dark."

"I doubt it," said Wyndham thoughtfully. "I rather imagine he sees a light, but perhaps not the light we know. There's a rude order in his country and men with knowledge rule. The Leopards, the Ghost Crocodiles, and the other strange societies don't hold power for nothing. Power that's felt has some foundation."

"You like power," Marston remarked.

Wyndham smiled and looked about while he felt for another cigarette. *Columbine*, swaying rhythmically to the heave of the swell, drove through the sparkling water with a shower of spray blowing across her weather bow. Her tall canvas gleamed against the blue sky. A Krooboy lounged at the wheel, the most part of his muscular body naked and a broad blue stripe running down his forehead. Two or three more squatted in the shade of a sail. At the galley door the cook sang a monotonous African song. The wire shrouds hummed like harpstrings, striking notes that changed with the tension as the vessel rolled. There was nothing to do but lounge and talk and Wyndham's mood was confidential.

"I have not known much power," he said. "In England, power must be bought. My father was poor but careless; my mother was sternly conventional. When he died she tried to turn my feet into the regular, beaten path. I know now she was afraid I would follow my ancestors' wandering steps. Well, at school, I had the smallest allowance among the boys, and learned to plot for things my comrades enjoyed. As a rule, I got the things. I don't know if the effort was good or not, but I was ambitious and wanted a leading place. Folks like you don't know what it costs to hold

one's ground."

"I expect I got things easily," Marston agreed. "Perhaps this was lucky, because I've no particular talent."

"You have one talent that is worth all mine," Wyndham rejoined with some feeling. "People trust you, Bob."

Marston colored, but Wyndham went on: "When I left school and went to Wyndhams' there was not much change. For the most part, my friends were rich, and I had a clerk's pay, with a vague understanding that at some far off time I might be the head of the house. The house was obviously tottering; I did not think it would stand until I got control. My uncle, Rupert's brother, would not see. Wyndhams' had stood so long he felt it was self-supporting and would stand. Well, he was kind, and I'm glad he died without knowing how near we really were to a fall.

"However, I didn't mean to talk about the house, but rather about my life when I was a shipping clerk. I had ambition and thought I had talent; I hated to be left behind by my friends. It cost much planning to share their amusements, join a good yacht club, and race my boat. Sportsmen like you don't know the small tricks and shabbiness we others are forced to use. Well, at length my uncle died and I got control of the falling house, with its load of debt. I'd long been rash, but the rashest thing I did was when I fell in love with Flora. Yet she loved me, and Chisholm, with some reserves, has given his consent. I have got to satisfy him and with this in view, we're bound for the Caribbean on board a thirty-year-old yacht."

Marston thought Wyndham did not look daunted. In a sense, his venture was reckless, but Harry tried, and did, things others thought beyond their powers. On the whole Marston imagined his boldness was justified.

"If money can help, you know where it can be got," he said.

Wyndham's half-ironical glance softened.

"Thanks, Bob! So far, I haven't gone begging from my friends; but if I can use your money without much risk, I will borrow. I think you know this."

"What's mine is yours," Marston remarked and went to the cabin for a chart, with which he occupied himself.

He studied the chart and sailing directions when he had nothing to do and was rather surprised that Wyndham did not. It was a long run to the Caribbean and would be longer if they drifted into the equatorial calms. Marston had a yacht master's certificate, although he was rather a seaman than a navigator. He could find his way along the coast by compass and patent-log, but to steer an ocean course was another thing. One must be exact when one calculated one's position by the height of the sun and stars.

For some time they made good progress and then the light wind dropped and *Columbine* rolled about in a glassy calm. The swell ran in long undulations that shone with reflected light, and there was no shade, for they lowered all sail to save the canvas from burning and chafing. The sun pierced the awning, and it was intolerably hot. They had reached the dangerous part of the old

slavers' track; the belt of stagnant ocean where the south wind stopped and the north-east had not begun. The belt had been marked long since by horrors worse than wreck, for while the crowded brigs and schooners drifted under the burning sun, fresh water ran out and white men got crazed with rum while negroes died from thirst.

Wyndham lounged one morning under the awning after his bath. He wore silk pyjamas, a red silk belt, and a wide hat of double felt. He looked cool and Marston thought he harmonized with his surroundings; the background of dazzling water, the slanted masts that caught the light as they swung, and the oily black figures of the naked crew. He wondered whether Harry had inherited something from ancestors who had known the tragedies of the middle passage. Marston himself was wet with sweat, his eyes ached, and his head felt full of blood.

"We may drift about for some time," he said, throwing down a book he had tried to read. "The sailing directions indicate that the Trades are variable near their southern limit."

"It's a matter of luck," Wyndham agreed, and Marston started because his comrade's next remark chimed with his thoughts. "When I studied some of the house's old records I found that two of our brigs vanished in the calm belt. One wondered how they went. Fire perhaps, or the slaves broke the hatch at night. Can't you picture their pouring out like ants and bearing down the drunken crew? The crews did drink; slaving was not a business for sober men. Hogsheads of rum figure in our old victualing

bills."

He paused and resumed with a hard smile: "Well, it was a devilish trade. One might speculate whether the responsibility died with the men engaged in it and vanished with the money they earned. None of the Wyndhams seem to have kept money long; luck went hard against them. When they did not squander, misfortune dogged the house."

"Superstition!" Marston exclaimed.

Wyndham laughed. "It's possible, but superstition's common and all men are not fools. I expect their fantastic imaginings hold a seed of truth. Perhaps somebody here and there finds the seed and makes it grow."

"In Africa, they water the soil with blood. It's not a white man's gardening." Marston rejoined and went forward to the bows, but got no comfort there.

The sea shone like polished steel, heaving in long folds without a wrinkle on its oily surface. But for the sluggish rise and fall, one might have imagined no wind had blown since the world was young.

For a week *Columbine* rolled about, and then one morning faint blue lines ran across the sea to the north. Gasping and sweating with the effort, they hoisted sail and sent up the biggest topsail drenched with salt water. Sometimes it and the light balloon jib filled and although the lower canvas would not draw, *Columbine* began to move. One could not feel her progress, there was no strain on the helm, but silky ripples left her side and slowly

trailed astern.

For all that, she went the wrong way, heading south into the calm, and they could not bring her round. Her rudder had no grip when they turned the wheel, and sometimes she stopped for an hour and then crawled on again. The Krooboys panted in the shade of the shaking sails, and Marston groaned and swore when he took his glasses and slackly climbed the rigging. The dark-blue lines were plainer, three or four miles off, and he thought they marked the edge of the Trade-breeze.

Wyndham alone looked unmoved; he lay in a canvas chair under the awning, and smoked and seemed to dream. Marston wondered what he dreamed about and hoped it was Flora. In the afternoon Marston felt he must find some relief.

"I want to launch a boat and tow her," he said. "There's wind enough not far off to keep her steering."

Wyndham nodded. "Very well. It's recorded that they towed the *Providence* for three days and used up a dozen negroes in the boats, besides some gallons of rum. The fellow who kept the log was obviously methodical. However, I want to keep our boys, and you can't tow in the sun."

"It's unthinkable," Marston agreed. "We'll begin at dark."

CHAPTER VII

THE TOW

At sunset they hoisted out two boats, for wages are low in Africa and *Columbine* carried a big crew. Wyndham stopped on board to steer while Marston went in the gig, and the sun touched the horizon when he began to uncoil a heavy warp. He was only occupied for a few minutes but when he had finished it was dark. The relief from the glare was soothing and the gloom was marked by a mistiness that gave him hope. He knew a faint haze often follows the North-East Trades.

The Krooboys dipped the oars, and the water glimmered with luminous spangles under the blades and fell like drops of liquid fire. This was all the light, except for the sparkle at *Columbine's* bows as she slowly forged ahead. She came on, towering above the boats in a vague dark mass, until she sank with the swell and the tightening rope jerked them rudely back. On heaving water, towing a large vessel is strenuous work, for her progress is a series of plunges and one cannot keep an even strain on the rope.

When they began to row Marston's boat was drawn back under the yacht's iron martingale. Her bowsprit loomed above it, threatening and big, and the oars bent as the Kroos drove the boat ahead. In a few moments she stopped and forged back towards the yacht, but the jerk was less violent. *Columbine* was moving faster and the heavy warp worked like a spring, easing the shock.

Marston's business, however, was to tow her round and when she began to turn he had trouble to keep his boat in line. The tightening rope rasped across her stern, the gig swerved and listed over, until it looked as if she would capsize. The oars on one side were buried deep, the men could not clear them for another stroke, and the threatening martingale rose and fell close astern.

Marston, when the rope would let him, sculled with a long oar, and presently the skin peeled from his hands. His throat got parched, sweat ran down his face and he gasped with straining breath, but it was better to use his strength than risk the martingale's being driven into his back. They pulled her round and it was easier afterwards although he could not relax much. The yacht was stealing through the water, but they must keep up her speed or the violent jerks would begin again. It was only possible to rest for a moment on the crest of the swell when the warp absorbed the backward pull.

A negro began to sing and the rest took up the chorus. The air was strange and dreary but somehow musical, and Marston imagined it was very old. He understood the Kroos had sung their paddling chanties long before the Elizabethan slavers touched the fever-coast. The night was very calm and dark. The figures of the men were indistinct, but when the song stopped Marston heard their labored breathing and the regular splash of oars. They rowed well and he hoped their toil was not wasted. By daybreak they might reach the edge of the wind, but the fickle zephyrs might die away and the fiery dawn break across another glassy

calm.

When he was not sculling Marston mused. He was rich and owned it strange that he was there, laboring in the boat, as the slavers labored when they towed the *Providence*, two hundred years ago. He wondered why men went to sea in sailing ships, to bear fatigues nobody endured at home, to fight for life on slanted yards, and stagger waist-deep about flooded decks. Yet one went, and sometimes went for no reward. The thing was puzzling.

After all, the sea had a touch of romance one felt nowhere else. It was something to brave the middle passage, although one had enough fresh water and no frenzied slaves on board. Marston thought about the old brigs – they towed the *Providence* three days, under the burning tropic sun. He could picture her. She rode low in the water, with her stone ballast, and freight of parched humanity packed close on the tween-decks and in the bottom hold. She had tall masts, for speed was needed, and the weight aloft would make her plunge and roll. The jerks on the towline embarrassed the boats, but white men drove the exhausted negroes with whips and curses until they dropped the oars and died. Yet they towed her three days.

Marston could not see his watch and wondered how long it was to sunrise. It was unthinkable they should go on rowing in the heat of day; he was tired now and remembering the dark ripples alone sustained him. He thought they had nearly reached the spot where the surface was disturbed, but the fickle puffs of wind might have dropped. Stopping sculling for a few moments,

he turned his head. His face was wet with sweat but he felt no coolness on his skin. It was very dark and ominously calm.

He took up the long oar again, twisting it with bleeding hands and bracing his legs. They must keep *Columbine* moving and his business was to hold the boat straight; trouble with the warp would follow if she took a sheer. For all that, he could not hold out long. He had taken life easily and his body revolted from the strain. In fact, he was beaten now, but it counted for much that the Krooboys rowed. They were raw savages and he was white. They owned his control, but all the advantages money could buy for him had gone. Nothing was left but the primitive strength and stubbornness of human nature. He must not be beaten; he owed it to the ruling stock from which he sprang, and with a stern effort he tugged at the oar.

At length, he felt an elusive chill, and wiping his wet face, looked about. In the east, it was not quite so dark, and when he turned his head the yacht looked blacker and not so large. Hull and sails were no longer blurred; their outline was getting sharp, and he noted that the balloon jib swelled in a gentle curve. One side of his face got cold and when he began to scull again he thought the strain on the rope was less.

A belt of smoky red spread swiftly along the horizon, he heard the high gaff topsail flap, booms rattled and then the yacht got quiet. The tow rope sank and when it tightened there was no jerk. *Columbine* was stealing up behind them.

"In oars!" said Marston hoarsely. "Let go the warp!"

The boat drifted back to the schooner and bumped against her side until somebody caught a trailing rope. Marston with an effort climbed the rail and dropping on deck saw Wyndham at the wheel.

"Shall we hoist in? The boys are done," he said.

Wyndham nodded. "Day's breaking; it will soon be blazing hot. The sun may kill the wind, but I don't know. It's a fiery dawn."

Blocks began to rattle and when the first boat swung across the rail Marston looked about. Broad beams of light stretched across the sky and the red sun rose out of the sea. He went to a chair under the awning and threw himself down. He had earned a few minutes' rest, but when they had gone he did not move and Wyndham smiled as he noted his even breath. Beckoning a Krooboy, he sent him for a blanket and gently covered the sleeping man.

Marston was wakened by a lurch that threw him off the chair, and getting up stiffly he noted the sharp slant of deck. Then he saw foam boil behind the lee rail and straining curves of canvas that kept their hollowness when the yacht rolled to windward. She trailed a snowy wake across the backs of the sparkling seas and her rigging hummed on a high, piercing note. The sky was blue, but the blue was dim and the sunshine had lost its dazzling glare. One felt a bracing quality in the breeze.

"Looks as if we had hit the *Trades*," he said. "What's her course?"

"About North, North-west," said Wyndham, who sat on the stern grating and indicated the Kroo at the wheel. "Bad Dollar is steering by the wind. I reckoned we had better make some northing while we can. Off our course, but the *Trades* are fickle in this latitude. Suppose you get your sextant. It's close on twelve o'clock."

Marston looked at the nearly vertical sun and laughed.

"I feel as if I'd just gone to sleep," he said and went below.

The breeze freshened and held, *Columbine* with all plain sail set made good speed, and they laid off a straight course on the big Atlantic chart. The risks of the middle passage were left behind. If they were lucky, she would reach far across on the starboard tack, without their shifting a rope.

Their hopes were justified and at length they made Barbadoes, and sailing between the Windward Isles, entered the Caribbean. One phase of the adventure was over, but Marston with vague misgivings realized that another had begun. Somehow he felt he had not done with the shadow he had shrunk from in Africa. For all that, nothing happened to disturb him as they followed the coast, stopping now and then at an open roadstead, and now and then in the stagnant harbor of an old Spanish town. Indeed, Marston found much that was soothingly familiar; smart liners, rusty cargo boats, and busy hotels. In parts, the towns had been modernized, but civilized comforts, and sometimes luxuries, contrasted sharply with decay and customs that had ruled since the first Spaniards came.

Wyndhams' had agents and correspondents at a number of the ports, but, as a rule, they were dark-skinned gentlemen of uncertain stock. They lived at old houses with flat tops and central patios, where the kitchen generally adjoined the stable, and transacted their business in rooms from which green shutters kept out the light. The business was accompanied by the smoking of bitter tobacco and draining of small *copitas* of scented liquor. They declared their houses were Wyndham's, but did not present him and Marston to their women.

Except for some American and German merchants they saw few white people. The citizens were mulattos of different shades, negroes, and half-breeds who sprang from Spanish and Indian stock, although it was often hard to guess what blood ran in the *Mestizos'* veins. For the most part, they were a cheerful, careless lot; the coast basked in sunshine, with high, blue mountains for a background, and Marston felt nothing of the gloom and mystery that haunted the African rivers. At some of the ports Wyndham made arrangements for the extension of the house's trade, but Marston could not tell if he was satisfied or not.

When they lounged one evening on the veranda of a big white hotel, Marston led his comrade firmly to talk about business. The hotel had long since been the home of a Spanish grandee, and although the back was ruinous the Moorish front had been altered and decorated by American enterprise. Marston thought it a compromise between the styles of Tangiers and Coney Island. The rash American had gone and the *Fonda Malaguena* owned

the rule of a fat and urbane gentleman who claimed to have come from Spain. For all that, the *Malaguena* was comfortable, and after the yacht's cramped, hot cabin, Marston liked the big shaded rooms. The wine and food were better than he had thought, and as he sat, looking out between the pillars, with a cup of very good coffee in front of him, he was satisfied to stay a few more days. Small tables occupied part of the pavement, white-clothed waiters moved about, and people talked and laughed. A band played in the plaza and tram cars jingled along the narrow street. There was a half moon and one could see the black mountains behind the ancient town.

"I don't know if I ought to grumble, but it's obvious there's not much money to be earned at the ports we've touched," Wyndham remarked. "Where steamers call and trade is regularly carried on, competition cuts down profits. You must use a big capital if you want a big return."

"It's the usual line," said Marston. "I think it's sound."

Wyndham smiled. "You like the usual line! The trouble is, my capital is small."

"Then, you have another plan?"

"I have some notions I hope to work out. Wyndhams' have agents and stores at places farther along the coast. Steamers can't get into the lagoons and we use sailing boats. The trade's small and risky, but the profit's big. We'll push on and see what can be done, although I don't expect too much."

Marston pondered. He wanted to help Wyndham and had

sometimes felt his sportsman's life was rather objectless. For one thing, he might provide himself with an occupation and perhaps stop Harry's embarking on rash adventures. To invest his money would give him some control.

"Could you make the business pay if you had a larger capital?" he asked.

"There are pretty good grounds for imagining so," Wyndham replied.

"Very well! I have more money than I need and have been looking for a chance to use my talents. So far I've kept them buried, and if I don't dig them up soon, they might rust away. If you agree, I'd like to make a start now and try a business speculation." He named a sum and added: "You promised you'd take my help when you saw how you could use the money."

"You're generous, Bob," Wyndham remarked with a touch of feeling, and then smiled. "However, I know you pretty well and think I understand your plan. You want to keep me out of trouble and see I take the prudent line. But was the plan yours or Mabel's?"

"Mine," said Marston, rather shortly. "All the same, I imagine Mabel would approve. But this has nothing to do with it and you needn't invent an object for me. I'm looking for a good investment. My lawyers only get me three or four per cent."

"Then you make no stipulation?"

"I do not," said Marston. "You will have control and command my help. If I couldn't trust you with my money, I would not have

gone to Africa with you. I won't grumble if you lose the lot. The thing's a speculation."

Wyndham knitted his brows for a few moments and then looked up.

"You're a very good sort, Bob. I'll take the loan."

"It's not a loan," said Marston firmly. "I'm buying a partnership."

"A partner is responsible for all losses and liabilities. A lender is not; he only risks the sum he invests."

"Of course," said Marston. "I understand that."

A touch of color came into Wyndham's face, but he smiled.

"Oh, well, I knew you had pluck!"

Marston got up. "Now we have agreed, we'll get to work. Let's see if the telegraph office is open. To begin with, we'll buy the lot of ballata your agent at the other port talked about."

Wyndham laughed and they set off up the hot street.

CHAPTER VIII

THE LAGOON

After a few days, *Columbine* sailed west, and one night lurched slowly across the languid swell towards the coast. There was a full moon, but Marston, standing near the negro pilot at the wheel, could not see much. Mist drifted about the forest ahead and he heard an ominous roar of surf. Although no break in the coast was distinguishable, the schooner was obviously drifting with the tide toward an opening. The wind was light and blew off the land, laden with a smell of spices and river mud. Marston did not like the smell: he had known it in Africa and when one felt the sour damp one took quinine. He had studied the chart, which did not tell him much, and since there were no marks to steer for he must trust the negro pilot.

There was a risk about going in at night and Marston would sooner have hove to and waited, but the tide rose a few inches higher than at noon, and Wyndham seldom shirked a risk when he had something to gain. By and by he jumped down from the rail where he had been using the lead.

"I expect we'll get in, but I don't know about getting out if we're loaded deep," he said.

"Do you expect much of a load?" Marston asked, because the chart did not indicate a port.

"It depends on our luck. Small quantities of stuff come down;

scarce dyestuffs, rubber, and forest produce that manufacturing chemists use. We have a half-breed agent. White men can't stand the climate long, and the natives are rather a curious lot."

"Negroes?" said Marston thoughtfully.

Wyndham laughed. "There are negroes. I understand the population's pretty mixed, with a predominating strain of African blood. I expect you don't like that, but trade's generally good at places where steamers don't touch. Profits go up when competition's languid."

Marston did not like it. He had thought his giving Wyndham money would limit their business to trading at civilized ports. He imagined Harry knew this and ought to have been satisfied, but he banished his feeling of annoyance. After all, he had made no stipulation and was perhaps indulging an illogical prejudice. He must, of course, trust his partner.

The yacht stopped with a sudden jar and her stern swung round. The sails flapped and her main boom lurched across and brought up with a crash. She bumped hard once or twice, and then floated off and went on again. The misty forest was nearer and a dim white belt indicated surf. It looked as if they were steering for an unbroken beach. Then a wave of thicker mist rolled about them and the forest was blotted out. Wyndham jumped on the rail, and Marston heard the splash of the lead. After that there was silence except for the roar of the surf, and Marston went forward to see if the anchor was clear, but Wyndham said nothing and the schooner stole on. Although the

breeze was very light, the tide carried her forward and Marston felt there was something ghostly about her noiseless progress. By and by, however, Wyndham threw the lead on the deck.

"Another half-fathom! We're across the shoals," he said. "I expect the pilot trusts the stream to keep us in the channel."

Marston nodded. He saw trees in front, and in one place, a dark blur, faintly edged by white, that he thought was a bank of mud, but all was vague and somehow daunting. The trees got blacker, although they were not more distinct, the sails flapped and then hung limp. The pilot called out, and when Marston gave an order the anchor plunged and the silence was broken by the roar of running chain. This died away when *Columbine* swung, and except for the languid rumble of the surf all was quieter than before. The pilot got on board his canoe and vanished in the mist, and a few minutes afterwards Marston went to the cabin. It was very hot, but when malaria lurks in the night mist one does not sleep on deck.

When he awoke in the morning the cabin floor slanted, and going on deck he saw why the pilot had told them to let the boom rest on the port quarter. The tide had ebbed and although its rise and fall was not large, belts of mud and channels of yellow water occupied the bed of the lagoon. All round were dingy mangroves that overlapped and hid the entrance. A little water flowed past the yacht, but it was plain that her bilge rested on the ground. The bottom shelved, but the heavy boom inclined her up the bank. There was nobody about and nothing indicated that anybody

ever visited the spot. Marston frowned, because it was hard to persuade himself he was not in Africa.

About noon a canoe arrived with two negroes on board and Marston and Wyndham were paddled to a village some miles up a creek. It was a poor place; small, whitewashed mud houses, a rusty iron store, and a row of squalid huts occupied a clearing in the forest. Wyndhams' agent had a house by the creek and received his visitors in his office. Outside the sand was dazzling, but the office was dark and comparatively cool. A reed curtain covered the window, which had no glass, there was no door, and little puffs of wind blew in. Don Felix was a fat and greasy mulatto, dressed in soiled white duck, with a broad red sash, in which an ornamental Spanish knife was stuck.

He brought out some small glasses and a bottle of scented liquor and they began to talk and smoke. The agent's English was not good and he now and then used French and Castilian words. Marston noted that he talked about a number of unimportant matters before he touched on business, and seemed unwilling to come to the subject.

"I can give you a load, but trade is bad," he said at length, and turned to the window with a gesture that seemed to indicate the forest. "The people up there are lazy and for some time have not brought much produce down."

"It's natural produce, I suppose? Stuff that grows itself," Marston remarked. "There isn't much cultivation in the bush?"

Don Felix shrugged. "*Quien sabe?* Who knows what they do

up yonder? These people they are *drôle*. Sometimes they bring me cargo. Sometimes they come to beg; there is a *fiesta* in their village, they make *fandango*, *jamboree*. The trader pays for the fiesta and gets back nothing."

"Then why do you pay?"

"It is better," Don Felix replied and looked at the door, as if to see there was nobody about. "They are *bête*, the *Mestizos*, but when one is wise one does not make enemies. There is much Obeah in the bush."

"*Obeah's* something like African Ju-Ju? Magic of a sort?" Marston suggested.

"Something like that," Wyndham agreed. "I don't know much about it." He looked at the agent. "Do you?"

Don Felix made the sign of the cross. "Me, I am good Catholic; I know nothing. They are *drôle* in the bush. When I think about their folly I laugh."

"Not always, I imagine," Wyndham remarked dryly. "However, we must persuade these folks we have goods they'd find useful. That's the beginning of trade. When a man sees he needs things somebody else has got, he gets to work and looks for something to sell. Now let's consider – "

Marston listened while his comrade talked. Harry sometimes surprised people who did not know him well. He was romantic but he had a calculating vein. Harry could plan and bargain, and Marston reflected that while the Wyndhams had long been adventurers they were traders, too. After an hour's talk he had

arranged much that promised to help the agent's business and they went back to the creek.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.