

Gilson Charles

Treasure of Kings



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Содержание

CHAPTER I-JOHN BANNISTER	5
CHAPTER II-THE COMING OF AMOS	9
CHAPTER III-THE MAP	15
CHAPTER IV-KIDNAPPED	18
CHAPTER V-I SET FORTH UPON MY VOYAGE	21
CHAPTER VI-I AM CONCERNED IN A MUTINY	25
CHAPTER VII-AND AM MADE TO PAY FOR IT	29
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	31

Gilson Charles

Treasure of Kings Being the Story of the Discovery of the Big Fish, or the Quest of the Greater Treasure of the Incas of Peru

CHAPTER I-JOHN BANNISTER

I shall never forget the day on which I first set eyes upon John Bannister. I was then a boy-sixteen years of age, if I remember rightly-and I stood before him, tongue-tied by the questions that he asked me, wondering how he had come by the great ugly, horrid scar upon his face, awed-indeed, I think, a little frightened-by the great muscles in his forearms, naked to the elbows, his rough weather-beaten face with skin like leather, and above all else by the stature of the man.

For he was a giant-a giant such as I had dreamed of when a child. As some such figure had I pictured Giant Despair, when my mother had read to me from *Pilgrim's Progress*: "And Giant Despair was in one of his fits again." I had pictured Strength and Madness let loose amid a thunderstorm of wrath. And when I first looked upon him who was to be my champion and my comrade. I forgot his soft, kindly words and pleasing smile, and could only think how terrible he must be in anger.

There is a strip of beach upon the Sussex coast, so many miles from nowhere, where the sand-snipe gather and seldom a human being may be seen. There, as a lad, I would love to roam, with no certain object in view, but just to find what I could, to observe what chanced to come my way, and, when wearied of wandering, to sit upon the shingle over and above those plains of wet, grey sand and think of all manner of things as my boyish fancy pleased.

I was seated thus one April morning, far from home, and wondering how my tired legs would carry me back to dinner, when my attention was attracted to two strange birds, of a kind that I could not remember to have seen before. The sea was calm as glass, the sun hot as August. They were large birds, and were engaged-so far as I could see at a distance of more than a hundred yards-in dragging from the shallow water what might have been the carcass of a fish.

I watched them, greatly interested, forgetful even of my appetite, possibly for five minutes; and then there came a heavy step upon the shingle at my back.

I turned quickly, to behold the figure of John Bannister. Like some great beast of prey, he had broken his way quite noiselessly through a thick brake of that shrub which, I think, is called sea-buckthorn-though I never knew one tree from another. And he stood regarding me, with his hands upon his hips.

I got to my feet, thinking that such a man might be up to no good in so lonesome a place, and I might find it advisable to take to my heels. But, quite suddenly, he laughed; and at the sound of his laughter I knew at once that I, for sure, had nothing to fear. Since that memorable day I have learned in the world many true and singular things, but none truer than that you may know always an honest man by his laughter and the shake of his hand.

"I startled you," he said.

"I wondered who it was," I faltered sheepishly.

"And you are still none the wiser," he answered.

And at that, he seated himself by my side.

He told me that the strange birds were hooded crows. He told me also how they bullied the rooks, robbed the gulls; how they were cleverer and more evil than any other bird, foes of all and

feared by all-thieves and murderers. He talked like a book; he had the science of the matter at his finger-tips, and he could, at the same time, paint pictures, as it were, with words. With him the hooded crow was in a single sentence *corvus cornix*, and the "highwayman of the air."

And as he talked to me, I wondered the more concerning him, and thought the less of the hooded crows. Who was he, whence had he come, and what was he doing there in such a lonely place, in his shirt sleeves, in the warm April sunshine? These were questions that he himself was to answer. I cannot say why he took me straightway into his confidence, and afterwards into the very chamber of his heart-but he did; else I would now have naught to write about.

Let me confess that I have taken the whole tenour of my life from this man's greatness. I have tried my best, all my long years, to bear in mind his strength, his wisdom, and his courage, that I might walk humbly in the shadow of a glorious example. But, more than all besides, I know that I owe to him the restless spirit of adventure, the love of action, the joy of wandering, that has led me so often to strange and distant places where I have found myself in even stranger company.

I cannot tell you of all he said to me upon the morning of our meeting. He spoke of many things, of the world he had seen, the dangers he had faced, the people he had known. As I had no longer feared him after his first word and his open, kindly smile, so after five minutes of his talking did I feel that I had known him all my life. For his words were magic. Wondrous pictures framed themselves before my eyes upon the calm surface of that English sea-pictures of wild men, of treeless deserts, of savage forests and inhospitable hills; and I longed then to follow in the footsteps of this heroic man, whose hairy arms were those of Vulcan and whose voice was soft as that of the mother whom I loved.

I forgot my dinner. I hungered only for adventure. I sat upon the shingle, wondering what lay beyond the vague horizon where grey sea and sky were blended, where I could just discern the smoke of a solitary and distant steamer, the only sign of life or movement upon that desert sea-for we in the West of Sussex lay well away from the track of the Channel shipping.

On a sudden, I asked him the time; and with a glance at the sun he told me it was two. At that, I jumped to my feet.

"But I am late!" I cried.

"Not for the first time," said he. "I can remember my own boyhood."

"My dinner was at one."

"Then you dine with me; for I eat when I have time and appetite, sleep when I will, and live as Nature meant me to."

He led me back from the beach across some sand-hills to a place where the gorse was like a wave of gold. And there was a wooden hut-or, rather, shed, for it was walled upon three sides only. And within were all sorts of things: a sleeping-bag made of the skins of some small animal with fur soft as a mole's, which he said had come from the south of Africa; an iron cooking-pot, an evil-looking affair which he had brought with him from the Amazon; skins painted by North American savages; mocassins; a Malay sarong, a kind of towel worn around the waist; and more curiosities and rude, primitive utensils than I could well describe within the space of a page of the smallest print.

And yet, I dined like a prince: a soup of fish, plover roasted upon a spit, and in place of bread, flour and water fried in a pan after the custom of the Afghans. It may have been the novelty of it all, or the fact that by then I was well-nigh famished, but I never ate more heartily, and I have never forgotten that meal, though I have had many such since then.

In answer to my questions, he told me more concerning himself. Though he had lived a life of adventure, exploring wild countries, sleeping beneath the stars, in constant peril of his life from savage beasts and scarce less savage men, I could not of myself comprehend why he should in peaceful England bury himself miles from the abodes of his fellow human beings. For I write-you must remember-of many years ago, of the mid-Victorian time, as it is called-and good days they

were, as we know full well who have lived to see these unsettled, troublous days. To-day, from the spot where John Bannister and I first met, you may catch a glimpse to the west along the coast of the red roofs of bungalows, where week-end visitors may come from London to set up bathing-huts upon the beach, whilst from the east, perhaps, a pair of lovers may wander from across the golf course at Littlehampton in search of desirable seclusion. For that stretch of coast is desolate still; but in those days it was a kind of No Man's Land, with no sign of life but the gulls and the sand-snipe, the smoke from John Bannister's camp-fire, and the hooded crows.

Well, the truth was, he who feared neither beast of prey nor painted cannibal was afraid of civilised men. He went once a week to the little inland village a few miles distant to purchase groceries and stores. There-as I found out afterwards-they thought him a madman, though he was always courteous in his manner and paid without question for what he bought. He had few words for any man, and none ever for a woman. Later, when my mother came to learn of my new-found friend who lived alone among the sand-hills, she was anxious to see him, more for my own welfare than from curiosity; but he told me flatly that he had never known any civilised woman save his own mother, who had died when he was young, and he would rather face a wounded lion than pretend to talk to one.

"For it comes to this," said he; "I have gone back, as it were, upon the centuries; I have learned to live as men lived in ancient times. Though I have read much and thought more, and have some claim, I suppose, to be called a scholar, in many ways I am no better than a cave-man. I have forgotten all the niceties of culture. I have neither small-talk nor table manners. So I prefer to live as I do, in my own way; and I offer no welcome to visitors. The farmer who owns this land is glad enough of the little I pay him in the way of rent; but, beyond that and my weekly shopping, I seek no intercourse with strangers. I am content to be alone."

I asked if he were not often lonely, and he laughed.

"Even here," said he, "in Sussex, Nature is a living force. The sea changes almost hour by hour. Birds come and visit me. Even the rabbits in the brake have already learned to know me. They all seem to know-these little, wild things-that I am one of them, and soon cease to fear me. They are my companions and my friends, and I have also books and memory. And I have health and air, the smell of the salt sea and the seaweed, and the sunrise to awaken me before your street-bred friends are stirring. The wind, the rain, and the sun-I welcome each as it comes. Did I want other comrades, I should go and seek them; but I prefer to live like this."

"And yet you talked willingly to me?" I asked.

"Because," he answered slowly-and his words came to me as a surprise-"because you are a cave-man, too."

"I!" I exclaimed.

"Every boy," said he, "every healthy, happy boy. It was the savage in you-though you may not realise it-that brought you out here alone, that took you right away from red bricks and shops and dinner."

I cannot say whether I have conveyed to the reader in the space of this short chapter a true conception of the character of John Bannister, as he was when I knew him first. Of his personal appearance I have yet to write; and if it be a simple matter to describe that which is outwardly apparent, it is by no means easy either to fathom or to portray a man's soul and mind.

Do not imagine that I myself knew aught of him until after we had sojourned together for months, faced the same dangers, stood side by side throughout the great adventure of which I have to tell. I knew from the first that he was wise and generous and kind: I could see with my eyes that he was strong, and his talk charmed the imagination of a dreamy, active boy. In spite of all he knew, of the experiences he had had in all parts of the world, he was one of the simplest men that ever lived. And there was something in him of the poet. I do not mean that he ever tried to set down his thoughts in verse, but that he lived in love with all things beautiful. I have seen him stand

stock-still like one transfigured, with eyes illumined, gazing in wonderment upon a purple sunset upon the snow-capped crestline of the distant Andes-and that at a moment when his own life, as well as mine, was not worth a full day's purchase.

Judge all men by their deeds and not their words. Hear this history to the end, and see what like of man was he whose charm and peril led me forth from green and sleepy Sussex to adventure in the darkness of those tropic forests that shut out the source of the great River of Mystery, where there are poison, black ignorance, and fell disease, and a man may no more count the dangers that encompass him than the myriads of stinging insects that drone about his ears.

And one thing more: my own life has not been lived without event. It has been my fate to tell a score of times of the enterprise of others; but of all men of action I have ever known, read or written of, I rank John Bannister as first. Perhaps that may be because I can now seat myself of a winter's evening before my study fire and see him in my fancy as he was in all his strength and manhood, pass through again the dangers and the hardships, and live once more the glorious days that it was my privilege to pass with him, and remember that, had it not been for him, I might have lived all my life in Sussex and seen nothing of the world. But how can I set down the debt I owe him? For I owe him life itself.

CHAPTER II-THE COMING OF AMOS

After that morning, throughout the summer months when I was at school, there was seldom a Saturday or a Wednesday afternoon when I was not to be seen hastening eastward along the beach to see John Bannister and to listen to his talk.

During those days I learned much of him, of his travels and adventures; but there were certain matters upon which he would never speak in any detail. He would never tell me, for instance, the full story of how he had come by the great scar upon his face-a disfigurement so pronounced as to be at once pathetic and repulsive, which had aroused my boyish curiosity from the first. Had it not been for that scar, Bannister would have been a handsome man, as indeed he was when the left side of his face was to be seen in profile. He had deep-set steel-grey eyes that looked clean through you, and the forehead of a thinker; his hair, in those bygone days, was black, no more than touched with white upon the temples and about the ears, and his moustache the longest I have ever seen. Though there was never a man, I should suppose, who had less of vanity in his composition, I think he grew it thus to hide in part the record of the terrible wound that had extended from his right ear to the corner of his mouth-a scar that was always rough and white, though his face was burnt by the sun to the colour of tan.

"I came by that," he once said to me in answer to my question, "in what might be called an honest cause. A thousand miles from nowhere, where there is neither Law nor Right nor Wrong nor Justice, one-who may or may not have learned the Lord's Prayer at his mother's knee-would have put to death some score of helpless human creatures, slaughtered them like sheep."

"Why?" I asked.

"Why," said he, "there are but few motives that sway the evil that lies in all men, and of these greed of gold is first. And this man of whom I speak was a great force of evil, and is so still, for I never doubt that he is yet alive. For gold he would have murdered those who had never wronged him, who had indeed shown him nothing but kindness and hospitality. Fate decreed that this man's path and mine should cross; and because I stood between him and an ill-gotten fortune, I was struck a coward's blow. You would never guess the weapon, Dick, that gave me my beauty mark for life?"

He paused as if waiting for an answer, though I had none to give.

"Well, then," he continued, "it was a sceptre-the golden sceptre of a bygone dynasty of monarchs, ended four hundred years ago-kings of no naked savages, but emperors, rulers over an ancient civilisation that has crumbled to the dust, of a people who were cultured in their own way, industrious and great. It is something, we may imagine, to carry through life the scar that was given by the symbol of such authority and power."

"And where was this?" I asked.

"Where the mountains overtop the clouds," he answered, "where one may see the last of the sunset beyond the valleys of Peru, and the dawn rises from the dark forests of the Upper Amazon, in which, Dick, there are secrets that no man yet has ever lived to learn."

"It was the sceptre of the *Incas*!" I exclaimed; for I had read as a holiday task *The Conquest of Peru*.

"The very same that was hidden from Pizarro," he made answer, "together with all the gold of Huaraz and Cuzco."

"And who was the man who struck you?" I demanded.

"When I tell you that his name is Amos Baverstock," said Bannister, "that he hails from the same west-country town as I do-and that is Tiverton in Devon-and that that man to this day counts himself as my greatest enemy, I tell you more than I should."

And though I tried my utmost, I could get from him nothing more. A reticent man by nature, he was yet from the beginning prodigal of speech with me. With the exception of this great Peruvian

adventure-which, I could tell from his demeanour, he ranked as the one outstanding episode in all his life-he would answer all my questions. I thought this strange; and there was an even stranger thing about him-and I was soon to learn that the two were linked together. Though he had to some extent confided in myself, he forbade me to speak of him to my schoolfellows. He told me he was well content to have found a friend in a boy after his own heart, much the same sort of lad as the John Bannister who had bathed in the Exe, and, barefooted, raced other boys upon the river bank; but, were the knowledge of his presence upon that lonely shore to become the common property of a clamouring, crowded school, his seclusion would be lost, his peace of mind disturbed, his haven of rest and solitude converted into a kind of monkey-house-for that is what he called it.

I gave my word, and kept it; and yet, I could not but think of things. And it occurred to me that John Bannister lived as he did for other reasons than solely to enjoy the fruits of solitude. Not that he himself had ever told me anything that was not the truth: he had, indeed, sojourned for so many years in the wild places of the world that he had forgotten much concerning the ways of civilisation and could be shy-as he was before my mother-like an overgrown yokel who stands, cap in hand, first on one foot and then upon the other. He wanted more than solitude, he wanted secrecy. For more reasons than one I should have guessed it; but I was but a boy, and looked not for motives or for causes. I was content to take the man as he was: a hero in my eyes, who had risked his life a thousand times, who had done great deeds and seen strange sights and wondrous places that I had only dreamed of.

And now I come, at last, to the beginning of my story: a blazing morning in the August sun, when our friendship was four months old, when the wheels of chance began to move, and those forces were set in motion that whirled me away, when still a schoolboy, from sunny, sleepy Sussex, to be a wayfarer with grim Death himself in dark, tropic lowlands, or amid the very clouds.

It being holiday-time, and I having no thought in my head than what pertained to my hero, I set forth earlier than usual, and took the straight cut across the fields, instead of following the shore. This led me to a group of sand-hills, not half a mile from where Bannister had pitched his camp; and amid these I stumbled upon three men, seated, heads together, in the shadow of a gorse bush.

I cannot for the life of me explain why I did it-never before or since have I played the eavesdropper of my own free choice-but the moment I set eyes upon a hunchback, with a clean, wrinkled face and two small eyes as black as boot-buttons, down I dropped on all fours, like a man shot, and crept silently and swiftly to the cover of a clump of reed-like grass.

I think the sight of the man frightened me. He had the cruellest face I had ever seen; and there was cunning in it, too. Also, there was a suggestion of merriness, of latent mirth, about him-patent in the shining, bead-like eyes-that caused me instantly to shudder. Have you ever considered the eyes of a half-grown pig, as something apart from the glistening, inquisitive, joyful, and highly entertaining quadruped that a young pig happens invariably to be? They are wicked and gleeful, defiant and pitiless, those little, twinkling eyes. They are more fearful than those of a snake, because they are more alive and equally soulless. Well, then, such eyes had this man: eyes at once merciless and mischievous. And so it was, I must suppose, that I hid myself amid the grass.

And then one of those who were with him used these very words; and when I heard them, it was as if I was deprived of the power to breathe.

"I wish I were a hundred miles from here, I can tell you that. He's not likely to forget that it was you, Amos Baverstock, that trapped him and left him for dead, and that it was I who struck the blow."

I lay in the long grass, close as a hare, my heart pumping within me like an engine. I had heard and seen enough already to know that my friend was in danger. I had a sense of some calamity impending, but no time just then to guess at the meaning of it all; for I must listen to the quiet, cold voice of Amos Baverstock-the hunchback with the pig eyes and a long, thin nose like a weasel.

"You were right enough in London," said he, "when I told you I had tracked him down, as I swore to you both I should."

"Maybe," said the other, "I forgot, for the moment, what he was. I would sooner face a tiger."

He was a rough-looking man, with a red, untidy beard, and there was something about him of the sailor.

"Tut, man," said Amos; "you make a mountain of a molehill! I do not propose to set about this matter like a fool. He's lying yonder like an old dog-fox in his earth, and we'll send a terrier in to fetch him out."

"Me!" cried the red-bearded man, horror-stricken at the thought.

But, before Amos Baverstock could answer, the third man spoke for the first time; and my attention being thereby attracted towards him, I was at once astonished at everything about his individuality: his voice, his personal appearance, the words he used, his very attitude of carelessness and ease.

"Cave tibi cane muto."

That is what he drawled, and though I was then a schoolboy who had struggled through the dull prose of Cæsar to the loftier realms of Virgil, I must confess that fear had so deprived me of my wits that I understood no word, except the first.

The speaker lay flat upon his back, with his hands folded behind his head, and his face exposed to the sun-like a tripper who would go back to London nicely tanned. I observed that he had taken off his coat and rolled it into a pillow, and that the shirt he wore was of the softest, flimsiest silk.

He was dressed like a fop in the height of the fashion of that day, wearing a white tie, with a great gold pin in it, a well-curved moustache and those short side-whiskers which were then the vogue. He had light-blue eyes and fair, curly hair, and had it not been for the side-whiskers, would have looked much younger than he was. Everything about him suggested that he was-or should have been-a gentleman of means and leisure.

"Cave tibi cane muto," he repeated, more slowly than before. And this time I had the sense to understand it: "Beware of the silent dog."

"Just so," said Amos. "We will tempt the dog with a bone. Trust to me, you dolt," he cried, turning sharp upon the man with the red beard, who was sitting with a scowl upon his face and his legs crossed like a Hindoo. "Ask yourself, have I ever yet sent you on a wild-goose chase? Am I one to take unnecessary risks?"

"Then, shoot him, take what we want, and have done with it," growled the other.

"Friend Joshua," said Amos, "we are some eight thousand miles from Chimborazo, and probably not two miles from a police-station. We want no questions asked, no hue and cry. That would ruin everything."

"There's something in that," admitted the red-bearded man, whose name was evidently Joshua.

Amos chuckled.

"This is no baby's game," said he. "Bannister fears neither man, wild beast nor devil. No more am I afraid of him. I have tricked him once, and I can trick him again. Were I to get within arm's length of him, it is true, as like as not he would wring my precious neck; and the same applies to you, friend Joshua; for he will not have forgotten that it was you who struck him down at the end of the passage that leads from Cahazaxa's Tomb. But Mr. Forsyth here, he has never set eyes on in all his life."

"In other words," cut in the young man with the side-whiskers, still stretched at full length upon the ground-"in other words, I myself am the bone to be presented to the silent, dangerous dog. A pleasant prospect-but I acquiesce. Having gone into this business, I am prepared to take what comes."

Though he had spoken with a shade more animation than before, he had neither moved an inch nor troubled even to open his eyes. A calm customer, in very truth, was Mr. Gilbert Forsyth, as I was afterwards to learn, something to my cost—a man with more manners than morals, who was never afraid and never surprised, and who smelt of the vile pomade with which he plastered his moustache.

"Sir," said Baverstock, "you are the very man for me. I promise you that, if we pull this business through, we shall wade knee-deep in gold."

"I want gold to spend and not to paddle in," said Forsyth. "Give orders, Mr. Wisdom; I am here solely to obey."

Amos produced a long and very black cigar, bit the end off and began to chew, making his face all wrinkles. I thought that he would light it, but he did no such thing. He would look at it with one eye half closed, use it much as a musical director wields his baton to punctuate his words, and then chew again, until the brown juice was streaming from the corners of his mouth.

"Go to John Bannister this morning," said he. "Go to him now, if you like. He doesn't know you from Adam. Pretend you're just an idle, inquisitive holiday-maker who has dropped across him by chance; get into conversation with him, ask him foolish questions; and then, without advertisement, just-drop that across his head."

As he said this, he threw across to Mr. Forsyth some kind of weighted implement, such as a house-breaker might have in his possession. It was about the size and shape of a belaying-pin, and attached to the thin end was a leather strap to secure it to the wrist.

"Sounds simple enough," drawled Forsyth. "However, for the sake of argument, suppose I fail. I understand from what you both tell me, he has the strength of two ordinary men."

"Six," growled the red-bearded fellow, who seemed to me to be a discontented rascal.

"Strike hard and without warning," said Amos. "In case of mishap, Trust and I will be at hand to help you."

I thought, at the time, that Trust was another man—a fourth party in this vile conspiracy; for I did not then know that the name of the red-bearded man—as great a rogue as Amos himself, if not a tenth as clever—was Joshua Trust, who had served before the mast in the Royal Navy, to be tried by court-martial for a felony and afterwards discharged.

Mr. Forsyth, in the meantime, picked up the bludgeon and toyed with it in his hand.

"A useful tool," he observed. "Convenient to carry, and—I should say—effective to use. To be candid, I'm a little afraid of it. Though I have not the pleasure of knowing Mr. Bannister, I should be sorry—for my own sake as well as his—to deprive him of his life."

"You need not be afraid of that," laughed Amos. "Had his skull been thinner than a bullock's, it would have been broken years ago. We want him senseless, when we can bind him hand and foot, and help ourselves to the very thing we want. He has got it somewhere, sure enough; and had I to search the world for it, I would find it in the end."

And then he clapped his hands and rubbed them together; and I have never seen in all my life an expression of such malignant glee.

"Once it is ours," he cried, "across the Western Ocean! Nothing stands between us three and fortune. Gold!" he almost shrieked, "I tell you, it is there knee-deep in a cavern as large as a cathedral: golden ornaments and vessels, bars and rings and bracelets. You shall have your fair share, Mr. Forsyth; for all's square between us, and, I confess, we could not very well move in this business without you. Joshua here will tell you, though I may be an ill man to cross in more ways than one, I never yet went back upon my friends. You've come into this affair to help us, and I'll not forget it."

"Dear me, no!" drawled Forsyth. "I join you for my own ultimate gain. I recognise that I am blessed with as little conscience as yourselves, and see profit in the matter. I know nothing of this fellow Bannister, and care still less. Besides, I have, I suppose, a natural taste for such an

adventure as you propose. I am heartily tired of this dreary country, with its railways, gas-pipes and antimacassars. I would, in a word, stake all I have upon an only venture, to die soon or rich—I care little which it be."

And thereupon he yawned, placing the tips of his fingers before his mouth in a manner exceedingly affected.

They talked then for a while of other things; and all the time I was seeking an opportunity to escape, to hasten to my friend to warn him of his danger; and yet, though I was well screened from view of Amos Baverstock and his companions, it was some time before I could find the courage to bestir myself. I feared that they might hear me; and the very sight of Amos had instilled within me a sense of dread which returns to me even to this day whenever I think of the man.

I lay in the long grass like a wounded bird: it was as if I had not the power to move. My thoughts were running riot—Bannister to be shamefully assaulted, something stolen, and I kept repeating to myself the magic phrase, "Gold knee-deep in a cavern large as a cathedral."

There was something about all this of the kind of adventures I had often imagined; I had thought that I would revel in the prospect of such dangerous escapades; and here was I, scared out of my wits, too terrified to move, my heart beating violently, as if I were out of breath from running.

Indeed, it was only the thought that Amos Baverstock or one of the others would get up to go, and then discover me, that made me shift from where I had been hiding; and no sooner was I out of earshot than I set off running as if pursued by fifty fiends. I never ran so fast before or since. Over the sand-hills, stumbling amidst the shingle, breaking my way through gorse and hedgerow, I came at last to John Bannister's cabin, lying in a hollow by the sea.

"Mr. Bannister!" I cried. "Mr. Bannister! Something dreadful is about to happen!"

I was, I suppose, half blinded by my running; or I had not the sense to look about me. I stood before the opening of the cabin, wringing my hands and crying out like a fool:

"Mr. Bannister! Mr. Bannister! Come quickly!"

I had for answer neither the sight of his great strength nor the familiar sound of his voice, but just the wash of the sea at high tide beyond the ridge where the buckthorn grew, a great rhythmical, breathing sound, as if a giant were slumbering.

I was more afraid than ever when I realised that he was not there, and it might take time to find him; for, befogged as my wits were, I knew well enough that the occasion was one that would admit of no delay.

I ran straight to the beach, and looked to the eastward and westward. For a moment I had hoped to find him, for he would sometimes bathe in the sea at that hour of the day; but a glance or so was enough to tell me I should not find him there.

I wandered for a while somewhat aimlessly amongst the shrubberies that crowned the margin of the sand-hills and the shingle, and then returned to the cabin. As things happened, I must have done so in the nick of time; for, when I had searched in odd corners, as if looking for a hidden thimble, instead of a man of six-foot-four, I went to the threshold, and looking out beyond the gorse, beheld the tall figure of Mr. Gilbert Forsyth, strolling towards me, swinging in his hand his silver-mounted Malacca cane.

I did not know whether or not he had seen me. It was sufficient for the moment that I had no way of escape. The cabin—as I have said—had been built in a hollow, and to cross the ridge that encompassed it would bring me into full view of Mr. Forsyth.

On the other hand, I could think of nowhere to hide. I stood for a moment irresolute, with clenched fists, cudgelling my brains and wishing that I was anywhere else upon the wide face of the earth. Then I heard a footstep on the shingle without, and as I drew back into the shade of the hut, I saw the man's shadow cast upon the threshold.

I looked about me in a wild and silly way, and then without a thought dived under the great fur sleeping-bag that lay ruffled against the wall.

Forsyth entered. I could not see him, but I could hear him moving to and fro, and once he even trod upon my foot. Then I heard his voice, raised in a kind of drawling sing-song, as if he called to someone at a distance.

"Come on," he sang. "The way's clear. The dog's out of his kennel."

A full minute may have elapsed. On such occasions, time counts for next to nothing. But, presently, I was aware that, besides myself, there were three persons in that small place, and one of them was Amos Baverstock.

"Here's our chance," said he. "Joshua, keep watch from without. He may not be far away, and it would be a rough-and-tumble business if he caught us in the act. And now, sir, help me to find the map. The thing must be somewhere in this hut, unless he carries it always on his person."

And at those words was I made to realise that, as sure as I had been christened Richard Treadgold in the little church at Middleton, I had done a foolish thing and was like to be made to pay for it.

For Amos Baverstock was come to search for a certain map, the significance of which I then, of course, knew nothing. Whether or not he would find this map was a question of itself; but there was no sort of a question within the bounds of probability that he could look for long and fail to discover *me*. And then, in truth, the fat would be in the fire.

CHAPTER III-THE MAP

I expected every moment to be caught, to be jerked forth from my hiding-place like a landed fish. In the course of their searching they must sooner or later move the sleeping-bag, and I would be exposed.

It occurs to me that fear must be one of the strangest of emotions; for I can honestly say that, now that I was in this hopeless and perilous predicament, I was no longer afraid. Certain that I must fall into the hands of Amos Baverstock, equally uncertain of what then would be my lot, I was resigned to my fate; I was long past apprehension. I still thought of Bannister, and wondered concerning the map for which Amos and Forsyth were looking, but for myself I now cared not a snap of the fingers what became of me; and this attitude of mind I preserved throughout the next eventful moments, else I had never acted as I did.

For Amos never found me on his own account. No doubt he would have done so in a very little time, had not Forsyth, almost at once, struck upon the very map for which the two were searching.

"What's this!" exclaimed Forsyth. "It seems the thing we want."

"Where?" cried Amos, who, I judged, snatched it from the other's hand.

"That's it!" he almost shouted. "The parchment map copied from that made ages ago by Villac Umu, the High Priest of the Incas of Peru. Bannister has translated it, and marked the route in red ink. It's all plain as daylight."

I could tell by the sound of his voice that he was wildly excited. He spread out the map upon the little table in the centre of the cabin, and, feeling secure since Joshua Trust was keeping watch, spoke breathlessly to Forsyth, relating the matter in such detail that then and there I was made a party to the whole vile conspiracy-or as much of it as there was any need for me to know.

"When the ancient Peruvians fled before the advance of the Pizarros," he explained, "they carried their treasures across the mountains. These they hid in two places: one, which is called the Little Fish, consists of all manner of earthenware utensils; the other-the Big Fish-is composed of golden ornaments and ingots. I have heard it said by some that the Little Fish is in Bolivia; by others, as far north as the Amazonas Territory-the truth being that no man living knows. It was John Bannister himself who discovered the secret of the Greater Treasure, or the Big Fish, as the natives call it. He lived for years among the wild savages who inhabit the forests about the eastern foothills of the Andes; and there, I believe, he came across some priestly descendants of those who had served the Incas. It was high up among the Conomamas, to the south of the great Region of the Woods, that I first fell in with Bannister. I was there prospecting for gold, but I had never dreamed of such a gold-mine as the Greater Treasure of the Incas. Bannister never told me that he had learned the secret from the priests, but I made so free as to inspect the map, when I believed him to be sleeping."

"But is this safe?" asked Forsyth. "Supposing Bannister returns?"

"There is nothing to fear," said Amos. "Time's our own. Joshua is on watch upon the sand-hills, and can see him coming half a mile away. We are as safe here as anywhere."

"Well, then, go on with your story," said the other. "You saw the map yourself?"

"No more than glanced at the thing before he had me by the throat and well-nigh strangled me," cried Amos. "After that we parted company, though I followed his track, and three times tried to kill him."

I heard Mr. Forsyth laugh in his silly, affected way.

"You do not mince your words," said he. "And I think I like you for it all the better. So you tried to murder him, and failed?"

"I did not say 'murder,'" grumbled Amos. "You can do no worse than kill in the great Region of the Woods; and whether you slay a jaguar, a monkey or man, it is much the same in the end. But

to kill a man like John Bannister is no such easy matter. He has the ear of a panther and the eye of a bird, and he strikes like the coral snake-silent and deadly-and for those self-same reasons, the story I am telling you must now turn something against myself. For I began the business by hunting John Bannister in the Wilderness; but, before the game was a week old, it was he that was hunting me, and hunting me, too, day and night, from the Putumayo to Bolivia, from the Amazon to the sea.

"I sought safety, at last, in the port of Lima, where I was sheltered by some pretence of Law and Justice; and there I joined forces with friend Joshua and three other kindred spirits who now lie unburied, their bones picked by the vultures.

"Well, then," Amos went on, "we five put our heads together and talked the question out. It was plain to us that, since Bannister was such a tough nut to crack, it were safer and simpler to go straight to the fountain head, as the saying goes, and see what could be done with the priests. I guessed from what Bannister had told me, that the Peruvians were a weak-kneed, cowardly lot, and thought it would not be difficult to frighten them into telling us all they knew. But we had to search the woods for months before we found them, living in the midst of black ignorance and superstition; and by then-would you believe it! – Bannister had got wind of our intentions, and had come back upon his own trail, crossing the mountains and descending into the Region of the Woods.

"He turned up in time to ruin all our plans. His very presence gave the priests the courage they had lacked. There was a stiff fight, and we, having the worst of it, were obliged to beat a quick retreat to the foothills, though we carried with us a hostage. So far as this man was concerned, I took a leaf from the book of the Spaniards. I knew that Pizarro had not gained all his knowledge by fair words and promises. I tortured the wretch, until he shrieked for mercy and promised that he would guide us to Cahazaxa's Tomb, upon the very crestline of the Andes, where he swore to us the Greater Treasure was hid. Thither we went, to find that the rascal had lied to us. A few golden ornaments there were, in a vault cut in the living rock, at the end of a narrow passage, and amongst these was the ancient sceptre of the Incas, but the lot were not worth the price of our journey. Moreover, John Bannister himself had had the audacity to follow us. Night by night, he hovered about our bivouac, hoping to deprive us of our hostage. So I set my mind to work to finish him; and as fortune had it, the old Tomb was as good as a rat-trap. For there was a great boulder at the mouth of the passage, which might be rolled down-hill to block the entrance; and even then it was as much as Joshua and I could do. We fooled John Bannister to enter the Tomb by making a show of moving camp and leaving the Peruvian behind. However, when we thought we had caged him, we found to our great dismay that we had under-estimated the man's colossal strength; for he rolled back the boulder as though it were nothing, and came down upon us like a raging lion."

Amos paused a moment in his narrative. Listening eagerly for what was yet to come, I heard distinctly the disgusting noise of the chewing of one of his long, black cigars.

"We were unprepared for that," he continued. "Indeed, thinking we had got him safely caught, to starve to death or shoot himself, we were standing before the entrance to the passage without our arms; and before we could master him, our party of five had been reduced to two. It was Joshua who ended the affair. We had looted the Tomb of the little treasure that was there; and Joshua snatched up the golden sceptre of the Incas and struck down John Bannister, whom that night we left for dead."

"And what of the map?" asked Forsyth.

"We searched him, but never found it. He may have left it with the priests, or hidden it somewhere in the forest. Two years later, I again journeyed to the Region of the Woods, and found out from the priests that Bannister had taken it away with him, after he had returned to the Wilderness from Cahazaxa's Tomb."

Amos had calmed down by degrees whilst he related the whole story to Mr. Forsyth; but now, quite suddenly, he became as frantically excited as before.

"For two years I have hunted for the man," he cried; "and I found him here by chance. I want nothing but the map, to know where the Greater Treasure has lain hidden for more than four

centuries, and to learn how to get there. See here!" he shouted; "the place is far to the north, near the valley of the Yapura River. The treasure of the Incas was carried four hundred miles from Cuzco!"

"What more could we want?" laughed Forsyth.

"Why, nothing else," said Amos. "This map's worth more to us than the keys to the vaults of the Bank of England."

I heard a sound like the rustle of paper or parchment, from which I judged that Amos flourished the map in his hand. And then it was that I did a thing so bold that I have never ceased to be amazed at my own audacity.

I had passed from sheer fright to cold deliberation. I cared not two pins for my own safety; and though I was still in dread of Amos, I thought not once of him, but of John Bannister, whose very shadow I almost worshipped. Besides, it must be understood, I was already caught like a fly in the web of these adventures. I had listened, as to a story, to all that Amos had said, and had tried to figure in my mind's eye the Greater Treasure, all glittering in the dust, Cahazaxa's Tomb and the dark Region of the Woods. I knew, from what I had heard, that if all this wealth belonged to any Christian man, that man was John Bannister himself and never Amos Baverstock. Why Bannister was content to live as he did, when he could be master of such riches, was a circumstance I could not then explain, but which I was wise enough to see was no concern of mine. Upon one thing was I well determined, with a kind of blind pig-headedness that might have led to my own undoing—and that was that Amos should never take away with him the map.

"Gold!" he cried. "Gold! We'll wade knee-deep in it!"

And at that, I sprang from under the sleeping-bag and hurled myself straight at him whom I so truly feared.

Both he and Mr. Forsyth were too surprised to do little else but gape, which gave me the chance I wanted, to snatch the parchment from his hand.

I do not think I could have been much quicker; but he was not to be taken unawares. The parchment was old, and must have been half torn already, for, when he pulled one way and I the other, the thing came in half. And then, even before Baverstock had time to drop an oath, I was past the opening of the cabin and racing like a madman through the gorse.

CHAPTER IV-KIDNAPPED

While I went over the sand-hills like a hare, I looked back once and saw Amos running, his face all screwed up in fury, and his black eyes as if they were on fire. At the door of the cabin stood Mr. Forsyth, shaking his Malacca cane at me, but never troubling himself to move so much as an inch.

I knew from the first that I had the legs of both of them, that Amos could never catch me though I carried a pound weight on either foot. And I believe, like a fool, I laughed, thinking myself secure; and when I pulled through a hedgerow that cut off the sand-drift from the open fields, I found myself face to face with Joshua.

For my own excuse, it may be urged that I had had much to think of in the last few minutes; and if I had remembered my friendship with Bannister, I had at least forgotten the very existence of Joshua Trust. But there he was, as plain as a pike-staff, about thirty yards to the front of me.

I pulled up and stared at him; and to my surprise he made no movement, until I heard the voice of Amos from behind me.

"Catch the young fiend! Shoot, Joshua, before he gets away!"

And at that I jumped to the right, straight into a rabbit-hole, and pitched on to my head.

I lay where I was for a few seconds without moving, for I was a trifle shaken by the fall. I could still hear Amos, cursing and swearing horribly, and Joshua, beating along the hedge with his stick. For all that, neither could I see them nor could they see me; for I was flat upon my face in a bunch of thistles, which was near as great a torment as a swarm of bees.

I knew from the first that sooner or later I would have to run for it; and the only thing that held me back from bolting then and there was the certain knowledge that Joshua Trust would shoot. I write with natural reluctance whatsoever stands something to the credit of myself; but, even at the moment, I thought more of the parchment than of my own skin. For I still held the crumpled fragment of the map in my right hand, gripping it tightly as if it were a running-cork.

I heard Joshua's voice quite near to me; and knowing that he must find me if I remained where I was, I resolved to take my chance. But first, in case of possible misfortune, I stuffed my portion of the parchment map to the full length of an arm down the very rabbit-hole that had tripped me up. And as I did so, a thought flashed through my mind: that it was, indeed, a strange circumstance that half the secret of the Greater Treasure of the Incas of old Peru, who four hundred years ago had foiled the greedy Spaniards, should lie hidden in a rabbit-scape in Sussex.

And then I sprang to my feet and trusted to Providence to help me. Joshua was in front of me and threw out his arms to catch me. But I dived beneath them, swerved away from him, and ran for my very life.

I heard Amos shouting like a madman. Out of the corner of an eye, I saw Joshua Trust fumbling in the region of his belt for the pistol I knew he carried.

It was neck or nothing then. I had the sense not to run straight, but to dodge here and there like a snipe; and as like as not I owed my life to that. For I found out afterwards that Trust was a dead shot, who seldom missed his mark.

As I fled, the sharp crack of his pistol broke upon the silence, scaring the sea birds from the beach. The bullet sang past my head and clipped the lobe of an ear, so that the blood ran down my neck. And thus was I, Dick Treadgold, blooded, in both metaphor and fact, to a life of peril and adventure.

Whilst Joshua reloaded, I had a chance to double the distance between us. I headed inland, away from the shore, and made in the direction of the village which was more than a mile away. Straight in front of me was a clump of trees, and I hoped to gain this before Trust could fire again.

Though the country that lies south of the Downs, from the west of Worthing to the ancient city of Chichester, is, in the main, as flat as a table, this particular clump of trees was perched upon a rounded hillock-though you would call it that nowhere but in western Sussex; and therefore, when I gained the trees, I could survey the land on every side of me to the extent of a good square mile.

To the south were Joshua and Amos Baverstock, hastening after me, the latter some way behind his longer-legged companion. To the north, a little to the east, was the sharp belfry of the church in the village I would gain: and, to the west, was the lane that leads to Arundel.

I had paused for a moment, not so much for breath as to get my bearings, to select the shortest route; and in this brief moment, I became aware of a circumstance that caused my heart to leap for joy. For, coming toward me, by way of a footpath that led across the fields, carrying under an arm a brown paper parcel that I knew to contain his weekly stock of provisions, I recognised the great, tall figure of John Bannister himself.

All thoughts of my pursuers were instantly banished from my mind. What cared I now for Amos Baverstock and all his threats and oaths! I was conscious of nothing else but the bald fact that a friend in need was close at hand-and one, moreover, who would soon get the best of Master Baverstock-and so great was my elation that I took no heed of a dog-cart which, at that moment, came rattling round a bend in the road.

I called loudly upon Bannister by name, though he was then scarcely within hearing, and dashed down the hill before Joshua could have reached the trees from the other side.

The road in that place was bounded by a wooden fence, and balancing myself upon the top of this, I shouted frantically to Bannister.

"Come quick!" I cried. "Amos Baverstock is here!"

I was answered, before the last word had left my lips, by a shot fired at the back of me. The bullet splintered the woodwork of the very bar upon which I was standing; and, startled into action, I jumped into the road.

Immediately I had to turn back again no less quickly, to avoid being run down by the dog-cart, the driver of which reined up with a jerk.

I looked up at him at once, thinking to recognise some farmer that I knew; but, instead of that, I set eyes, to my amazement, upon Mr. Gilbert Forsyth, with his side-whiskers and his greased moustache.

I remembered then-too late as things turned out-that the road curved seaward near the place where I had first discovered Amos and his friends. Had I thought of it at all, I must have known that they had never walked to that lonely spot. They had driven there, to leave the horse and cart upon the road, whilst they settled themselves at a little distance to discuss how best they might attack John Bannister, in his cabin by the sea. Moreover, had I known then as much as I know now of Mr. Gilbert Forsyth, I should never have supposed for a single instant that he could be as idle as he seemed, that he would have remained doing nothing before the opening of the cabin, whilst his friends were pursuing me.

For Gilbert Forsyth, a fop to all appearances and a lazy dude, was in reality a man of action. He said not a word to me, but when he had reined in his horse, he lifted his whip, and cut me down as if I were a thistle.

It was a long tandem whip-and tandems were much in fashion in the days when all this happened. The lash wrapped itself about my legs like a living snake; so that when Forsyth jerked the whip backwards with all his force, I was thrown violently on my face upon the hard, dusty road.

I tried to get to my feet as quick as I could, but had done no more than struggle to my knees, when Forsyth struck me upon the crown of my head with the heavy handle of the whip.

It was a cruel blow and a stout one; and I know that if I did not actually lose consciousness I, at least, saw the trees swing upward into the sky, and the white road upon which I lay rush round and round, like the spokes of a revolving wheel.

And then the next thing I knew was that Forsyth had me by the throat. Though I was then young, I was not a weakling. I struggled desperately, and might, perhaps, have freed myself, had not Joshua Trust arrived upon the scene in time to settle the affair the wrong way for me.

For he gathered me up in his arms, and I was held as if I were encased in iron. I shouted frantically, but that was of no more help than the cackling of a hen. I was lifted bodily into the cart.

I heard Joshua shout to Amos: "Run like mad! Here's Bannister himself!"

Forsyth had climbed upon the box. Trust was on the back seat, with me held like a squalling babe in his arms. The cart tilted forward a bit, as Amos scrambled up and took his seat beside the driver.

I heard Forsyth crack his whip, and immediately the horse started off at a canter, the cart rocking like a boat in a heavy sea. I continued to shout, until Joshua swore at me and clapped one of his great hands across my mouth. And the last thing I saw, as the cart turned into the main road to Littlehampton, was John Bannister breaking through the boundary fence, and then standing quite still and upright in the middle of the road, staring after us, with his brown paper parcel still under his arm.

CHAPTER V-I SET FORTH UPON MY VOYAGE

Though all these events took place more than fifty years ago, I have a very perfect recollection of that drive. In those days there was not much traffic on the Sussex roads; and we passed nothing on the way to Slindon save a hay-cart and a brewer's wagon. On neither occasion did I dare cry out for help, for Joshua Trust sat by the side of me with his loaded pistol, pressed close against my ribs, in the pocket of his sailor's pea-jacket. I never doubted for an instant that he would shoot. I had then, it is true, little experience of the world; but I could scarce fail to recognise that I was fallen into the hands of desperate men who counted human life of little worth.

So I kept my silence upon the road, wondering all the time what was to become of me, and, above all else, what Amos Baverstock would say when he discovered that I had cast away my fragment of the map.

That he thought I had it still was plain enough, since he twice told Joshua to keep an eye on me, lest I should throw it from the cart. He was in a great haste to reach the woods at Slindon, where in springtime the wild flowers are like a garden; and he had a good reason for this. Indeed, in all my experience of Amos, I never knew him fail for want of caution; and when a man is circumspect as well as fearless, he is an enemy who cannot be trifled with.

It was the scoundrel's design, so I discovered, to reach the woods with as little delay as possible, and there to wait until the evening, when he could take the Portsmouth road under cover of darkness. There were, at that date, many coaches on the highways; and Amos evidently thought it wiser not to trust me.

So to Slindon Woods we went, and were there in no time, soon after noon. They unharnessed the horse, and turned him out to graze; and whilst Mr. Forsyth unpacked a hamper that was well stocked with provisions and wine to drink, Amos took me by the shoulders, and looked me straight in the face.

"And now, boy," he said, "I'll have no more nonsense from you-so understand me, once and for all. It's an unwise thing to pry into my affairs-I can tell you that. You know more about me already than I care to think; and I tell you fairly, you had best mend your ways, if you value life."

I was afraid of the look of him, of the hard glitter in his eyes and the way in which his thin lips were tightly pressed together. And I was more afraid still of what would happen when he discovered that I had made away with my fragment of the torn map. My heart was in my mouth. I felt as if I were suspended by a thread upon the brink of a precipice, and that at any moment that thread would break and I be hurled into eternity.

Fortunately, perhaps, I was not left long in such uncertainty; for no sooner had Amos taken his hands from off my shoulders than he clapped them together behind his back, and came out with the very question that I feared.

"And where's the map, my boy?" said he.

I answered nothing.

"Give it up," he demanded, and held out a hand.

"I have not got it," said I.

At that his jaw dropped. He stared at me in amazement, not knowing whether or not to believe me.

"Haven't got it!" he repeated. "What d'ye mean?"

And the way he rapped out those last few words made my blood run cold. I saw, however, that I must make a clean breast of the matter, let it end which way it would.

"I have not got it," said I, "for a simple reason; because I had thrown it away before you caught me. And now, you know the truth, and can do with me what you will."

The hunchback stood staring at me as if I were a ghost. His thin, wrinkled face had gone a yellow or a greenish colour, and his little eyes looked blacker and more on fire than ever. He kept working his mouth about, as if he were chewing some of his vile tobacco; and, on the whole, I cannot conceive an expression more menacing, a countenance less prepossessing.

He came up to me, and searched my pockets; and whilst he was doing so, I noticed that both his hands were trembling. He had then been joined by both Trust and Forsyth, who stood on either side of him.

Amos, as he drew away from me, came out with an oath that I can never write. Indeed, the swearing of this man was not the least of his many sins.

"He has not got it!" he cried. "We've been fooled, Mr. Forsyth; and that by a slip of a boy!"

I thought that he would kill me, then and there, beneath the shadow of the trees in Slindon Woods. But, though Amos Baverstock often worked himself into fits of ungovernable fury, he never was guilty of a foolish action. For my life-though at the time I never guessed it-was of some use to him. Not only did I know where I had hidden the torn map, but, as like as not, I had looked at it, and might be able to remember the names of some of the places that were marked thereon-knowledge for which Amos would give much. Had it not been for this, I have little doubt he would have put me out of the world.

They tied my feet together, in case I should endeavour to escape, whilst the three seated themselves upon the gnarled surface roots of a great oak tree, and examined their fragment of the map, discussing the question openly, so that I overheard them and learned of the trick that Providence had played us all.

For the map had been rent in twain, not by the hands of Amos Baverstock and me, but by the sure and supple fingers of Almighty Destiny. Amos had in his possession at least three-quarters of the parchment-he had it all, indeed, except one corner, that which I had seized in my attempt to wrench it from his grasp. And, as good luck had it, that one corner contained the information of the greatest value: to wit, the exact locality where the Greater Treasure was to be found.

As for the rest of the map, it carried you from the outskirts of what may pass as modern civilisation to within a certain unknown distance of the secret place. It put you on the right road, as it were, and then left you-lost in the midst of a wilderness of doubt.

When Amos grasped the full significance of this, he jumped to his feet, a perfect figure of fury, storming at me and swearing, using threats and shouting of torture, if I did not then and there confess. But speak I would not. Whatever happened, I was resolved to hold my ground, though I was filled with grave misgivings.

For all that afternoon they badgered me, trying intimidation, bribery and curses; and then, at last, they settled it amongst themselves that they would take me with them into Portsmouth, and thence across the sea into the very heart of a black barbarous country, where they hoped to find the Treasure of the Incas.

It was then, whilst we waited in the woods for sunset, that I saw myself, a lad of sixteen summers, launched upon a series of adventures, among strange peoples and in wild, romantic lands-adventures such as those of which I had often read, of the bold Spaniards who had followed Columbus into a new and unknown world, and brave blades of the stamp of Drake and Grenville, who-like John Bannister himself-were all men of Devon. That I was to be one of a company so glorious seemed to me all my heart could wish, though I went as a hostage with my life itself at ransom.

In a strange fashion, in very truth, did I begin my travels; for I journeyed that night to Portsmouth, not only bound hand and foot and tied to the seat of the dog-cart, but gagged as well; so that, by the time we reached our destination, I ached in every limb.

For three weeks we dwelt together in a lodging-house, patronised by seamen, in a poor quarter of the town. The landlord-a fat, slovenly fellow whose hand was seldom far from a pint mug or near

a razor-was, as I guessed, hand in glove with Amos; for he must have known that throughout those three dreary weeks I was kept locked in a stuffy room, where I had neither fresh air nor liberty, and no better fare than is accorded to a convict.

I have said that we dwelt together, but this was not wholly so; for Mr. Gilbert Forsyth, though he was often of our party, had taken rooms in one of the best hotels. He was a gentleman somewhat fastidious in his habits, with a nice taste in wine and clothes, though-as he was soon to prove-he could rough it with the best of us.

Joshua, too, was seldom in our lodgings. It appears that he spent most of his time in the neighbourhood of the docks, on the lookout for an old shipmate whom he knew he could trust, with whom Amos could strike a bargain.

Such a man was eventually found. Joshua brought him in, one evening, and shortly afterwards Mr. Forsyth arrived, looking more than ever as if he had just come out of a bandbox.

This fellow proved to be the skipper of a barque, due to sail in a few days' time, bound for Caracas in Venezuela. She must call first at Liverpool, to take on a cargo of cotton goods, but would touch at no port upon the voyage but Fayal in the Western Islands, which are now called the Azores.

All this fitted in exceedingly well with Amos's plans. As I was in the next room when they talked the matter out, and they never troubled to close the door, I know for a fact that Baverstock bribed the skipper, and that Forsyth-who I suspected all along had undertaken to produce the funds-paid him as much as fifty pounds down, quite apart from the question of passage money, and there was more to come at the end of the voyage.

Gilbert Forsyth, indeed, was a member of the expedition for no other reason than that he supplied the sinews of war, else Amos had never taken him into his confidence and agreed to forego a third part of the loot. For all that, Forsyth proved himself a man of action and resource, though he never looked it; and things would have gone worse with Amos than they did, had he not had at his right hand one so capable and cool throughout those wild, adventurous days.

For Joshua Trust was well enough in his way to strike a blow or carry a camp-kettle across a mountain range that topped the clouds-otherwise he was a bull-in-a-china-shop kind of a fellow, whose worth was in his forearms and not his head.

But Forsyth was cast in a finer mould: a man of education, with tags of Latin in the corners of memory, a sense of humour-subtle enough to be lost upon both his strange companions-and a wonderful brain for figures.

The man's laziness was all pretence and affectation. He always talked as if he were half asleep, and yawned at intervals, screening his mouth with a hand upon one of the fingers of which he wore a golden signet ring; and yet, his brain was ever active, and he had the happy knack of doing the right thing at the right time-as he had already proved to my cost.

Even whilst I lay imprisoned in that dingy room in Portsmouth, Forsyth returned along the coast to within a stone's throw of John Bannister's cabin by the sea, and searched vainly for the fragment of the map which I had thrown away. And that in itself was a bold thing to do; for the police-to whom Bannister had described the appearance of both Baverstock and Trust-had been told of my disappearance, and the countryside, from Arundel to Chichester, was populous with printed offers of reward.

For, all this time, my mother was well near distracted by anxiety and distress. John Bannister called upon her, and tried in his own straightforward way to set her fears at rest, and swore to her that he would find me, though he had to search the world.

Of how well he kept his oath it is my task to write, and of much else besides. For the barque, which was called the *Mary Greenfield*, dropped her pilot off the Needles of the Isle of Wight, and with a fair wind and under full canvas struck the open sea. And I, Dick Treadgold, was on board, sea-sick that night as any full-grown man could be, and sick at heart as well. For, when the white

cliffs of dearest England faded in the evening light, I realised for the first time that I was alone, and there was no telling what the Fates held in store for me.

CHAPTER VI-I AM CONCERNED IN A MUTINY

I have neither space nor patience to describe in any detail that long and tedious voyage. For we were months at sea. I saw whales spouting water into the air, and schools of porpoises; and at one time, for a whole month on end, we were becalmed, the ship lying idle in the midst of a vast floating mass of seaweed, where there were all kinds of jelly-fish and squids. The heat was excessive, and there was a rank, almost putrid, smell in the air, which came from the decaying seaweed. That in itself was enough to try the temper of every member of the crew; but, to make matters worse, much of the tinned meat on board exploded in the hold. I cannot explain this, but I know that it happened, and am content to leave the explanation to the scientific reader. These circumstances, together with the surly nature of James Dagg, the captain, led from dissatisfaction to open grumbling, and thence to the mutiny of which I have now to tell.

My own fortunes were, to some extent, involved in that affair; and in any case, I must describe the incident more or less as it occurred, since nothing could better serve to illustrate the true character of Amos Baverstock, who plays as important a part as myself in the narrative that follows.

I had not been a week at sea, and just recovered from my sickness, when I was given clearly to understand that I was to hold no intercourse with any of the crew. I cannot say that I wished to, for they were a ruffianly lot-half of them, I verily believe, prison-birds, like Joshua Trust, and the remainder West Indian negroes, Chinamen, and Lascars from the coast of Malabar.

I had to share a cabin with Amos himself, who seldom let me out of his sight. Thrown into such close intimacy with the man, I learned much concerning him, and he more of me. He seldom allowed a day to pass without questioning me in regard to what I knew of the map; and so terrible did his threats become that I was filled with fear for the future.

On that account, I yearned for a friend, someone in whom I could confide; and it was not long before I found such a man on board that pestilential ship. Now that I can look back upon my series of adventures, I can see both men and matters in their true perspective, and I realise that, had it not been for William Rushby, the boatswain of the *Mary Greenfield*, the most honest and the whitest man that ever piped all hands on deck, this tale had never been told.

When I saw him first, I sized him up as the true seaman that he was; but I dared not speak to him, because of the threats that had been heaped upon me. I knew also that I could go to none of the ship's officers with my story, for they were all tarred with the same brush as the skipper; but Providence before long gave me the chance I wanted.

When we were in mid-ocean Amos tired of the voyage, and required little persuasion from Mr. Forsyth to take to playing cards. Captain Dagg was a card-player, too, and Joshua made the fourth; and this was the party that sat down nightly after supper to gamble, drink and smoke, by the light of a reeking paraffin lamp in the little stuffy saloon.

I watched them play for many nights, and though I knew nothing of the game, it was quite clear to me that they were three babes at the business by the side of Mr. Forsyth. For it was he who always won, no matter with whom he played or what cards he held, and it was he who raked in their money.

This was all one to me. I soon tired of watching them; and when I had once slipped away from them, to breathe the fresh air on deck, and no questions had been asked, I made it my constant practice to sit of an evening upon the poop, whence I could look down into the water and see the phosphorus as if smouldering in the wake of the ship.

And here it was that I talked with William Rushby. At that hour it was his duty to see that the ship's lamps were lighted, and when he had hoisted the mast-head lights, and put the red light to port and the green to starboard, he would come aft, haul in the log, and speak to me in whispers.

That he took that precaution from the first makes it plain enough that he guessed some mischief was afoot. He questioned me concerning who I was and what business I had in such company on board that ship. It was some time before I dared tell him the truth, for fear of Amos Baverstock; but I did so in the end, making him swear to keep my secret; which he did.

"It is all like a fairy tale," said he, when he had heard my story; "and it's hard to tell the best way to help you. Of this much I am certain: if you set forth into the back country of Venezuela with a man like Baverstock, you'll not come back alive."

"But I cannot escape!" I protested. "Even on board this ship, I am watched at all hours of the night and day."

Rushby thought for a while, stroking his short black beard which was like that of a Russian Czar.

"Maybe," said he, "at Caracas, I could desert and take you with me. I have no liking for my shipmates here, as you may well imagine. In the meantime, many weeks must pass before we sight the mainland, and in that time much may happen."

As he said this with some significance, I asked him what he meant.

"Why, just this," he answered; "there's trouble brewing aboard, which will come to a head before we touch port. The crew are a low-down, blackguard lot, no better men than sailors; and though they may be held to blame for that, it's no fault of theirs if they are fed worse than swine and cursed from dawn to sunset. Dagg I had heard about, though I never signed on under him before, nor will again, and the mate's even worse. There's high talk in the fo'c'sle, as it is, where the ringleader is that nigger cook. Mark my words-and I've sailed the seas for more than twenty years-a prize-fighting negro in the galley can cause more mischief aboard a sailing-ship than a monkey and a woman, both in one."

I laughed, for I was not then accustomed to the talk of sailors.

"And they've run out of lime-juice," he went on; "and that's a serious thing."

"Lime-juice!" I repeated, thinking he was joking still.

"A man must eat vegetables," he explained to me, "to keep his blood cool and his liver nicely trimmed. You can't eat green cabbages and Brussels-sprouts in mid-Atlantic, so you must carry lime-juice aboard; and we've run out. The men have much to complain of. They are in ill health, and one or two should be lying up in a sick berth, instead of being sworn at left and right for not moving quicker. So I see trouble ahead. It may be a hurricane, or just a summer squall; and if the first, Heaven help James Dagg and his officers, for they're a tough lot for'ard, as I know who've listened to their talk."

And Rushby was proved to be in the right. We ran into a great calm as I have said. The sea was like glass; and though the sun was blotted out by a steam-like fog, the heat was so intense that we went about the deck in naught but vests and trousers, with the sweat dripping from our finger-tips.

Without a doubt, the crew suffered for lack of lime-juice; some broke out with a horrid skin disease. And then the news came that the tinned meat had all gone bad, and we were forced to live on salted ling-fish, so that we went thirsty all day long.

It was Ebenezer Hogg, the negro cook, who started all the trouble. He was a long, raw-boned Jamaica man, who had cut a figure in the prize-ring in his younger days. He had never forgiven the skipper for a blow across the mouth because the cabin potatoes had not been properly peeled, though this was the work of Ah Chin, the cook's mate, a half-daft Canton Chinaman, who would fire off crackers at all hours of the night, in honour (I suppose) of the heathen gods he worshipped.

Hogg told his shipmates he cared not a "dime with a hole in it" for James Dagg or any man. They had no food fit to eat, so they might as well help themselves to the ship's grog, to keep-as he described it-body and soul together.

Rushby-as his duty was-warned the captain of what was coming; but Dagg, who had been losing heavily at cards to Mr. Forsyth, only abused the boatswain for his pains, and said that he himself was the best judge of such matters and would know how to deal with insubordination.

And that night the crew, led by Hogg, the nigger, broke into the storeroom with a hatchet and broached the rum casks. Within half-an-hour, they were all roaring drunk; and that was a night that I shall never live to forget.

The moon came out from the white sea-mist, as if to look down in scandalised amazement upon a scene of debauchery and violence-a round, red ball of fire, casting its rays upon the stagnant, reeking seaweed, illuminating the deck of that floating madhouse with a dull crimson glare, whereby you might see the whites of men's eyes and the glitter of the sharp blades they handled.

Dagg appeared on deck, his face livid with passion; and I could see by his walk that he, too, had been drinking heavily at his card-playing.

"What's all this?" he shouted at the top of his voice. "Understand, I'll have no monkey-tricks aboard the ship that I command."

Hogg at once squared up to him, his two fists before his face, very drunk and brazen.

"Come on, James Dagg!" he cried, with his Christy-minstrel accent. "Time yer and me settled de account."

"This here's mutiny!" exclaimed the captain.

"Dat's de right word, boss," said Hogg. "Mutiny it is."

And at that, he struck the captain with his fist, so that Dagg rolled over and over upon the deck, groaning loudly.

The fat was now in the fire. If discipline could be restored, Hogg would be hanged at the yard-arm and his body cast into the sea; and drunk as he was, the nigger knew it.

"I'm de captain of dis ship," he bellowed, "an' James Dagg's de cook."

He showed his white teeth in a grin, and then gave orders as if he had been accustomed all his life to a position of authority; and the wonder was he was instantly obeyed. Five minutes later, both Dagg and his mate were bound hand and foot; and the second mate had been locked in his cabin, where he was fast asleep. The negro went staggering backwards and forwards, from the forecastle to the poop, crying out that he it was who was Captain and his name was Admiral Hogg.

There were two spectators of this comedy, who could not be considered as partisans; and the one was William Rushby and the other was myself. The boatswain's sense of duty would have held him to the captain, had it not been for me; for, though I had no liking for any of the crew, and a feeling of positive loathing for a great brute like Hogg, I saw in the discomfiture of James Dagg and his officers some chance of my own ultimate deliverance. So that when the cook turned upon me, and caught me by the scruff of the neck, I played the card that I thought safest at the time, but which certainly lost me the trick that meant the game.

"And now, boy," said Hogg, "which way de wind blow wid you? Will you sign on to serve as cabin-steward under Admiral Hogg?"

"Why, sure," said I, having picked up something of the man's own way of speaking. "I was never a friend of Captain Dagg's, as you may have seen for yourself."

And thereupon, I looked away from the negro's grinning countenance, and straight in the black, pig-like eyes of Amos Baverstock.

If I had feared him before, I was well-nigh terrified of him then; for there was black murder in the look he gave me, and his mouth was working horribly.

For all that, he straightened his face in half a second, and turned to Hogg as calm as the sea itself.

"I'll settle with you in a moment," said he. "I've not lived more than half my life without learning how to deal with a buck nigger who's three parts tipsy. Bo's'n," said he to Rushby, pointing straight at me, "put that boy in irons."

Rushby never moved.

"Did you hear my orders?" rapped out Amos.

"I heard right enough," said the boatswain. "But I'm not here to take orders from you."

At that, the crew, who had gathered round, thinking that Rushby was with them, became bolder than ever. Knives were drawn from belts, and one of these was flourished in the face of the captain who still lay upon the deck, bound hand and foot.

"Ho!" cried Amos. "So that's your tune, is it? I see you must all be taught a lesson."

He talked with all the confidence in the world, though-with the exception of Mr. Gilbert Forsyth, who had just strolled on deck with both hands in his trouser pockets-there was no one at his back, and he faced a crowd of angry, drunken seamen who would not then have stopped short of murder.

From Rushby he turned once more to Hogg. "And so," said he, "you claim to be the captain of this ship?"

The negro glanced in his direction, but would not meet those cruel, steadfast eyes.

"If I'm not," he blurted out, "then who is de captain? Tell me dat?"

"Why, I am," roared Amos. "And what have you to say to it?"

Hogg realised he was challenged. Perhaps, under the influence of rum, he had already gone further than he meant to; but, in any case, so far as he was concerned there was no question of retreat.

"Put up your fists!" he shouted. "We fight for it and let de best man win."

He grinned from ear to ear, as, standing in front of Amos-above whom he towered by a good clear head and shoulders-he lifted his great, black fists to the level of his face. I thought that he would kill Amos with a single blow; for the one was so big and bony, and the other so frail and shrivelled up. But I did not then know Amos Baverstock.

"Come on!" cried Hogg, still grinning.

I looked at Amos, thinking to find him alarmed; but never upon the face of any man have I beheld an expression of such complete contempt.

"You black dog!" said he, with an oath.

He drew back his right hand, as if about to strike, and immediately I caught the glint of a revolver barrel in the moonlight.

There was a flash, a single loud report, and then a dull, heavy thud as the negro's great ungainly body came down upon the deck. And there he lay, full in the red moonshine, upon that tropic night, huddled and stone-dead-the black, bragging fool who had claimed to be our captain.

"And now, then," said Amos, as cool as ever, turning to the crew, "is there any man else who would like to command this ship?"

CHAPTER VII-AND AM MADE TO PAY FOR IT

And that was the end of the mutiny on board the *Mary Greenfield*. The match was struck by a negro; the flames were fed with rum; and the fire flared up, just to be stamped out by the one strong man on board.

Amos at once released both the captain and his mate; whereupon Dagg treated the crew to a long-winded, high speech upon the subject of what he would do, if such insubordination occurred again; but as he had done naught during the crisis, but to get knocked down the moment he opened his mouth, there were few of his audience who were not laughing up their sleeves.

I have told the full story of the disturbance, to illustrate the character of Amos Baverstock. I have yet to write of the sequel to the trouble, which more nearly concerned myself.

For Amos was as good as his word, and made short work of William Rushby and of me. Though the crew had been bound over to keep the peace, as you might call it, admonished to behave themselves in future, the boatswain was not only degraded of his rank, but forthwith cast into irons.

As for myself, I was led before a kind of tribunal, assembled in the saloon. Captain Dagg, Amos Baverstock, and Joshua Trust were my judges; and a strange triumvirate they made, Amos chewing his black cigar, and all three seated before their glasses of grog, with their greasy playing-cards scattered before them on the table.

"Boy," said Dagg, "you joined in a mutiny. Do you know that, you whelp? Do you know what it means?"

"No, sir," said I.

"It means death," said Dagg. "The yard-arm-that's what it means."

I believed, for the moment, that they were really going to kill me; and so seriously had the great heat and the excitement affected me that I don't think I cared very much whether they did so or not. Anyway, I know I answered boldly, though I had never the courage to look straight at Amos, whose eyes I felt were upon me.

"Captain Dagg," said I, "if you want to murder me, get on with the matter. I ask you to do no more than to remember this: I did not come on board your ship of my own free will. I was kidnapped, and carried here by force, and I have no means of escape."

At that, Amos struck the table with his fist; and, bold though my words had been, I jumped as if a cannon had been fired.

"Silence!" he roared. "We are not here to argue with you. You were given your orders. You were told that on no account were you to communicate with anyone on board this ship, and you defied us. We have reason to suspect that you have taken into your confidence William Rushby, formerly boatswain. Do you deny it?"

He banged the table again. I looked right into his face, and it was just as if I was under fire. But I could never answer him. I had the pluck neither to lie nor to tell the truth.

"Good!" said he. "You admit as much. Well, then, we shall see that no such tricks are played us in the future. Rushby is in irons. As for you, for the rest of this voyage you remain a prisoner in your cabin; and if we have any more trouble with you-I warn you fairly-you meet the same fate as that hide-bound, cursed nigger."

And that was the lame and impotent conclusion of the mutiny on board the *Mary Greenfield*.

My lot was now even worse than before. For week after week I was locked in a stuffy cabin, and got neither fresh air, good food, nor exercise. The calm broke up quite suddenly with a squall, followed by a shower of rain. For about an hour the water came down like a cascade upon the sea, washing the ship from stem to stern, giving-as it appeared to me, looking out from my narrow port-hole-new life to the floating seaweed and the myriads of living things that were swarming in the midst of it.

The ship rocked, turning lazily from side to side, like a sleeper awakening, and then, lurching, took on a list to starboard, as the wind gripped her hoisted sails. And then, once again, we were under canvas, ploughing westward across that great, lonely ocean.

A few days later, we struck a trade wind, and made even better progress. Though I myself was never more miserable in all my life, I had reason to think that there was less discontent on board. I could hear the patter of the bare feet of the men on the deck above me, as they hastened about their work, as sailors should, and the shrill note of the boatswain's whistle-which caused me to wonder who the new boatswain was. It must be understood that during these days of my imprisonment I had nothing to read and nothing to do, but to meditate upon my own misfortunes.

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