

## CHAPTER XXIV

THE water surrounding the underground outlet was not of great depth—an inch or so over five feet—but the suction of the sink-hole was irresistible. Once caught in those sinking waters meant to go down with them; and a moth would have struggled to equal advantage. If fate had given me the choice of fighting to save myself it would not have changed the outcome in the least. The plank had floated too far away to seize. The water was deep enough that if, by a mighty wrench of muscles, I was able to seize with my hands some immovable rock on the lagoon floor my head would have been under water.

Fate, however, didn't give me that fighting choice. Edith Neelman had already gone down, a single instant before. Loss of life itself couldn't possibly mean more. There was nothing open but to follow through.

But while the trap itself was infallible, irresistible to human strength, there might be fighting aplenty in the darkness of the channel and be-

yond. The time hadn't come to give up. The slightest fighting chance was worth every ounce of mortal strength. And as the waters seized me I gave the most powerful swimming stroke I knew, a single, mighty wrench of the whole muscular system, in an attempt to get my lips above water for a last breath.

Partly because I have always been a strong swimmer, but mostly by good fortune, I won that instant's reprieve. I had already exhaled; and in the instant that my lips were above the smooth surface of the lagoon I filled my lungs to their utmost capacity, breathing sharp and deep, with the cool, sweet, morning air. The force of my leap carried me over and down, the descending waters seized me as the sluice in a sink might seize an insect, and slowly, steadily, as if by a giant's hand, drew me into darkness.

I had been drawn into the subterranean outlet of the lagoon, the passageway of the waters of the outgoing tide. Life itself depended on how long that under-water channel was. I only knew that I was headed under the rock wall and toward the open sea.

At such times the mental mechanics function abnormally, if at all. I was not drowning yet. The thousand thoughts and memories and regrets that haunt the last moments of the lost did not

come to me. The whole consciousness was focussed on two points: one of them a resolve to do what I could for Edith, and the other was fear.

Besides the seeming certainty of death, it was unutterably terrible to be swept through this dark, mysterious channel under the sea. Perhaps the terror lay most in the darkness of the passage. It was a darkness simply inconceivable, beyond any that the imagination could conjure up—such absolute absence of light as shadow the unfathomable caverns on the ocean floor or fill the great, empty spaces between one constellation and another. In the darkest night there is always some fine, almost imperceptible degree of light. Here light was a thing forgotten and undreamed of.

The waters did not move with particular swiftness. They flowed rather easily and quietly, like the contents of a great aqueduct. Perhaps it would have been better for the human spirit if they had moved with a rush and a roar, blunting the consciousness with their tumult, and hurling their victim to an instantaneous death. The death in that undersea channel was deliberate and unhurried, and the imagination had free play. Already we three were like departed souls, lost in the still, murky waters of Lethe—drift-

ing, helpless, fearful as children in the darkness. It was such an experience that from sheer, elemental fear—fear that was implanted in the germ-plasm in darkness tragedies in the caves of long ago—may poison and dry up the life-sustaining fluids of the nerves, causing death before the first physical blow is struck.

It was an old fear, this of darkened waters. Perhaps it was remembered from those infinite eons before the living organisms from which we sprang ever emerged from the gray spaces of the sea. And I knew it to the full.

But I didn't float supinely down that Cimmerian stream. The race was certainly to the swift. Knowing that the only shadow of hope lay in reaching the end of the passage before the air in my lungs was exhausted, I swam down that stream with the fastest stroke I knew. Carried also by the waters, I must have traveled at a really astounding pace, at momentary risk of striking my head against the rock walls of the channel.

An interminable moment later my arms swept about Edith's form. I felt her long tresses streaming in the flood, but her slender arms had already lost all power to seize and hold me. Had death already claimed her? Yet I could not give her the little store of life-giving air that

still sustained me. Holding her in one arm and swimming with every ounce of strength I had, we sped together through that darkened channel.

No swimmer knows the power and speed that is in him until a crisis such as this. No underwater swimmer can dream of what distances he is capable until death, or something more than death, is the stake for which he races. The passage seemed endless. Slowly the breath sped from my lungs. And the darkness was still unbroken when the last of it was gone.

The trial was almost done. I could struggle on a few yards more, until the oxygen-enriched air in my blood had made its long wheel through my body.

What happened thereafter was dim as a dream. There was a certain period of bluntness, almost insensibility; and then of tremendous stress and conflict that seemed interminable. It must have been that even through this phase I fought on, arms and legs thrashing in what was practically an involuntary effort to fight on to the open sea. The last images that drowning men know, that queer, vivid cinema of memories and regrets began to sweep through the disordered brain. There was nothing to do further. The trial was done. I gave one more convulsive wrench. . . .

And that final impulse carried me into a strange, gray place that the senses at first refused to credit. It was hard to believe, at first, that this was not merely the gray borderland of death. Yet in an instant I knew the truth. I was heading toward light: the subterranean blackness of the channel was fading, as the gloom of a tunnel fades as the train rushes into open air. And a second later I shot to the surface of the open sea.

It was through no conscious effort of mine that I did not lose my life in the moment of deliverance from the channel. At such times the body struggles on unguided by the brain; instinct, long forgotten and neglected, comes into its own again. As I came up my lips opened, I took a great, sobbing breath.

I must have submerged again. At least the blue water seemed to linger over my eyes for interminable seconds thereafter. But there were no walls of stone to imprison me now, and I again rose, and this time came up to stay. The life-giving air was already sweeping through me, borne on the corpuscles of the blood.

In an instant I had found my stroke—paddling just enough to keep afloat. Edith still lay insensible in my arms. Only a glance was needed to see where I was. A gray line back of me

stretched the rock wall, and beyond it the lagoon. I had been swept from the latter, through a submarine water passage under the wall and a hundred yards into the open sea. Dell, who had gone through the channel ahead of us, was nowhere to be seen.

As soon as I had breath I shouted for help to the little file of men who were already streaming through the gardens toward the lagoon. They must come soon, if at all. Tired out, I couldn't hold on much longer. In the pauses between my shouts I gazed at the stark-white face of the girl in my arms. My senses were quickening now, and a darkness as unfathomable as that of the undersea passage itself swept over me at the thought that I had lost, after all—that the girl I had carried through was already past resuscitation.

But the men on the shore had heard me now—I was aware of the splash of oars and the hum of the motor of Neelman's launch. Some one shouted hope—and already the dark outline of the motorboat came sweeping towards me. It was none too soon. . . . The dead weight in my arms was forcing me down, and my feeble strokes were no longer availing. But now strong arms had hold of me, dragging me and my burden into the boat.

There are no memories whatever of the next hour. I must have lain unconscious on the sand of the shore while Nopp and his men fought the fight for Edith's life. At least I was there when at last, after lifetimes were done, a strong hand shook my shoulder. Van Hope and Nopp were beside me, and they were smiling.

"A piece of news for you," Nopp told me, happily. "You put up a good fight—and you'll be glad to know that your girl will live."