



BENJAMIN MELCHETT

Cape Damaris, Maine November, 1843

That he was ill all day Sunday—with one of the worst headaches he'd ever had—I understood Monday morning from Eben, who stopped by the counting house to help me begin laying out orders for *Abigail's* spare parts and sea stores; so I was surprised when he popped up at my desk bright as a sunrise, and invited me to step outside. What he was up to I had no idea—one of his maddening pranks, I supposed; and I glowered at him, exasperated, for I was up to my elbows in work. With Pa, Joseph and six others just off for Portland, to haul back a part of *Abigail's* cargo —with Tom, skippering *Charis*, due back from Liverpool, and a hundred freight lists, incoming and outgoing, consequently tacked up around me—I was in no mood for jest; and besides, I hadn't had time to forget the discomfitures of Saturday night.

That he was the same man who'd squired my sister and made once again such a hit with her set, at the supper table as well as on the dance floor; that he was the same stranger who—decked out in dress clothes, the special garb of his people only I had seen—had breezed through the festivities so difficult for me, I recalled only too smartly; and I was not anxious to see him alone. None too graciously, therefore, I hauled myself out of my chair, and followed him to one of the boat sheds, where he steered me suddenly around a corner; and there before me—looking as out of place amongst the derelict hulls, and the plain, weathered spars of the stored sloops, as if it'd been dropped from another planet—was a magnificent gypsy wagon.

“Happy birthday,” he said cheerfully, as I simply stood and stared

at this vision; and dazedly I shook my head at him.

“It’s...you mean it’s mine?” I managed at last, still having made no step toward it.

“Of course. I like it a lot better than what I gave you *last year*,” he chirped, meaningfully rubbing his arm.

As if released by his bright, cheerful tone and the winsomeness of his cocky humor, I broke at last into reactions, and words came bubbling to my lips without order. “Jim, it’s...it’s even betteh than I imagined, all them times I tried t’ picture what you described... it’s... you didn’t make all this youhrself, did’je?”

“Aye,” he answered, “all but the wheels. I needed Longstreet’s help with those; and Eben lent a hand with all the assembly.”

“But...how on earth did’je eveh find time t’ build it?”

“Oh, at dinner hours, sometimes in the evenin’. It’s been all this time out in Eben’s shed; I’m surprised you didn’t stumble on it.”

By now I was caught up in such a flood of reactions—joy that he’d remembered my anniversary, which even I had forgotten; relief that there were still secrets between us, personal exchanges of gift and memory to which no others were privy; awe at his skill and power of imagination—that I could no longer stand still beside him; and I walked up to the nearest window, opening and closing the shutters. Like a child who gains confidence from his first touch, and begins to explore a strange object without restraint, I hurried on to adventure the wheels, examining the boxes, rims and spokes—then traversed the walls to the driver’s seat, where I knelt in the dust to peer under the shafts, and study the arts of the undercarriage.

Canary yellow in the body, handcart blue at the roof, emerald green in the shutters, barnside red at the wheels, with patterns and scrolls of every hue in between, it was like no other vehicle I’d ever seen; and I shook my head in silent amazement, standing back a moment to view the whole thing, with alternate rushes of humor and appreciation.

Then finally—afire to see the inside, not unlike a boy about to view his first treehouse—I gave a nod at the door opposite the shafts, where Dee stood patiently in harness, and eagerly asked him “May

I?"; and at once he opened its cunning latch, saying sunnily, "Of course: it's yours."

Inside I found everything laid out as compactly as the cabin of a sloop, and I took inventory as delightedly as one about to voyage: a small stove with two burners, a teakettle already clamped in place; a small brass fuel box full of logs; two or three built-in seats, each with a cushioned lid for storage; a table which folded up against the wall; three raiseable windows, handsomely curtained; a hanging cupboard for dishes, already stocked; and at the far end, in a curtained alcove, two big bunks, one atop the other, each wide enough to sleep at least two, and both clad in comforters, quilts and pillows.

"So this is what it looked like," I murmured, transported to another time and place, and imagining Jim growing up in these walls; and putting his hands in his pockets, he chuckled.

"Well...not quite," he told me, grinning; and scanning the place from ceiling to floor, I looked at him.

"What could possibly be missin'?" I asked, trying to imagine various Rom contraptions.

"If you'll meet me at Eben's b'fore supper, I'll show you."

"I've only got three ships t' load, an' a channel t' dig out in the harboh," I said dryly; and giving a carefree laugh, he shook his head.

"This is more important," he said, his chin coming up in that stubborn manner; and too curious to resist, I surrendered.

"It'd betteh be good," I postscripted, on my way out.

"Oh, it will be," he said serenely, latching the door again behind him, and jumping up on the box by Dee; "I don't expect you'll ever forget it."

Promptly at four I showed up at Eben's, having left my desk in a state of upheaval; and there in the drive I saw the cart, visible from half a mile with its bright hues; while poking out from all three windows, raised in the warm late autumn half-sun, were the heads of five children at once recognizable—despite disheveled hair and disreputable faces—as mine.

"What's up?" I called to Jim on the box, where he sat in the sun with Dee's reins in his hands; and "Hop up, we're goin' for a ride," he

answered, grinning at me as I climbed up beside him and tried to take the reins, which he promptly refused to hand over.

Touching up Dee, he headed her nose out the drive, then turned toward the Point and the harbor road, where sparse leaves and red berries brightened the sere fields beneath the gathering smoky grey clouds. "I thought, since it's so pretty, we'd head this way," he added, while mopheads crowded at the window behind us, and a quick bark or two confirmed Sam too was aboard.

"And just where is it you figure on goin'?" I asked him, leaning back on the narrow seat, curious.

"In circles," he returned cheerfully, with a meaningful look out of the corner of his eye, and an almost undetectable curl of his lip.

"An' when are we gettin' back?"

"Whenever."

I knew perfectly well that he was referring to the conversation we'd had after the race a week ago; and I answered him with the twitch of a smile. "You'hre not goin' t' forgive me for that bit of a sprint, are ye?"

"Not any time soon, no."

I smothered a grin as I gazed ahead. "An' how did'je manage this?" I asked, cocking a brow at the children behind us.

"Oh, Anne's in town for the Ladies' Aid meetin'—a quiltin' at Melissa's which won't likely end soon; and it wasn't hard t' bribe Sadie."

"This is crazy, y' know," I dolefully informed him; "Anne's goin' t' get wind of it, even if we don't pass nobody; an' ten t' one it's goin' t' rain."

"The rain'll hold off, an' Anne'll get over it; you know damn well she always has."

"So far," I amended wryly; and he gave me a sidelong look full of humor as, slapping the reins, he bid Dee down the road.

At first we simply followed our noses, taking the harbor road for a spell, while the sea gleamed a gunmetal blue on our left, and the oak leaves provided warm splashes of color against the somber dark green of the spruce. It was so warm I took off my sack coat, folded

it and leaned back against it; while Jim at the reins held forth in his shirt sleeves, the old red and white check he'd worn to sea, and a simple woolen waistcoat.

As we drove there poured forth from all three windows shrieks of mirth and argument and protest, accompanied by snatches of song, including Romany ditties Jim'd taught whenever he'd spent time with the young ones: most of the lyrics about poisoning pigs, or filching horses or soliciting flirtations, though in Romany they rang as sprightly as dance tunes. Despite the fact they had no idea what they were singing, the children rendered each air with relish, and as much conviction as their counterparts in Wales—the lanes echoing with such foot-fetching nonsense as:

“Here the gypsy gemmen see,
With his Roman jib and his rome and dree—
Rome and dree, rum and dry
Rally round the Romany Rye!”

Caught up in their infectious skylarking, I fell in with their jubilant spirit, applauding their various musical efforts, and letting them help Jim decide our route: mostly a matter of such offhand exchanges as “Have any of ye ever been down this road?” “No!” “Then let's go down it!” In this way even I soon lost all sense of direction, though I knew we were vaguely heading inland; and when we finally stopped for supper, it was in a place I'd never been—at the side of what looked to be a disused wagon trace, beneath a giant oak whose copper leaves still massed against the blue-grey sky.

Clearing a space for ourselves in the leaf drifts, and the piles of acorns scattered around—firing up the stove in the *vardo*, and warming up the supper Jim'd brought—we contrived to picnic outdoors, dipping our bowls into the kettle, and perching slices of bread on our knees: not even Courtney complaining about sharing napkins, or picking acorns out of her tea, so appetite-whetted were we by the fresh air.

It was while we were eating that the first problems arose on what till now had been a country lark: the sky, half-grey, suddenly closing over, and a few drops of rain beginning to fall. Looking over at Jim

I cocked a wry brow, which he studiously attempted to ignore; and gathering up our gear, we moved into the *varado*, the seven of us finishing up around the small table. Finding room for our bodies on the three seats and lower bunk proved no easy undertaking; while—what with our bowls and teacups, not to mention our spilled stew and bread crusts, which the dog was busily lapping up off the floor—we'd soon made a hurrah's nest of the *varado*.

It was at this point we discovered Jim'd brought neither dish cloth, nor any sort of a rag to clean up with; and dishes, kettles, silver and what not ended up on the stove, or stuffed into some seemingly unused corner, while faces were scrubbed with napkins fast becoming unappealing. By now the rain was coming down in hard streams, making a miry mess of the wagon trace; and abandoning for the time all thoughts of dessert—a magnificent gold and silver cake Eben had baked—Jim and I were obliged to go out in the wet, and get Dee and the wagon back onto the main road before we became hopelessly entrenched in the mud.

Though Jim erected a tarp and we both shrugged on coats—mine, of course, belonging to my best work suit—we were soon soaked through to our shirts: the rain slanting down under the tarp on Jim, and cascading on me whenever I jumped down to help guide Dee round the mucky morasses. Nor was that the extent of our problems; for less than happy now in the small van, the children could be heard squawking like hens in a hen house—from the sounds of things pulling each other's hair, disputing territorial bounds or arguing over who'd hold Sam; and their screeches of protest little encouraged us in our work.

Our task almost accomplished—the main road, with its better grading, actually hoving into view—there came a sudden crash and a shrill shriek from the *varado*, followed by a chorus of cries and laughter; and rushing to door the we beheld a woeful sight: Courtney spread-eagled on top of the cake, which Tom had got out and set on the table, apparently for them to snatch from. Reportedly she'd fallen out of the upper bunk as the wagon'd lurched out of a pothole, though I strongly suspected a timely shove from Seth; and there being nothing left of the brave silver and gold, it had to be

summarily pitched by the wayside, the boys grabbing handfuls of frosted ooze as it went.

Courtney meantime had to be doused with a bucket of water, which of course was our only spare; and dolefully hanging out the empty pail—examining the solid grey sky, from which the rain was now pouring in torrents—I said dryly to Jim, “Well, it’ll soon be re-filled, at this rate.”

Trying to hide his grin and miserably failing, Jim attended to the squalling Courtney, handing me her dress and stockings, and attempting to get the globs of cake from her curls; and I hung the clothes out the back with the pail, there being no place left indoors to stuff them. Of course he hadn’t thought to bring spare clothes for the children, so Courtney, shivering, and none too clean to look at even in her drawers, had to be wrapped up in Tom’s jacket and a quilt, which we hauled down from the upper bunk. Leaving her to huddle in a corner with her sister—promising to take a strap to the boys, if they perpetrated any more trouble—I went back out with Jim to work on the *vardo*, which had sunk in the mud with all our jumping around; and we soon found we had to put our shoulders to it, if we hoped to free ourselves anytime before winter.

Pushing together from the rear, Dee straining ahead in the traces, we’d just begun to make detectable progress, when another commotion erupted inside; and this time when we opened the door we found that Seth—who’d looked a bit peaked after supper—had suddenly and without preamble become miserably sick, all over the quilt and of course, the pillows. Coming into the mess, mud-splattered ourselves, and oozing muck from our boots and pantlegs, we did our best to effect a clean-up—suspending the quilt from the eaves out the back, hanging Seth’s clothes and pillows out likewise, and dousing his face in rain collected from the bucket.

The rain by now coming down like thunder, and occasional lightning even flashing in the dark, Jim and I went back to our work—me with accusing scowls and sideglances, he with the squints and gleams of suppressed mirth; but we soon found that, between the heavy rain, and the jolting and jouncing of our weight on the floor, two of the

wheels were even more deeply entrenched; while there was certainly no hope of any passing traffic from which to beg outside assistance. Trying one last idea, Jim hiked ahead, and wrested a rail from an old sagging fence; but getting it positioned in the right place in the mud, with the aid of one puny lamp in the pitch dark, proved to be a capital challenge; and I lent my help with a skeptical glower, while Jim, on his knees, gave in freely to laughter.

In the midst of all our grunting and tugging, burrowing and digging and scraping and wallowing—in the midst of all the racketing or rain, howling of wind and cracking of thunder—Tom could be heard, if not seen, at the nearest window, summoning me with a note of insistence; and trudging over to him I hollered “What is it?,” in no mood to deal with another disaster.

“Papa, it stinks somethin’ awful in here!” he cried, opening the window wider for air.

“Well, we did the best we could,” I growled; “ye’ll just have t’ beahr it—or come out in the rain!”

“No, not that; I mean it’s Nat—Nat’s diapeh! Can’t we please do somethin’ about it?”

Looking over at Jim—who’d come up with the lamp, and who now was looking indescribably guilty in its faint light—I asked drolly, “I s’pose y didn’t think t’ bring extra diapehs?”; and he collapsed with fresh spasms against the van.

“Didn’t think we’d be gone this late,” he managed, while from within I could catch cries of “Ough, Nat, get away!” and “You stink too much t’ be my brotheh!”

“So much for the ‘charm of goin’ in circles,” I said dryly; but he was too convulsed to retort.

Carrying out a final attempt at the wheels, I held the rail while Jim—fairly useless, due to incapacitating spells of laughter—tugged at Dee; then both of us pushed from behind—but it was clear we’d come to a halt. Totally soaked and mud-splashed to the waist, surrounded by the din of thunder and downpour, we looked at each other in the lurid flashes, me fit to be tied and Jim vivid with mischief; then I shook my head with wry awe at his spirit. “It’s no use; we’re hehre for the night; might as well make the best of it,” I hollered, giving the rail

a last kick with my boot; and openly grinning, Jim unharnessed Dee, and led her into the shelter of a grove.

In the lee of the *vardo* we pulled off all our outer clothes, hanging them in a clutter from the shutters and eaves, then standing out in the rain for a makeshift wash; then taking one last look at the van in the flashes—the whole crazy rig looking like some crash between a vendor's cart, a laundry tub and a kitchen cupboard—we hauled ourselves in to take care of Nat, and break the news we were bedding down in the reek.

Firing up the stove, we attempted to get dry in our under-flannels, at least to a tolerable degree of dampness—meantime pulling off shoes and stockings, plumping up beds and scrubbing down Nat, and sacrificing Courtney's nappie for a diaper. In all the accumulated reek of cooking, stale vomit and wet dog and soiled diaper and dishes—in all the jungle of tramped on bedding, hanging laundry and muddy carpets—Nat was the only one completely happy; and Jim, holding him by the stove in his wet under-flannels, surveyed the mess with a half-fond grin. "*Avali*," he said, falling into his old tongue, "yes; *this* is what it used t' look like."

Gazing around at the wild scape of what had been—only a few hours ago—my magnificent birthday present; settling down next to him and warming my numb hands at the stove, while Tom, Jean and the twins fought under the blankets of the upper berth, I asked, "Is this really how it used t' be? How on eahrth did'je keep from killin' each otheh?"

"We didn't," he said cheerfully, cuddling Nat.

"You mean—?"

"A' course. My uncle a few years ago dispatched my aunt. Though everybody gave out she was indigested, we knew the pig poison'd ended up in her stew."

My hands poised at the stove I simply gawked at him, dumbfounded at the ludicrous sight of him in his wet undergear, glibly relating the details of a murder—and a family murder at that—in this storm-lurid hodgepodge of dishes and laundry; then as if the crazy events of the night had suddenly been put in a different

perspective—a preposterous perspective which gave a slant of humor and hilarity not just to the everyday and mundane, but even to the solemn and lofty—I frankly yelped with pent-up laughter. Somehow catching my spirit the children laughed too, each with his own particular note and fashion, some giggling and chortling, others whooping and crowing; and shaking my head I said, “We betteh turn in; we’re gettin’ punchy, even though you brought no cideh, nor anything else hahrd t’ drink.”

Still rumbling and chuckling we climbed into our berths, Tom, Jean and the twins—all coveting the upper—crammed into its various ends and corners, me and Jim with Nat between us, tucking our sodden selves into the lower; and for a while there was considerable pitching and rolling as fourteen arms and legs sought nooks and crannies, or various heads ducked under the covers, usually to muffle peals of thunder.

Slanting in through the window a bit of moon revealed Jim, curled up on his side close by; and forestalling sleep I looked on his still face, half-turned toward me in the muted shadow. Usually so neat—liable to shave twice a day, even aboard ship, in any seas less than twenty feet—he now sported the smudge of a beard, or mud, or both, while his wild wet hair spilled onto the pillow. Yet there was a peacefulness on his face in the dim moon, a serenity which matched the tranquility in my heart; and I gazed on him, moved, unable to withdraw my glance—seeing things that, even after all this time, I had never really noted before.

In the uncertain light, under his eyes, there were smudges which were not the shadows of his thick lashes; and suddenly touched with concern for him, I ventured to whisper “Jamie?,” not loud enough to waken if he was asleep.

Lifting the long lashes which were one of his chief charms, he drowsily smiled, and turned a little more towards me; and still whispering I inquired, “You feelin’ all right?”

“Neveh betteh,” he responded, mimicking my r’s with a sly grin; then closing his eyes he half-drowsed again.

“Eben said you was mighty sick yestehday,” I murmuringly insisted; and his lashes lifted and fell as he smiled at me.

"I'm fine, really."

"That new medicine help?"

"Aye; don't worry about me. It was nothing, really—just too much of your Pa's claret-punch."

"You Romany liah," I said, turning over; but I caught the answering gleam of his wry smile, as he slid wordlessly into sleep.

If getting to bed had been difficult, getting off again next day was more so; for the reek, not improved by a night at close quarters, and the addition of a wet diaper, still lingered; while there was little dry to wear, and still less available to eat. Some stale bread and plain tea in the early morning half-fog was the best we could offer the children, while Sam looked on in mournful disgust; and it was damned ineffective in manning two men to the task which awaited in the mud.

Of us all Dee was the only one who had an adequate meal, Jim having brought a huge bucket of oats; and I looked at him wryly while she ate her fill. Nor were our future circumstances such as to inspire cheer; for Tom, late for school, faced a charge for tardiness, while the rest of the family, no less delinquent, anticipated a feather-white Anne, and I, overdue at the yard, confronted a loaded desk.

Yet in the light of day, reinforced by a night's sleep, the job of un-miring the cart went easier than expected; and once on the main road we found the going better, the main challenge being to detour potholes, and find our way back through the maze of Jim's routes. Pulling up at Eben's to avoid shocking Anne more than necessary, we helped ourselves to a scrub and a brush, Jim and I thankfully changing clothes, and all of us enjoying space; then—having put a clean diaper of sorts on Nat, and washed and combed the rest to a degree—we walked over en masse to Anne, and cast ourselves on her icy mercy.

Unmoved by our tale, she thawed only a trifle, obviously holding me personally responsible for the storm, and eyeing Jim like a creature from some other planet; but caught up in her hurry to purge clothes and wash hair, and fumigate Seth and Nat of their ordeal, she said considerably less than she might have, or would later on when

she caught her breath.

Slipping a freshly-dressed Tom into the buggy and a still-grinning Jim beside him, I clattered off for the school and yard post haste, the three of us devouring johnnycake as we went; and when Jim and I parted company at my desk, he looked as bright as if he'd spent the night at the Inn, singing out "Hope you enjoyed your joy ride, Pal; beats sailin' three laps in the teeth of a gale, don't it?," and dropping me a merciless wink over his shoulder.

Re-immersed in the complications of dredging the harbor and posting up various cargoes, I didn't see him again for a couple of days; and when I did it was in circumstances considerably less comic, if those just passed could indeed be described as funny. Getting ready to sign up *Abigail's* crew—expecting to clear for China in early December—I easily roped Eben into being first mate; and naturally I looked for Jim to tally on as second. So sure was I that he'd choose the berth in which he'd already met such success, and proved such a valuable addition to our leadership, that I even dissuaded others from signing, turning away such able hands as Jack Tupper and Percy Winslow, and mentally calculating plans based on Jim's abilities. Thus it was to my amazement, looking over the freshly signed Articles later on in the week, that I found Tupper's name penned next to second mate, and Jim's, further down, beside steward; and for a moment I simply couldn't take in what I saw, too stunned to even feel betrayed.

Stomping straight over to Seth's desk, where the book had been stationed, I collared Seth summarily from his work, and demanded to know how the mistake had occurred; but he calmly assured me that no error existed—that Tupper and Robertson had even approached him together, and taken on these berths by agreement. Too dumbfounded to answer—torching the Articles, throttling Tupper, or transporting Robertson straight back to Wales, all courses of action which silently flashed through my mind—I grimly picked up the book and stalked out; and marching directly over to the joiner's shop where Jim worked, I unceremoniously hauled him away from his tools, and speechlessly shook the pages at him.

“Robertson, what the sam hell is the meaning of this?” I bawled, managing to find my tongue in my anger, and vaguely aware of the dozen or so carpenters looking up from their work to indulge themselves in our confrontation.

“Of what?” he asked, trying to look innocent, but coming nowhere near to succeeding.

“Of *this*,” I bellowed, opening to the Articles, and jabbing my finger at the freshly signed lines.

“It’s the berth I want,” he said blandly, looking where I pointed, and refusing to be perturbed by my outburst.

“The berth ye *want*?” I erupted, never in my life more confounded. “What about second mate? All this time I been expectin’ ye t’ tote the load with me!”

“I know it,” he said fairly, beginning to look stubborn; “but this is more important.”

“More important, hell! What’s more important than shippin’ as second mate? It’s the berth that makes or breaks the ship!”

“There’s otheh important ways of servin’,” he insisted, the sapphire in those dark eyes taking on a dry sparkle, and that obstinate chin of his coming forward a trifle.

“Not t’ match the mates there ain’t!....Jim, this is my first run t’ China; I been lookin’ forwahrd t’ youhr help!”

“Just the same, I’m shippin’ as steward,” he maintained; and now his chin was definitely jutting, while the dry sparkle in his eye was glinting with heat.

“Shippin’ as...you....Jim, I ain’t sayin’ it don’t have a prestige of sorts, but it’s...damn, it’s such a dihrty job!” I floundered, casting desperately around for reasons compelling enough to make him change his mind. “Cleanin’ the waduh closet, washin’ m’ laundry, swabbin’ the bath tub—think of all that Rom *mukado*! Not t’ mention, you won’t neveh use youhr seamanship—haul on the mainsheet in all hands work, that’s it! It’s crazy, man—ye can’t possibly have any idear what you’hre doin’!”

“Oh, I can’t, ‘ey?” he flashed, getting angry, and all our spectators edging in with interest.

“Of course not!—you—why, anotheh voyage, an’ you could go

for youhr first mate's papehs!"

"I ain't interested in bein' first mate."

"What d'ye mean?" I gasped, never having heard such like. "It's youhr chance t' advance—t' improve youhr standin'!"

"I ain't interested in advancin'."

I looked at him like this was the maddest thing I'd ever heard, too dumbfounded for a moment to spit out a reply. "Well, advancin' is how ye make more money!" I sputtered, certain that this logic, at least, would convince him.

"I ain't interested in makin' money."

"Why, you've got t' be interested in it, man—you spend it like waduh!"

At once his hands went to his hips and his dark blue eyes flared up like tinder. "That's my business, ain't it?" he snapped like a whip; and at the crack of his voice all hands drew in closer.

"What's youhr business is mine, an' always has been!" I cried, losing the thread of my argument with the fear that I'd never now be able to sway him.

"Damned if that gives you the right t' tell me what t' do!" he fired; and now I could see the blaze of his will—the all-to-familiar signal that my case was hopeless.

"I c'n tell ye what t' do if it's for youhr own good!" I hurtled, impatient.

"You don't have the pimp-payingest notion of what's for my good!"

Stung to the quick I simply flung out whatever came first to my heart and tongue: "I know betteh than you do what ye need—have eveh since the night I met ye!"

"You wouldn't know what I need if you met it on the street!"

Beside myself at losing him for the role I knew too well was indispensable to me—panicked at the thought I'd bitten off more than I could chew, with a bigger ship and a longer trek than any I'd sailed before—furious I'd not been able to bend him to my will, I simply instantaneously hit him, landing him one square on the jaw; then as he took a step back, his hand at his face—as our audience

zealously gathered around, like so many tourists craning to see an accident by the road—I caught my breath; for I couldn't believe I'd struck him—I, who'd never before hit a man in my life, much less this one I'd have shed my heart's blood for.

For an instant his eyes proclaimed his hurt, a pain like no other I'd seen written on a face; then swift as a bolt came the look Eben'd seen in Rio, that Reuben and Sal'd probably seen on the dock in Portland—the volcanic rage of an alien, a stranger; and even as he coiled I realized I still didn't know him. Anticipating his strike I half-flinched in preparation, wondering what on earth I'd do if he drew a knife; but he didn't assault me with fists or a weapon—no, not in any ordinary gadje way; he simply hurled himself at my body, a hundred and ninety pounds of fury, knocking me full length on the floor; and before I could move he was on top of me, biting, scratching, kicking like a hellcat, while our onlookers roared out encouragements and wagers.

Nobody I'd ever known had ever fought this way before, without any concept of square play or standards; nothing was off limits—everything below the belt as fair game as everything above it; and no trick was too infantile or dirty. Though I had a good forty pounds on him, it was all I could do to grab an arm or a leg, or now and again a hank of cloth; and then all I got for my effort was an empty shoe or sock or waistcoat, for he slithered and twisted out of my hold as if he was greased. To pin him down, hold him still, if only long enough to gain some advantage or figure out what next to make for became my only design in being; while his seemed to be to change shape or locale just when I came closest to triumph. In his shirt sleeves and bare feet he fought on without restraint, as uncontainable as quicksilver—now sinking his teeth into my shoulder, now pulling my beard and scratching my eyes, butting me with his head or pummeling me with his fists, till I was forced to respond in kind, or forfeit all chance of bringing him to heel; and damned if I wasn't biting him in return, and kicking and scratching as if I was nine!

Beating him and pounding, or being pounded, I soon lost all track of whose blows were which, or whose arms and legs were flailing on what path; and for all I knew he was me, and I him, so equalized were

we by the impacts of body. By the time I got his neckerchief in a grip and he my throat, or at least, my collar, I found to my amazement he was laughing—laughing! with the blood running down from his nose and mouth; and then I found I was laughing too, actually rolling on the ground laughing, as though I'd just had the best time in my life.

As if that weren't enough there was a mob of spectators four or five deep from all over the yard; and all of them were laughing too, all roaring and whooping and slapping their knees, as if this was the most hilarious display they'd ever seen; and the whistles and hollers echoed from one end of the shop to the other, and probably spilled out into the yardway.

Getting to our feet, we mopped our faces with handkerchiefs volunteered by the dozen; then as onlookers reluctantly began to break up, amidst chuckles and rumbles of "Damned if that wahn't the best I eveh seen!"—as I finished pulling on my shoes, and began to search about for my hat—my gaze fell on Jim, opposite me, trying to catch his breath; and meeting my gaze, he smiled, his eyes shining.

"I'll be the best damn steward you ever had, I promise," he said, holding out his hand; and I just surveyed his face, shaking my head.

"You'll have t' do somethin' about the cut of youhr jib; I don't hire nobody with a mug like that," I said dryly.

"You did once b'fore," he reminded serenely, still patiently holding out his hand; and my heart suddenly cramped with the force of my love I not only accepted his hand but hugged him, drawing him to me right in front of the whole place; then smoothing my hair I picked up the Articles, and marched them back to their place on Seth's desk. Ignoring his exclamations at the sight of my face, I calmly pursued the rest of my day's work, now and then icing my eyes and my teeth; and that night at supper I brushed aside Anne's remarks about Jim's being the Devil Incarnate, tranquilly sipping my soup with a slow spoon, and retiring to bed with a poultice and hot ale.

That I'd never know what to expect from him—that I'd never really get a handle on him, or know him the way I'd once imagined, when I'd traversed his memories seeking clues, or the images of

his trunk, that first night, searching landmarks—I'd by now pretty much concluded; and events soon bore out my opinion, for far from hostile and unbending, he next reversed himself completely, yielding himself up in a way I hadn't seen since that indescribable night off the Horn.

For a couple of days we'd tread lightly round each other, meeting now and again at the yard, and once sharing a brandy cider at Eli's; but too swamped with jobs to indulge in much leisure, I seldom had time for more than a few words with him; while he, needing work, was helping crew the steam derrick out in the harbor, and busy dawn to dusk with dredging. Mounted on a barge, and primitive in design, one of the few in operation on the coast, the derrick could only be operated in fine weather, its use in rough seas out of the question; and as we were caught up in a reasonably mild spell, he and the others were working it full time, trying to beat my late November deadline.

From time to time when I saw him, warming his hands at the counting house stove, and tipping his hat to me before going off to a late supper, I thought he looked uncommonly fatigued—those dark circles under his eyes failing to fade with the bruises, and the other scratches and marks of our fight; and a pang of disquiet stirred in my heart, as I contemplated what they might portend. But that his health was declining—that he, with his fine constitution, was imperiled by some ill that wouldn't mend—I never fully appreciated, till one night, coming off the barge, the crew dispersed, one of them telling me Jim'd just gone home, unwell; and hot on his trail I made for the Inn, fearful with all the fears of the season, yet trying to reason my way out of their grip.

It being a raw night, the wind fresh off the bay, and coarse and wet with the coming of winter, I tightened my collar myself as I went; and as I came up on the entryway of the Inn, the arc-lights of the lamps swung crazily on the steps, the green and red feeble and bleak in the sea-gusts. Thankful to step within, where some semblance of warmth and the quiet, sane exchange of converse did something to soothe my senses, I hastened up the broad, carpeted stairs, passing women heavily dressed in capes and beaver bonnets; then mounting the next flight, I came up at last on Jim's door, which I unlocked

myself and opened without knocking, in case he was already asleep.

Curled up in the armchair, which he'd dragged before the fire, and wrapped in every quilt he possessed, he seemed indeed to be dozing; and I knew at once—from the tense stiffness of his posture and the wan hue of his face, usually so brown and robust—that he had a severe chill, probably grippe. Keeping at bay thoughts of the diphtheria and lung fever already making inroads again into households, I quietly touched him and spoke his name; and when he didn't rouse I turned to the fire, stirring it up for all I was worth. Exposed to the northeast, our worst winter quarter, the room was chill with the damp and cold, the eaves vibrating with the rising wind, and the window frames whistling with each gust; and balancing a fortnight in this room against the risk of a ride out to Eben's, where warmer conditions prevailed, I got up from the hearth to find he'd opened his eyes, and was looking at me with grateful recognition.

Seen closer to those dark smudges under his eyes seemed to proclaim a crumbling defense, a resistance weakened by long-concealed strains, and by more obvious trials, such as his headaches; and frightened for him—longing now for the spit of his obstinacy, and the exasperating mettle of his maddening will—I plucked anxiously at the quilts around him. Yet looking up at me he conveyed a simple gladness for my presence, and a trustfulness which at once hearkened me back to the look he'd given me, that night I'd carried him to the sickbay aboard *Charis*; and even in my fear I was moved by his candor—one of the few glimpses I'd ever had into his unguarded spirit.

Stripped of my own guards by my sympathy I simply stroked his tumbled hair, trying to measure courses of action, and saying querulously, "Why didn't you boys send up a flare; if ye had, I'd of come out t' the barge m'self t' bring ye off."

Shaking his head as if any answer he might make would be too long for either his voice or strength, he closed his eyes and fell silent a moment, the only sound in the room the sough of the wind, and the kindly crackling of the fire; then lifting his glance once more he asked "Is this grippe?"; his gaze meeting mine again with appeal.

"Probably," I said calmly, making every effort to believe it; "an' if

it is, you'hre in for a spell: game for it?"

"Aye," he nodded, with a semblance of his old mettle.

"Listen t' me," I said, still bending over him, and all at once making up my mind what to do; "I'm goin' to get ye out of hehre, all the way out t' Eben's, where it's warmeh an' we c'n look afeh you: d'ye think that ye c'n stand the trip?"

Squaring his chin with another vague show of mettle he nodded; and giving his blankets a tug I went on, "I'm goin' t' go down an' rig Jimmy's carriage, an' drive you out t' Eben's m'self; now hang on here; I'll be right back."

Clattering down the stairs—fetching Jimmy out of the pantry, and getting him to make up hot bricks and flannels—I saw to the rig, harnessing it to my horse; then hurrying back up I roused Jim out of his slumber, unwrapping him and helping him to his feet.

"The fire," he said, taking an unsteady step toward it, as if long habit moved him to bank it; and steering him away, I held out his peacoat.

"Neveh mind that, or anything else; Isabel'll see to it as soon as we're gone," I soothed, helping him into the sleeves and tugging at the collar; then seeing he couldn't manage the buttons, I sympathetically did them myself, propping him between me and the back of the sofa. Trying to keep to his feet he waited, making an effort now and again to be useful; then taking me completely by surprise—the more so since, even ill, he'd shown restraint—he suddenly and wholly without warning leaned against me, bracing himself on my shoulder in so sweet a submission that my heart gave a twisting wrench in my chest. "Oh, Gawd, Jamie," I quavered, treasuring him in my arms as I had off the Horn, those unparalleled moments before the oblivion of sleep; and for a wordless moment we stood together, an immeasurable sureness steeling me.

As if somehow rested, and replenished with strength himself, he raised his head and stood apart from me, looking uncertainly about him; and raising his collar, I said, my voice shaking, "Whehre's yourh cap, honey?" So naturally did the word issue from me that I scarcely even noticed, preoccupied with caring for him; but he heard it, even in illness, his face suddenly touched; and his voice too faltered as he

answered, "On the table."

Fetching the cap, I gave it to him—his face as he drew it on strained, as if he fought against feeling; and struggling myself—needing to find his other gear, but unable to trust my voice to ask for it—I turned away and rummaged in the wardrobe, sifting his clothes for his muffler and mittens. Coming back with them, I handed them over, snatching up spare comforters while he dressed; then giving him my arm, I helped him down the two flights of stairs, bracing him while he clutched the rails. Finding Jimmy ready for us I bundled him straight into the carriage, where a battery of hot bricks and flannels awaited; and surrounding him with them, I closed him safely inside, then climbed up and took the reins.

Clattering down roads rutted and frozen, we rattled and swayed for a quarter hour, me trying to avoid the frozen ruts, and by the time we reached Eben's, pulling up close to the porch, and I reached within to help him to his feet, I found him nearly asleep in the blankets, only half-conscious between fatigue and fever. So far gone was he that it took Eben and I both to get him out of the carriage and into the house; but when we'd finally succeeded and were met by the warmth typical of the stout, log structure, I was thankful we'd made the trip.

Settling him in Eben's room, the most sheltered and easiest to heat in the house, I poured a drink and waited, anxious, while Eben fetched his kit and looked him over.

"Well?" I asked at last, unable to wait any longer, and crossing over to him as soon as he'd snapped his bag.

"He's in for a spell; but he'll weatheh it all right," assured Eben, calm and imperturbable as ever.

"What about his throat?" I pressed, anxious.

"Thehre's no sign of it," he answered, knowing what I feared.

"Thehre's two or three houses in quarantine hehre already; an' Asiatic cholera in Searspohrt—I just heard."

"I know it; but let's not borrow trouble. Thehre's plenty o' this hehre gripped goin' round; an' he shows every symptom of it."

I heaved myself into the armchair by the fire and downed the rest of my drink as I settled. "I'll set up with him first—I'm too nerved up

t' sleep yet," I offered, searching my pockets for my pipe and pouch.

"All right, I'll send word oveh t' Anne; but call me t' take my turn around midnight, an' see to it y' get some rest youhrself."

I gave him a cursory nod, throwing another anxious look at the bed; and he hesitated at the door.

"Now don't fret none about him, Ben," he said mildly, looking me over with concern. "His health ain't what it was last year, but he's still got what it takes; an' I calculate he knows you'hre settin' up with him." Glancing swiftly over at him I searched his face, but he simply cast me his usual benign smile; then catching up a few spare blankets from the chest, he went to bed himself down on the sofa.

We took it in turns the next several days, Eben staying home from work to nurse Jim, and me taking over around suppertime for the evenings, and one or the other of us checking on him during the nights, at least early on, when his condition was worst. Due to leave for Portland to wrap up business, several of *Abigail's* cargoes originating from there—expected already at Elkanah's, where Pa and Joseph were established loading freight, and getting impatient for my appearance—I kept postponing my departure, not wanting to leave till I saw Jim was recovering. So ill was he at first that he scarcely knew I was around, delirious in sleep and blurrily vague when awake; but there were times when he woke up half-there, his blue eyes above his dark beard searching for me, and a radiant smile spreading over his face, whenever his gaze fastened upon me; and I wouldn't have missed that light of recognition for all the tons of freight in Portland. There were times too when my touch seemed to serve him the same way—times when he knew me simply by the brush of my hand, as I helped him to drink or shifted the pillows; and no satisfaction in work could equal the pride I felt in knowing he depended on me. On other occasions, coming clumsily out of slumber, he would rouse to mumble requests in Romany, or ramble as he had when ill with fever after Havana; and there was no match for the leap which raced through my veins when I found that I could understand him, even answer him in his own tongue.

"Ben," he would quaver, rousing vaguely from sleep—from one of

the unhappy dreams which plagued him, or from the pain which he bore with his habitual restraint—"Tu san akai?"; "Are you here?"; and I would answer proudly, "Avali," protectively anchored there at his side. Sometimes it was only a word he spoke—sometimes just "pani," and I'd bring him water; sometimes it was "My sherro dukkers," and I would bring him powders for the pain. Now and again it was I who asked, "Si tut bokalo?"; tempting him with a bowl of broth, and he who answered with a shake of the head; other times he'd be alert enough to ask, "So se tute's kairing?" as I knelt by the hearth or poured over a book, and I would reply with the half-Romany, half-English gibberish not uncommon even to the Rom: "I'm kairing the yag" or "Just reading a lil."

Once as I drew on my coat and he saw me, I told him gently, "I'm jawing keri now," going home—though more and more home meant where he was; and sometimes I simply sat and listened to the peregrinations of his murmurs, managing to understand memories of the heath and moor, of roads and seas and rivers traveled—or the ring of the river buoys through the banks of the sea mist, rising up from the drifting streams of the Mersey.

When he was well enough to correct my grammar, or smile at my pronunciation—when he was improved enough to sit up against the pillows, and order me to mix up putrid potions, elixirs of leaves and stems and what-not he had me fetch from his cupboard at the Inn, in lieu of Eben's medications—when he was recovered enough to actually drink the vile stuff, without relapsing into illness—I knew I could postpone Portland no longer; and I took leave of him one mid-November morning when he was unaware in slumber: looking down on his dark, thick lashes and the curve of his fine, wide brow, before consigning him to Eben's care, then catching a south-bound schooner in the bay.

I hadn't been gone twenty-four hours—hadn't been a day installed in Elkanah's madhouse, with its perpetual breakfasts and high teas and luncheons, and its rafts of visitors and relations—before I missed him acutely; and I pursued my work with irritated distraction. Never separated from him before, except during last year's run to

Havana—never further than a few minutes from him, and usually within sight or hail—I hardly knew how to get on without him; for even if I hadn't seen him every day, I'd always known that he was within reach, and liable to pop up any moment. Now I longed for his irrepressible spirit, which found humor in the most aggravating situations; longed for his exasperating mercuric changeableness, as one would long for a tonic in weakness, or the warmth of the sun after the bleak blows of winter.

Caring little for hogsheads and hatches—caring still less for the ceaseless receptions presided over by Agatha and my cousins—I plowed through the mails which came from New York and the north, hoping for news from Eben as to his health, or epistles from anyone retailing anecdotes of his doings; and hence it was with a bound in my chest that I found, not very long before Thanksgiving, a pale blue missive which proclaimed with its script that it was from none other than Jim himself. Having never had a written word from him—save his brief note about liberty day in Havana last year, and even briefer scrawls left on my desk, by which he returned his wages or otherwise thumbed his nose at me—I pounced upon his letter with delight, studying the envelop, running my eyes over its address, even scrutinizing the seal for some hint of its sender; but I forbore to open it for hours, carrying it instead in my waistcoat pocket, till I could find a place alone to read it.

As if it were fuel, it inspired me in my work all morning, causing me to accomplish more in the space of a few hours than I had in the whole week I'd been there, and filling my mind with so many alternate imaginings of what he had said and how he had said it, that I felt almost beside myself in my labors. When at last—late that afternoon—I borrowed a horse, and rode out of town to a quiet inlet, where I sat down alone with a belated sandwich, my fingers actually quaked as they fumbled in my waistcoat, and drew the envelope out of my pocket.

Propping it against my knees, I read again every word on the envelope—slowly scanned the strong, slanting script, even dallying before breaking the seal:

Capt. Benjamin G. Melchett
c/o Capt. Elkanah Melchett
124 Congress Street
Portland,
Maine

Satisfied at last I hadn't missed so much as a comma, I slit the wax and drew out a pair of neatly written blue pages, my heart picking up speed as I noted their length, and spread them carefully upon my knee; then holding them against the searching gusts of the wind, I read with a broadening smile the following message:

21 November 1843
Cape Damaris
Dear Ben:—

I'm up and about and (though this will make you hopping mad) back out on the barge, the weather holding off for the time being. Another two or three days and we'll be through to the buoy, at five fathoms deep the whole length of the channel. If it doesn't commence to storm we should be able to wrap things up not very long after Thanksgiving, as per orders. Hope *Abigail* appreciates all our labors.

Not much in the way of excitement has happened here since you left. The harbor's looking fairly empty; a lot of vessels cleared last week (21), and not many are posted due. Eben and the chandlers have been stocking *Abigail*, and they're about the only ones doing out there besides us on the barge, the *Bangor* now and then, and the fishing smacks.

This past weekend we had another freak thundershower, like the one that damped us down that night in the *vardo*, and there was no preaching Sunday. Took the roads two days to settle. At the height of things the general store was struck, the bolt coming right down the stairs and knocking over a counter, and busting open a cask of brandy, which caught fire. The temperance societies (all four) seized on this as an act of the Almighty, and word has it next Sunday Rev. Brewster'll capitalize on it. Eli immediately mixed up a new drink, the brandy sizzler, in honor of the occasion, and won't tell anybody

what's in it. A few folks've informed him he's bound for some place hotter than the Equator, but he doesn't appear to be too worried about it. Haggai, though, has sworn off drink, and walks up and down in front of Eli's and the Seven Seas, scaring off business. Last I heard, Eli had plans to roast him for Thanksgiving.

I'm due for turkey dinner next Thursday with Eben at Obed's, about 30 McCabes expected in attendance, though where we'll all sit I haven't figured. According to rumor even Charlie and clan are expected over from the island, if he can navigate the channel. Eben's not sure he can find the harbor, even sober. With Effie cooking and the likes of Lem and Obed for entertainment—not to mention me on the fiddle—the affair ought to be a capital success, worthy of a column in the *Recorder*.

And now I suppose you're having a rich time at Elkanah's? Living in the lap of luxury, eating dinner with four forks, and all the other customs dear to your heart? Eben says not to worry, Elkanah's got the best wine cellar in Portland, but still I can't help but wonder if you've managed to keep from throttling Reuben, to say nothing of Sal and company. You're such a hot-headed bastard. If you scrap with Sal, take note: he's got an uncommonly quick left.

As for me, I think my right canine's less loose than it was, and all the other effects of your drubbing have faded. Eben says I eat enough for ten men, so apparently I've overcome gripe as well. It's payday Friday, I expect a few dollars for freezing out on the barge. What can a man want more?

Just the sight of you. Jean says to say you can't come home soon enough, and I can't add that I disagree. Tell Elkanah to finish his own damned loading, and catch the next boat back. Eben pledges to try his hand at another cake, and there'll be a glad welcome from

Your *prala*—Jim

So strong a gust of his vibrant person—warm with cocky, playful affection—blew over me with the words of this letter, that I read it not once but many times, testing each line for sentiment and feeling, and searching for indications that he missed me—that he was as lame without me as I was without him. Then leaning against a ledge

of rock, I dreamed for a while on the island-packed bay, the letter actually warming my pocket. Next to me branched a low, stunted rosebush—not likely to grow any taller or fuller, but hardy from its hold in the granite, and leafy still, though its blossoms were done; and as if it sensed and shared my bright glow, it took on a kind of presence beside me, a sympathetic force which caused me to turn to it, and touch its leaves as if they were fingers. Marveling at the life coursing in it—sensing that it, too, thrived and flourished in its way, even rejoiced like a sentient being—I stroked the fading leaves, noting their serrated edges, and feeling an uncanny communion of friendship; then breaking off at last from our wordless converse—giving a final reluctant pat to a branch, as if I would miss its kindly commerce—I got to my feet and remounted my horse, riding back into town at a slow, even pace.

Too moved within to attend to small talk at Elkanah's, or concentrate on the amenities of another high tea, I simply dashed through the door and up the staircase, not caring if my eruption was visible to all in the drawing room; and taking cover in my private guest chamber, I cast myself down in the chair at the desk, and helped myself to the supplies in the drawer.

Not since Bowdoin had I put pen to paper for any reason other than to add up a column of figures, fire off an invoice or draft a letter of credit; and words didn't come freely now from long disuse—nowhere near as easily as the thoughts came to my mind, or as the news had come to Jim's breezy letter. Nonetheless I managed, after an hour of effort, to marshal together a few adequate lines, and slip them into the mail in the hall basket; then wolfing down a plate of odds and ends in the pantry—avoiding, again, a formal supper with the family, about the seventh I'd managed to boycott—I crept back up the darkened stairs to my chamber, and slipped into bed with Jim's letter close at hand.

Whether it was due to the energy of Jim's words, or to the warmth which still lingered from the days I'd cared for him—whether it sprang from my need to see him, or from some inexplicable gift of vision—I fell into a vivid dream, so immediate that I felt I was

waking. I was standing at the train depot, ready to take the cars home, though no line as yet ran to Cape Damaris; and Jim was there beside me—a novice, like me, at train travel. Why he was in Portland in the first place, and why we were now going home together, was unexplained; but we were both dressed in our best, taking leave of Elkanah with satchels in our hands, as if we'd been here for some time; and Eben too was traveling with us. I felt worn out, not just from work but from contact with people, as I always did after a stay at Elkanah's; while Jim too looked tired, not entirely well from his illness; and though he bore his fatigue with restraint, I knew he was eager to settle down in the cars, and begin the lengthy journey home.

Boarding from the rear, we followed the conductor to our seat, toward the front of one of the cars; another seat faced it, and on this Eben lighted, while Jim sat down next to the window, and I took the place beside him. Gathering speed our train left Portland, with the usual ungodly commotion and clanking; but so glad was I to be near Jim—to feel the press of his shoulder against mine, and the vivid potency of his person—that all the noise and smoke and soot, and even the chattering of the passengers, faded away into a vagueness.

As we went along I was more and more conscious of my immediate surroundings—of the worn horsehide which covered the seats, of the prick of its nap and its dusty smell, of the bit of embroidery on which my head rested; but above all I was aware of Jim's closeness. His crisp white collar and shirt-front, well-starched; his greyish-blue traveling suit, smartly tailored; his newly-trimmed hair, so precise round the ears; his freshly-shaved face, straight nose, sensitive brow; his strong, shapely hands, now at rest on his lap: each in its turn cut keenly upon me. Self-contained, he seemed almost asleep, his eyes now and then closing as he gazed out the window; but within him I sensed an alertness to match mine; for from his body emanated such an awareness—such a consciousness of *me*, that I could almost see the radiance between us.

With a wrench in my heart I wanted to touch him—wanted to search that crisp dark hair, those delicate creases at his eyelids; and I sensed that, though he sat with restraint, he was fighting the same yearning—felt that he longed to surrender to me, as he had that night

when I'd buttoned his coat. For an unmeasured time we traveled thus, neither of us stirring or moving; then all at once, as had happened in his room, he simply, sweetly capitulated—laying his head upon my shoulder as if he could no longer help himself, and nestling there with his smooth hair near my face; and in the rush of his warm touch and confiding closeness—in the race of his confession made not just before me, but before a crowd of onlookers—suddenly, unarguably, I knew.

I knew we were lovers, that we always had been, though I hadn't as yet dared to lay a hand on him; knew that I loved him, knew—even more incredibly—that he loved me; knew it as simply, as sweetly, as plainly as I knew my name, or the shape of my hand. So overpowering was this onrush of knowledge and the blaze of joy that came with it that instantaneously I was awake, sitting up in bed and feeling the pillows in a confusion at my surroundings; then recalling every detail of the dream—re-living it so as not to forget it—I felt a wild flame of excitement sweep me; and at once I was up and pacing about, too exhilarated to sleep.

Though it still lacked a couple of hours to daybreak I hurriedly dressed in the dim light of my lamp, which cast a quivering dance on the wallboards; then, ravenous, I sneaked down to the pantry, where I filched some bread and cheese from the pie safe—the servants, just stirring, happening in on my stealth, and eyeing me as if I were a crazed man. Longing to get out into the open—feeling I would suffocate if I stayed indoors—I erupted onto Congress Street and half-raced down to the wharves, gnawing my chunk of bread as I went: the southwest gusts of the wind carrying me on, and tantalizing me with their unseasonal tang. Craving the sights and sounds of the harbor, I arrived, panting, on one of the piers, where I bought up smoked herring—all that I could afford, since I'd come away with only the change in my pockets—from one of the early morning vendors; then wrapping the fish in my remaining bread slice, I paced the wharf from one end to the other, without the slightest aim or direction: eating my fish, when I thought of it, from my hand, and watching the dawn slowly flurry the skies.

Whirling above in hungry curtains and clouds, the seabirds mewed and clamored and screeched—gulls, terns, cormorants variously hunting the tide-wrack, or diving amongst the schooner and yawls; while pedestrian crowds—pilots, fishermen, stevedores, seamen—irresistibly began to collect on the planks, as if drawn, like me, to the stir in the east. Slowly pinkening the hem of the sky, the light began to gleam on the horizon, glistening upon the backs of the windswells, and flushing with rose the wan sails of the fleet; then gradually irradiating the heavens, it imparted its luminescence to all—sparkling in the deadest wood a shimmer, till pilings, buoys, masts and hogsheads, planks and casks alike began to throb, even beat with an inner incandescence.

Ignited myself, like the faces around me, I paced in and out of the oystermen and dockhands, whose seasoned, knotty features breathed the dawn air; and longing to escape from the throngs for a moment, and commune alone with the blaze in my breast—having already abandoned the thought of working today—I rushed back to Elkanah's with the wind at my heels, saddled a horse under the nose of the groom, and rode to the quiet inlet where I'd yesterday sat and read Jim's letter in the lee of the rocks.

Arriving at high tide, the swells fresh and strong, I threw myself bluntly down on the ledge, and rocked to and fro next to my kindly rosebush; and alone, yet befriended, I looked back on my dream, and hugged my new knowledge close to my chest. In those early hours of my understanding, I felt a simple exhilaration—uncomplicated by doubts and fears, and unclouded by considerations of past and future; and I let myself drift and flow with the eddies which swept and battered my limbs in their swift course. I was in love!—frankly, wholly in love—I, who'd never imagined that I'd ever know the sweet elation of such abandon—I, who'd never dared risk jettisoning myself for another, or made myself available to the chance in the first place. The practical fancy I'd felt for Anne, the youthful mystique I'd known with Susannah, the boyish attractions I'd entertained from the distance of a school desk or a sidewalk or a meetinghouse pew—all faded and paled before the power of this newly unfettered emotion; and I simply gave myself up to its potency as to the force of

a sea at my head.

He was mine, he belonged to me; he'd never belonged, never could belong to any other; how could I have failed to realize the mating which had been working its way since I'd met him? What it all meant, or would come to mean—that I was married, not free to love another, much less another who was a man—none of it posed a threat at the moment; it only mattered that I loved him, and knew it; that I wanted him with a yearning and fire like no other I'd ever conceived. Awakened now to my fascination, I wanted to know him, know every inch of his body, know him as the imaginary lovers in my fantasies knew him; knew he wanted to know me, always had; and swept with reactions too many to sort I simply laughed, laughed wildly, swaying there restlessly on the rocks. Then getting to my feet I paced to and fro in the bubbling hiss of the backwash, heedless of shoes, stockings and pantlegs; talked to myself like a babbling brook, recalling past events in swift succession, and abusing myself for not understanding sooner.

The blaze of his eyes that first night at Toby's—the protectiveness I'd felt, guarding him by the fire at Hannah's—our communion atop Corcovado—his confiding clasp in illness aboard *Charis*—the intimacy of his nearness in the tent, on the beach or camping by the river—his homing in my arms off the Horn: all came back and suffused me with the wonder and certainty I knew in their wedlock.

Overcome with a fullness too great to bear I passed imperceptibly from laughter to tears, sitting back down next to my friendly rosebush, and brushing my hot face against its sharp leaves; wept with a wrenching that plucked and tore, bowing my head on the rock at its roots, and cooling my cheek on the rough slab of granite. I'd cried once before, a year ago now, with my arms about the young beech in Eben's woods, in the void of Jim's absence after the tent trip; so surely there was nothing shameful in crying into the wintry thorns of a rosebush; and I abandoned myself to its ragged branches, as if it could hear and understand me.

Coming half-dazedly out of my retreat—smarting with a hunger I'd seldom felt before—I climbed onto my horse and rode back

to Elkanah's, bent on sneaking a bit of luncheon, as I hadn't cash enough in my pockets to buy one; and slipping into the back door I crept up the servants' stairs, thinking of hiding till the midday meal was done. Half-way up to my chamber I heard the bell, and the creak of the floor as booted feet sought the dining-room; while from the pantry came the strident notes of Pa's bark, interrogating one of the maids as to my moves. Realizing they must be wondering why I hadn't been to work—anticipating they'd soon be wondering again, as I felt suffocated by the very thought of cargo, and had no intentions of showing up to help load this afternoon—I peeked over the main rail as they glided into the table; then seeing they were all—servants included—occupied, I tiptoed on up the hall to my room.

Dressing myself in a few more layers—remembering a shirt this time, though distaining a collar—I struggled with fingers still clumsy and quaking, now exasperated by buttoning, now stuffing and tugging; then too restless to wait for luncheon to finish—thinking of snatching a bite to eat in a tavern—I scrambled in the desk drawer for a bit more money, not failing to pick out coins of substance.

Replenished, I began to sneak back toward the hall, passing my dresser mirror on the way; and pausing a moment to peer into its depths—recalling it was perhaps time to run a brush through my hair—I gaped, astonished at my reflection. The hair, of course, I'd seen wild before, since it almost always looked like a gale of wind had blown it, even when I'd spent the day indoors; and the suit of clothes appeared no worse than usual, that is, as if I'd just come in from the woods. But the gaze—good God! and the expression! these were certainly enough to catch notice. Were these riotous eyes, reflecting abrupt shifts of thought, and these hectic features, expressing blunt swings of mood, those of Ben Melchett, the stolid shipwright? No wonder passersby looked at me like one succumbed! Checking another headlong wave of hilarity, I clapped my pilot's cap onto my head, and gave a bow to the apparition in the mirror; then slithering along the creaking hallway, I surreptitiously navigated the back stairs.

On my way out the back door—within inches of freedom—I heard the maid call “Cap'n Melchett?”, her voice alive with inquiring

interest; but since there were five or six Captain Melchetts in the house, I found it convenient to presume she meant someone else; and making a dash for the stable lane, I followed it post haste into the street.

Consumed with hunger, but having no idea where to eat, or where to shop where I wouldn't be recognized—equally ravenous by now to see Jim, to look on him with the light of new knowledge—I ended up back on the wharves, buying up herring from a different vendor, and sampling steamed clams with gratified vigor. Peering through the vapor which rose from the vats, I spied, on the horizon, the curl of steam which heralded the approach of the *Bangor*; and realizing it would make its return trip in a couple of hours—recalling it would touch briefly at Cape Damaris, before steaming on its way to Bangor—I jumped up from the hogshead on which I was sitting, and began to pace again with excitement.

True, I had no baggage with me, not so much as a toothbrush to take home; true, I lacked collar and cuffs, and looked like an escapee from the nearest asylum; true too, I'd always sworn never to take a steamer, and would probably cause my home port to faint, if I stepped off onto the town wharf from one. But if I climbed aboard now—just spontaneously took off, and impulsively appeared in Cape Damaris—I could spend nearly the whole weekend at home; could visit with Jim by the hearth at Eben's, or at our favorite table at Eli's; could see with my own eyes the face I now only dreamed of, and touch with my hand the man I imagined. What in blazes I would do when I saw him, didn't matter in the least to me; that I'd left no word of my intention with Elkanah, and that by nightfall they'd probably be dragging the harbor, or running to the constable to get up a search, mattered nothing to me either; it only mattered—urgently, simply—that I see him; and before I knew it I'd marched up to the office, and bought myself a four dollar ticket.

Pacing to and fro I watched the *Bangor* approach, enlarging at first by miniscule notches, then at last looming broad by the wharveside; and sitting down on a bench for a rest I watched the gangway come down with a thump, and the crowd of passengers

debarb. Mostly ladies and gentlemen of means from Bangor, they came off in a swarm of great coats and top hats, beaver bonnets, wool capes and flounced skirts; and watching them disperse I waited, impatient, tapping my boot restlessly on the planks. Counting the hats, the valises, the canes, then reckoning how many hours till I was home, I tried to speed up time to a degree; but stopping short, I jumped to my feet, startled out of my calculations; for there coming towards me—checking his initial path towards the street, and angling off in my direction—was a tall, blue-coated, tarpaulin-hatted sailor, whose jaunty walk and joyous expression could only proclaim him as dapper Jim.

Blithely unconscious of the importance of his advent—wholly unaware of the upheaval in me, and of the astonishment he'd triggered by his arrival—he walked up to me with a breezy wave, looking very well pleased with himself; and trying to rally my scattered defenses I stood staring at him, speechless. Fresh-cheeked, neckerchiefed, pea-coated, with a canvas seabag slung over one shoulder, he looked like the seaman I'd always known—looked carefree and offhand despite his glad grin, and the eager light of recognition on his face; and taking heart from his jaunty ease I struggled to look merely like an old friend, speechlessly pleased with an unexpected meeting.

Taking a step toward him, I held out my hand, on the point of actually choking out a greeting; but as he swept off his hat and accepted my clasp, and I saw that he had just had his hair cut, precisely as I'd seen in my dream, my heart collided again with my ribs; and any words I'd come up with immediately fled.

“What’s the matter with you? You look like you’ve just seen a haunt,” he sported, glancing over his shoulder as if he expected to catch a glimpse of something filmy and white disappearing.

“It’s just...I’m s’prised t’ see you,” I gasped, wondering if anything casual had come out with my croak, and if my heart was written as plainly on my face as it felt. “I...I neveh expected t’ see you get off a steameh.”

“I never expected t’ see you get *on* one,” he grinned, looking at the ticket in my hand. “Elkanah-sick, or homesick, or what?”

“A bit o’ both,” I hoarsely got out; and catching my gaze, he

looked curiously at me. Bareheaded in the sun, windblown and fresh, he was handsomer than I'd ever seen him—handsomer, and more cheerfully self-confident; and I broke off my glance in consternation. That I loved him, and rejoiced in it, I was still entirely sure; but I was not at all certain now of his sentiments toward me. It was one thing to wake up sure from a dream, and another to behold him standing unconcerned here in the bright November sunlight; and I floundered lamely with my misgivings. His head thrown back in gamesome delight, this man looked to be anything but pining, for me or anybody else; and I felt idiotic that I'd ever thought so.

"What's your excuse for spendin' four dollahs, an' comin' all the way up hehre?" I plowed on, breaking the silence before it became painful; and he stood back on his heels, looking at me.

"Well, I came t' tell you some news in person; figured it'd go better that way than in a letter," he offered, sticking his hands a bit awkwardly in his pockets.

So uppermost in my mind was the state of our feelings that I wildly wondered if he'd come to confess that he loved me; but trying to preserve some shred of reason, I simply asked, "Everything all right to home?"

"Oh, at home, o' course—they're all fine. I've got a pocketful of drawings from Tom and Jean, an' a note from Anne," he soothed easily. "No, it's about the barge."

"The barge?" I gaped, trying to remember what on earth he was referring to, the dredger's every existence having slipped from me. "What's wrong?"

"Well," he said, his chin coming up a hair, and his eyes taking on a half-guilty, half-mirthful sparkle, "it seems there was a bit of an accident."

"What kind of an accident?" I yelped, my lameness for the time swallowed up in my concern.

"The kind where the derrick slips off int' the harbor."

I gawked at him with my jaw on my chest, too taken aback to make connections. "You mean—it's—"

"Sitting on the bottom, aye," he said flatly.

"All the way undeh—the whole thing?" I got out, wildly trying

to calculate how much it was worth, and how much I was liable for in damages.

“Well, all but the top; that part sticks up kind of like a sea monster.”

Immediately I received a mental image of ten feet or so of iron neck protruding above the grey swells of the harbor; and that, with my dream, and the astonishment of Jim’s presence, was enough to trigger a tidal wave of laughter somewhere in the depths of my middle. “Twelve hundred dollah’s worth of...an’ all ye c’n see is the top?” I quavered, trying to preserve at least a semblance of sternness.

“Look at it this way, it’ll make a great aid t’ navigation,” he offered.

On the point of erupting with helpless guffaws, I just stood looking at him, quaking. “An’ I don’t s’pose *you* had somethin’ t’ do with this?” I cracked.

“I’m sorry t’ say I had quite a lot t’ do with it, since I was at the gears at the time: aye,” he confessed, his lips twitching beneath the serene glee of his eyes.

About to choke on my gusts of suppressed mirth, I was forced this time to remain speechless.

“You c’n take it out of my wages,” he suggested, cheerful.

“I can if ye live t’ be four hundred years old, yes!” I roared, a monumental laugh at last surfacing; and seeing me give way, he let go with his own, the two of us peeling like bells on the pier. If I had looked fairly beserk before, with my riotous eyes and rabid pacing, the two of us together must have appeared truly outlandish; and then, too, there was the preposterousness of how I must have looked to Jim—I, who in the fresh throes of knowledge only wanted to appear at my best. Unkempt, unshaven, slovenly dressed, and reeking of a day’s worth of herring, I must have looked and smelled like a bait boat, rather than a prospective lover; but even that realization only made me succumb to additional gales of laughter.

Subsiding at last, I took him by the shoulders, and shook my head at the picture before me—the very image of irrepressible caprice; and looking back at me, he candidly grinned—no more governable now than he ever had been. For a moment we simply regarded each other, our chests still heaving from our mirth; then catching my breath,

I managed to gasp, “Have ye eaten anything lately?”—spasms of hunger once again assailing my middle.

“Not since four this mornin’, though Eben packed me a bite for the steamer,” he answered, still panting as he pulled on his hat; and spying a tavern across from the wharf head, I straightaway draped an arm about him, and tugged him summarily across the street.

Though it was a fairly unruly den, semi-dark with smoking lanterns, and boisterous with the rowdy hoots of seamen, it was filled with the tempting aromas of chowder, lobster and cod cooked every which way; and not about to be choosy we sat down in a corner, and ordered everything on the menu. Our plates overflowing, and our glasses ditto, we indulged ourselves for a couple of hours: Jim regaling me with the full tale of the barge, or breezy news from each of the children, and me—no longer intent on going home, since home had just come here to me—listening and laughing at his carefree stories.

Though my initial astonishment at his arrival had faded, my eagerness at seeing him had increased—my eyes calm enough now to take in details; and I sat looking at him above my fork, noting the curl of a tendril of hair, or the mercurial blue glints of his gaze, as if I had never seen them before. Through the haze of oil lamps and acrid tobacco, his words and features cut vividly at me; and I lingered on each of them hungrily—trying to cover my fervent glances by darting off to the fireplace or rafters, and refusing to meet his eyes for long, for fear he’d stumble onto my secret.

That I wasn’t actually my old self, I could see he’d already perceived—not just because of my spasmodic manner, but because of my unaccustomed vagueness; and more than once I found him staring curiously at me. Having no news about work, since I’d done little, or about Elkanah’s household, since I’d scarcely seen them, and never once taken a meal with them, I could barely answer his questions; and I didn’t improve the picture any by abstaining from hard spirits. When I passed my quota for the first time since our bargain, he promptly covered my mug with his hand; but I brushed it aside, muttering “Should’ve set a time limit,” and helped myself to more; and his lips twitching at the corners, he grudgingly gave in,

with a darksome hint or two about the future.

Finding it helped me to feel less self-conscious, I kept right on to the bottom of the decanter—Jim making no effort to keep up with me, but looking indulgently on from his plate; till finally—my cheeks beginning to burn above my beard, and my talk tumbling out wholly unconnected—he quietly asked, “Ben, are you quite all right?”—his words falling clearly in on my ears’ roar. Somehow I knew, even half seas over, that he meant something other than my drunken state; but mimicking his answer to me in the vardo, I simply bawled, “Shure, shure, neveh betteh”; and stifling his grin, he subsided into his glass.

Intent on seeing me home—no easy undertaking, since it was now late and snowing thickly, and neither one of us was clear on our direction—he managed to steer me onto the street, and get the tavern door closed behind us; then propelling me forward he asked “Now tell me, which way is Elkanah’s”—his laughter unmistakably shaking his hands.

“He’s up there somewhere,” I gestured, including the whole of what I thought was the hill in my arm’s sweep.

“Up there by the signal tower?”

“Sounds right,” I traipsed, clutching him to keep my keel.

“Congress Street...that’s the name of his street, ain’t it?” he persevered, panting as he helped me stumble along.

“Sounds familiah...why don’t we ask?”

“Benjamin, anybody we ask’ll think that we’re drunk!”

“Well, we are, ain’t we?”

On we trudged, following a course more or less uphill, to judge from the way the streets rose up at me—the driving snow gusting about us in whirlwinds, and a feeble window looming up at whites through the blur, or a horse clattering by on the icy cobbles. Sloshing and sliding myself, and more than once needing to be picked up, I all at once cried out “Why, that’s his gate!”, dropping anchor abruptly by a white post; and puffing up beside me Jim gasped, “It is? Are you sure? How could you possibly know?”—his voice rising skeptically over the wind’s howl.

“I recognize them mermaids on the gateposts,” I bellowed, patting one of them on the head.

“Melchett, this better be right, or we’ll be arrested for bustin’ in on somebody else’s house!”

“It’s right, I tell ye, it’s right,” I trumpeted, half-dragging, half-leaning on him up the walk; and stumbling like a battalion of men on the verandah, we arrived pell mell at the door, where I triumphantly sounded the knock. Admitted by the butler, we erupted clamoring into the hall, me stomping my boots and beating my hat, and Jim fervently gesturing me for silence; and following his gaze I clapped eyes on the drawing room, where a sea of silks and brocades suddenly hushed, and paused gaping at us, cups mid-air.

“Y’see, what’d I tell ye? They’hre havin’ anotheh one o’ them damn teas!” I bawled, half-stomping in toward the doorway to see better; and Jim’s arm desperately headed me round for the stairs.

“Aye, Ben, I see—keep movin’ now,” came his voice, quavering with helpless laughter; but even as he dragged me I made everyone a sodden bow, nearly hauling him over with me in my effort.

“They have them damn teas everyday, that’s why I ain’t ate here,” I bellowed, as the stair carpet began to rise up in my face; and I felt Jim’s body shake with hilarity against mine. “Fine, hush now, up the stairs now, come on,” recited his voice, while a swarm of faces collected below us.

“Y’ have t’ dress for ‘em, an’ I hate it,” I bawled on, the faces getting smaller as I mounted, for the most part on my hands and knees.

“I’m sure they know it,” gasped Jim’s voice, desperate, while he struggled to haul me in one piece to the top; “now, which way is your room?”

“Down that way somewhere,” I gestured, wondering if we were being followed by any of the swarm, and recollecting suddenly, “Say, I should’ve interduced you.”

“They’ll meet me soon enough... Is this place your room?”

“It is if it’s got one o’ them gawddam beds that looks like it could get up an’ walk,” I blared; and as he peeked in to check someone looked up the hall toward us—some tall, well-dressed spark steering a course for the party.

“So *that’s* what ye’ve been up to all day!” scowled a voice which

sounded even more displeased with me than usual, and which I gradually managed to recognize as Joseph's; "should've known that this limejuicer'd be behind it!"

"What d'ye mean?" I barked, feeling my wits swing into focus, and resisting Jim's insistent tug into my room.

"I mean he's always got ye sidetracked someplace ye shouldn't be," hurtled Joseph, coming to a belligerent halt beside us.

"Oh, he has, ey?" I glowered, feeling my hands cock at my hips; and again I resisted the tug at my arm.

"Ben, it's nothing; come on," soothed Jim, not relenting a whit at his pulling; but neither of us paid him any heed.

"Aye! He's up t' no good, an' he always has been; an' now he's got ye up t' no good with him," blurted Joseph, tugging at his gloves as he swayed on his heels.

"An' who're ye t' judge what I should be up to?" I challenged, determinedly freeing my arm from Jim's grasp.

"Ye should be loadin' the schoonehs instead o' lettin' us do youhr dirty work!" he flung back, gaiters, gloves and cravat all quivering in the hall light.

"You do *my* dirty work! I like that!" I hollered, years of resentment suddenly rushing to the surface, and finding an easy exit from my mouth. "Who is it that's always runnin' the yahrd, or roundin' the Horn or building' us ships, while you get the best route, the transatlantic, the best cargoes, even the family house—even though I've clearhr established I'm the betteh navigatoh an' shipwright, an' even the betteh skippeh! *I'll* give ye dirty work!" I bellowed; and before I knew it, I'd punched him in the mouth.

"Benjamin Galen!" came Jim's gasp, half-aghast, half-overcome with explosive laughter; then before Joseph could strike back he stepped between us, and kept us apart with a fist at each chest. "Now, Joe, don't mind him," he gentled, patting confidingly at his lapels; "he's just had a bit t' drink."

"I c'n see that," condescended Joseph, his voice coming cool as the north wind in autumn; then giving me a long measuring stare from his curt eyes, he turned with icy dignity on his heel, and marched away, head up, for the stairs, never once casting a look back at us.

“Fancy *you* in the role of peacemaker,” I muttered, as Jim—getting back to business—steered me into my room.

“Fancy *you* in the role of hothead,” he came back, still quaking with pent-up laughter; and too grateful at the thought of sleep to answer, I stumbled in soddenly toward the bed. Letting go his arm, I fell into the bed clothes; felt the tug of Jim’s hands at my boots, the soft settle of the covers on me; then felt at last the blissful abandon of sleep—the kind of sleep I slept when I knew he was near.

When I came to the next day, struggling feebly for recollections, I found him sitting beside me with a potful of coffee, and a half-buried smile of indulgence on his lips; and as I painfully sat up and downed a cup, he cheerfully described last night’s entrance, witnessed apparently not just by Portland’s upper crust—including half of my Howland in-laws—but by the governor of the state and his wife. The fight, too, they’d heard, and could hardly mistake, since Joseph’d danced through the night with a split lip; and though Pa’d attempted to smooth things over—with one of his typical “Boys will be boys, and likkeh will be likkeh” bromides—the temperance circles couldn’t have been much impressed; while Reuben and Sal had enough ammunition stocked up from the spectacle to see them into the next century. “Wait till they hear about the barge,” I intoned, trying to choke down a breakfast roll; and he playfully grinned as he poured another cup,

“Oh, they got other business first; they’re expectin’ you t’ show up for work.”

Sending him away with a groan I rang for water, the servants—no doubt startled at my signs of gentility—bringing me gallons; and from them I discovered that Agatha had stashed Jim somewhere up on the third floor, in reflection of his social standing—his presence in the house at all apparently the result of Pa’s insistence, since he’d offered in the first place to board on the waterfront. Not much more welcome than I, then, he saw me through the weekend—through one or two of the less formal meals, through the confusion of loading and the sullenness of Joseph’s humor; and though the cards were plainly stacked against us—though Agatha was cool and Elkanah

was distant, and Reuben inclined to bait us at every corner—we nonetheless managed to carry off the game, due largely to Jim's winsome ways with the young set.

Having had time now to adjust to—or at any rate absorb—his advent, I privately struggled to sort out the meaning of my position; but so unnerving was his presence across from me at the table, or beside me on the loading dock, that every time I began to get a handle on things, I looked at him, and lost my grip. Convinced one moment that he loved me, the next that I was imbecilic to suppose it—convinced one hour that he'd showed up in Portland because he'd missed me, the next that that was too conceited for belief—I swung like a gyroscope on a wild sea; and my oscillations hardly made me a fit candidate for work, much less for a mannered dinner.

Not least unsettling was my manic conviction that my dream was about to come true; for here we both were—welcome or no—at Elkanah's, Jim with his hair cut, and both of us soon due home; and if we did confront our feelings more or less as I dreamed it, what in blazes was I going to do about it? Was I going to fling to the four winds my marriage, and carry on with him like the lovers in my dreams? Or was I simply going to burst with their containment?

Now for the first time I began to conceive what it all meant—all those considerations and consequences I'd postponed by my rosebush; and their uninvited assault further demoralized me. I'd never known anyone in a situation like this, never read of anyone either; it was virtually unspoken in Cape Damaris; and even at sea it was no matter for talk, save for a few snide remarks now and then in foreign ports. A couple of vague memories of old bards like Catullus—from my Latin coursework at Bowdoin—filtered back to companion me; but, of course, we'd never translated those poems, only knew they were there by innuendo; and bent anyway on making a name for myself in shipping, I'd never paid them any mind. Now I felt as turned upside down as one of those crystalline paperweights from Bavaria, the snow falling back into the sky from the housetops; and I longed for the comradeship of someone like me.

Against the ludicrous backdrop of mannered society my

daydreams of Jim blazed all the more bizarre, my isolation all the more urgent and painful; and I could hardly make coherent answer to the few who still sought to engage me in converse. Nor did I fare much better on the wharves, where we struggled to work in the last of the cargoes so as to be home, after all, for the holiday; and hence it came as an incomparable release when Pa called me to the desk in his room, that Monday night before Thanksgiving, and bade me and Jim ride his new saddle horses home, a day early in order to ready *Abigail* for loading, while he, Joseph and crew saw to sailing the schooners.

Though they weren't a train, and the Atlantic Highway was no track, the horses were a means home alone with Jim, an opportunity to break for a while from the others; and so overjoyed was I to get away from the family that even my trepidations about my dream, and my suspicions that Pa was doing me a favor, couldn't serve to quell my elation. Enamored of horseflesh, as Pa knew quite well—always more at home in a stable than in the parlor, and already a friend to the new beasts Pa'd bought—Jim himself was in seventh heaven; and though our trip was to be longer, and more tiring, than the sea journey planned by the others, we set forth gladly early Tuesday morning amid farewells tinged with mutual relief, and promises that the schooners would be off in a few hours.

Hoping to reach Cape Damaris that night, a journey barely within reach of the horses, we paced ourselves carefully from the beginning, making frequent stops for brief rests, and not hurrying along faster than necessary; and noontime found us on schedule in Brunswick, where we feasted at an inn and pampered our escorts, and rode at a leisurely speed past old Bowdoin. Showing Jim the three or four ivy-clad halls which comprised my alma mater, I recalled memories of professors and classes, and former classmates such as Jackson; pointed out the boarding house where I'd lived for three years, while he listened raptly as he always did, especially to tales of my past.

Then heading out of town, we cantered in silence, me reacquainting myself with the road I'd traveled by stage those school day vacations, Jim regarding alertly the new sights; but despite our

quiet a warmth spoke between us, a wordless rapport that knit our reflections—his eyes seeming to look where mine looked, his heart to lift like mine at our nearness.. So reassuring was our accord that for a long time my uncertainties took flight, and I dwelt only on the present, content with matters as they stood—asking no more, no less, than to be his companion, to share the search of the wind at our collars, and the gloss of the sun on the necks of our horses.

Though we'd originally planned to ride all the way to Cape Damaris, I could perceive, as the afternoon waned, that he was beginning to fatigue; and my concern for his health—almost forgotten in Portland, and in the joyous affinity of our trip—recalled me suddenly to my senses. It was past suppertime and, as in my dream, neither of us had spoken for an hour or so, though we'd communed often in gestures and glances. Now, with the weather beginning to close in, and a cold drizzle commencing to fall, I felt a return of my old anxieties for him, especially as I could see his shoulders set, and his expression steel itself against a confession; while I, too, was tired, as all at once worn-out as if I'd just spent a day in intent correspondence.

With Waldoboro ahead—with Cape Damaris ten miles beyond, and no inn or tavern in between—I began to think of stopping for the night; but knowing Jim's stubbornness, especially in the matter of conceding weakness, I was wise enough to know that I should maneuver him through the horses, that being the stock Romany means of excuse. Stopping for calls of nature, giving up for the night, or even for the mid-day meal, were all managed on the pretext of seeing to the horses; so suddenly I simply reached over and took his reins, and brought us to a halt by the road. Dismounting with him, and stretching my legs, I appealingly asked, "What d'ye think, matey? Shall we knock off and call it a day? They've done a fair stretch since we left this mohnin', an' the weatheh don't look too promisin'."

Stroking the horses, and searching their faces, then looking up into the northeast, he asked in return, "How much farther?"; and I smiled over at him as he nuzzled Cherry.

"It's two miles t' Waldoboro," I answered, "an' ten more t' Cape Damaris; an' thehre ain't nothin' like an inn in b'tween—though we

could lay up in a bahn, if that appeals t' your Romany taste."

He threw me a grin, then asked, visiting Mistral, "Is there an inn in Waldoboro?"; and I looked away to hide my delight.

"Aye, the Bell an' Anchor, run by Johnny Talbot, anotheh cousin of Eli's; an' thehre's a first-rate ostleh, too," I tacked on for good measure.

"It'd be better for the horses," he nodded, as if he'd conversed in depth with them; and concealing my triumph I simply re-mounted, and led the way up the road to town.

Uphill and down, then uphill again, on some of the biggest slopes of the highway, we found ourselves in the crowded inn yard, on the Cape Damaris side of the village; and scraping our boots in the entry—a sudden wrench in my chest at the thought there might not be two rooms vacant, and the pair of us obliged to share one—I marched up to the desk by the stairs, and rang the bell for Johnny.

Breezing in from a bedlam of throaty cries in the public room, Johnny engulfed me in his grip, then regretfully informed me that, far from there being two rooms, or even one available for the night, there were none—not so much as a windowsill vacant. Overcome with disappointment—all at once realizing how I'd longed to stay here, to be thrown into close quarters with Jim—I tried to make an offhand reply; but sensing something from my voice, or maybe perceiving our fatigue, the old shellback gusted, "If ye'll bide a wee, Cap'n, an' if youhr not pahrticulah, thehre might be somethin' small at the back."

Suspecting he was about to evict some member of his family, I vigorously endeavored to stop him; but he flung me off and shaped a course for the second floor, waving his hand all the way to squelch me; and soon a commotion on the back stairs, characterized by flurrying feet running both ways, confirmed my suspicion that some son or daughter was scurrying off with armloads of belongings for a makeshift cot in the kitchen. Bursting back into our entryway alcove, and ignoring my eruption of protests, Johnny announced, "It's not much, Cap'n, jest a bit of a bed an' a hearth; but it's betteh than a bahn on a night like this"; and not trusting myself to look at Jim—too overcome with gratitude toward Johnny, and with the sudden

assault of apprehension in my middle, to stammer out more than a word of thanks—I clumsily accepted the offer.

Ordering a simple supper of bread and cheese, chowder and mulled wine, and asking that it be sent up on a tray to our chamber, as we were too tired to undertake the public room, we left our bags for the moment in the entry, and took our horses round to the stable, Jim insisting on seeing how they were to be housed and fed; then stomping back in and picking up our gear, we followed Johnny up the wooden stairs.

On entering our room—a quaint, low-ceilinged, spartan cubicle over the back porch, commanding a view of the Medomak from both of its dormers—we discovered that the fire had already been built up, and that two mugs of mulled wine had been set out on a low table drawn up between two comfortably worn armchairs; and dropping our bags, we looked gratefully around us. In the gable end, the counterpane of the four-poster—somewhat rickety, but commodious and inviting—had been drawn back, revealing clean bedclothes and an overstuffed ticking; while from the pitcher and bowl on the linen-decked washstand rose a cloud of steam, betokening freshly-poured hot water. Out the lace-curtained windows we could see the darkening sky, with its lowering cloud mass and portents of sleet; and in contrast the hearth-fire flamed all the more welcome, the blaze in my chest all the brighter and hotter.

Shrugging off our peacoats and pulling on our dressing gowns, we took turns at the basin, our breaths puffing in the chill air, then drew our chairs up to the grate, as close as we could without setting them a-spark; and settling ourselves into the cushions—Jim half-curling up thankfully into his, and spreading his pea-coat over his shoulders—we sipped our hot wine, and bathed in the hearth-warmth. Now and then adding a log to the fire, or arranging those in the grate to better advantage—breaking up bread and cheese on our tray when Sal brought it, and pouring a re-fill of wine from the warm jug—we took turns tending one another; and I basked in our protective caretaking as much as in the flames at the grate.

As soon as we finished, he rose to turn in, while I returned our

tray to the kitchen; and coming back in a few minutes—finding him already in bed, curled up on the side nearest the wall—I made ready to retire myself, putting on a night log and banking the fire, which continued to glow even when I'd blown out the lamp, and thrown my outer garb over the armchair. As I climbed in beside him the wind began to rise, and the sleet to clamor on the rooftop above us; and feeling that fire, tavern and weather were cooperating in bringing us together, I gave myself up to the sensations of closeness, hot bricks at our feet and coverlets around us.

Except for the quiver of firelight on the walls, the room was dark—dark as only a chamber on a cloud-thick winter night can be; and the darkness enveloped us at once in a kind of cocoon of comfort. Rolled together in the center of the mattress—covered with a plentitude of blankets and quilts—we settled ourselves in comfortable positions, Jim unabashedly turning his head towards my shoulder, and nestling his limbs in the ticking near mine with a sigh of contentment. For an unmeasured time we lay together in this fashion, neither of us sleeping nor wanting to sleep—listening instead to the clatter of sleet on the roof, and abandoning ourselves to the luxuries of warmth. So elated was I that I was almost paralyzed: afraid to move a muscle lest he turn away—afraid to move any closer lest I offend him—longing to lift a hand to nudge his fingers—avid to know if he was filled with the same desire and joy—fearful he wasn't—fearful to ask.

In an agony of curiosity to know how he was feeling, the subdued hush of his breathing the only hint of his heart—yearning to know whether he was simply quietly contented as he seemed to be, as any gypsy in a wagonbed of relations might be, or whether he, too, was ache-filled with need—I lay in the warmth of our berth unmoving, conscious of his fingers tumbled near mine; remembered other times we'd slept nearby one another—recalled nights when fatigue or the presence of others had obscured me from knowing what I knew now. With nothing between us save the last shreds of defense, I hovered between that old life and our new, half-torn how to venture over; and it was far into the night before I fell at last into a half-slumber, and he too drifted off without having turned, or moved away from the

warmth of my shoulder.

Quick raps or rat-tats which thumped the walls and punctuated the howls of the wind abruptly tore me out of my sleep, and startled, I rose up on one elbow, bewilderedly thinking a loose branch knocked the eaves; then blurrily realizing it was Johnny at our door, I dropped back down again under the covers. “Aye, Johnny; I’m awake,” I managed, registering next the dim cold of the room, and the rattling din which must have been sleet; and through the darksome confusion came his muffled voice.

“Sorry t’ wake ye at this howeh, Cap’n; but I thought ye should know the weatheh’s makin’ up. Unless y’ wants t’ spend Thanksgivin’ with us, ye should shake a leg; even if y’ stahrt now, ye’ll barely make port.”

“Aye—thank ye—I c’n heahr it,” I got out, with another bleary glance at the window; and entering briefly he set out hot water and lighted a couple of candles on the mantle. In their feeble gleam the frosted panes, glazed with a combination of sleet and salt, revealed nothing at all of what lay without; but the slant of the wind at our northeast eaves told me everything I needed to know; and as Johnny bowed out, I quelled a moan. Reluctant to rise in spite of the need—aware all at once of the whole of the night, the warmth of the bed and Jim’s nestled limbs—I lingered on in the depths of our nest, conscious of all I must suddenly leave: the warm give of the ticking and comforters and quilts, the confiding closeness of shoulders and feet, the soft press of knees in the abandon of dawn, the sweet tumble of hair in the neglect of sleep.

Carefully shifting my limbs from his, I thought to let him rest a while longer; but alert at once to my gentle stirs, he roused enough to murmur “Ben...what is it?”, in his half-sleep turning closer to me; and wrenched by his move I tenderly halted.

“Wind’s makin’ up; we’ve got t’ be off, mate,” I told him, my voice coming strangely natural in the dim light; and “Aye,” came his answer, calm and accepting, not a flicker of remorse sounding in his tones—though he, too, dozed on as if unwilling to move, as if to savor one last long moment.

“You stay in bed till I build up the fire; no use in both of us gettin’ dressed cold,” I offered, when I could bear our closeness no longer; and untangling myself from limbs and bedding I rose, feeling an actual pain of detachment. Assaulted at once by the bite of the cold I threw on my dressing gown and peacoat, and hurriedly fumbled at the hearth—wondering every moment what he was thinking; and when at length he rose to dress, his eyes were averted and he had little to say, as if he too was experiencing loss and regret.

Though he partook of the morsels Jimmy had brought, washed in the lamplight and packed up his gear with the simple utility of the moment, speaking unemphatically of this and that, there was a stern restraint on his face—accentuated by the dark of the room, and the stark, abrupt shadows thrown by the lamp. There was an unusual depth, too, in his husky voice—a fervor which caused me to look up and wonder; but in no other way did he betray emotion, leaving our room in the end without a backward look, while I gazed over my shoulder at the rumpled bed, the vacant hearth, with an almost palpable stab of regret.

Once out of doors and trudging along over roads ice-hard and crusted with sleet, I struggled to pin my mind on our business—tried not to look back on the night before or to give in to the haunting conviction, taking shape now with each hard-won furlong, that those unutterable moments would never revisit; that even if they came to me in another form, they themselves were gone forever, in all their perfect imperfection. With the dark still pressing in around us, the relentless cold stinging our faces, and the wind whistling over our larboard shoulders, I struggled not to look ahead either—tried to suppress the discord of misgivings, urgent if vague in the pre-dawn dimness, which had sounded a warning in my chest ever since I’d been awakened.

What Jim was thinking as he rode beside me, his features barely discernible over his checkered muffler—what he was feeling as he considerately helped Mistral pick her way, I couldn’t tell in the resounding darkness; but for me, alternately staving off pain and disquiet, questions were irresistibly forming—queries I at first

welcomed because they brought surcease to my raw preoccupation.

How soon it would snow, how fast the temperature was falling; where the barometer stood and how far we had to go, there being scarcely a house or barn after Thomaston to lay up in: these were the speculations which loomed up in my mind. But these in turn led me to others, far more disconcerting to weigh; and in the stinging dark I could no longer postpone considerations I'd wholly forgotten since last night—recollections of the schooners somewhere off the coast, and of *Abigail* out in the harbor, riding at anchor in a shallow mooring. How many miles Pa and Joseph had done before the blow'd commenced last evening—whether they'd made port, or sought premature harbor, or headed to sea to ride out the gale winds—whether *Abigail's* holding ground was good—or whether she, too, had been taken out to sea, or driven out before that by the tempest:—such contemplations as these reared up in my mind like so many rocks along a lee shore; and the thicker they rose the more urgent my pace.

Torn between keeping up with me and showing heedfulness to the horses, Jim began to hang back a few rods, almost lost to view in the hail sheets; but when the snows swept in we closed in together, and picked out the last couple of miles at a snail's speed. When at last we drew rein in the lee of Job Taylor's, the house at the crest of the hill above town—when finally, by some freak shift or thinning of the clouds, it became a shade or two lighter, and we could make out Cape Damaris and the harbor—we beheld such a sight as I had never seen in all my years on the coast; and I simply sat atop my horse, gaping.

Between the low tides and the northeast gale, the harbor was drained, simply drained empty, as if a plug had been pulled or the water blown out; and the whole harbor floor from the wharves to Winslow's ledge stretched bare as a crab out of its shell. Along the exposed mudflats a litter of small craft, the bones of drowned ships and the flotsam of centuries loomed up like signposts on a desolate dreamscape; while between them lay bare beds not seen by man, certainly never imagined by me, mapping the soundings in my boyhood dinghy. Out beyond the natural shelf of the ledge rode

Abigail in waters scarcely deep enough to float her; but no sight of the schooners or any other large craft broke the eerie manifestation; and too stunned to take it in, I simply stared.

“Have you ever seen it like this b’fore?” came Jim’s gasp, on the wind, at my ear; and having almost forgotten for a moment he was beside me, I cast a dazed look at him.

“Neveh,” I shouted back, the words whipped away, as the driving snows commenced again.

“What d’ye want me t’ do?” he offered, stoic and calm in the shriek of the wind; and shaken out of my stupor I struggled to think what.

“I don’t know,” I grappled, half-driven to act, half-fraught with a wild inclination to laugh; “I don’t hahrdly know where t’ begin—but we’ve got t’ get *Abigail* out o’ the harboh—Christ—I b’live I could all but *walk* out t’ her from Eben’s...” Fumbling to a halt, I paused to think, to marshal my wits into some kind of order; then hauling out my watch, I considered the time. “I’m goin’ t’ Tom’s,” I shouted on the wind; “he ain’t likely been up more than an howeh; an’ if anyone’s organizin’ a crew for *Abigail*, he is. Ride out t’ Eben’s, fetch him an’ Obed an’ anybody else on the neck on the way back—an’ meet me at Tom’s—we’ll carry his dory, an’ row ourselves the rest o’ the way t’ the ship.”

“Aye,” rang his voice, all comprehending, as if he’d followed my logic without words, and come up himself with the same conclusion; and with a slap of the reins he was ready to be off.

“Bring some oilskins an’ a bite t’ eat—no tellin’ when we’ll be back,” I called out to him as he turned his horse; and with a jaunty wave he was off for the Point road, without so much as a look behind him.

Going straight out to Tom’s on the harbor near the mouth I found everything in disarray— the whole household caught up in the early morning confusion which erupts with an unlooked-for dilemma: the children, not dressed, dashing to the windows, or clinging, confused and crying, to Rachel; Tom in his oilskins, hastily greasing his seaboots; six or seven men overhauling their gear; and all the

paraphernalia of tomorrow's Thanksgiving dinner, scattered hither and yon on tables and sideboards.

When they caught sight of me they directly sent up a cheer, as if I'd been specifically dropped down to order; and while we waited for others Tom's stableman had sent for, we swiftly made plans, and swapped urgent news. That we'd all—schooners and horses—left Portland yesterday, they'd had no earthly idea, for there'd been no word or sight of the vessels, and no expectations of any of us till after Thanksgiving; and with the additional worry of the schooners before them, all hands did their best to put their minds on *Abigail*. While we chose duties and routes, Rachel brought us hot cakes, an impromptu breakfast far better than my first; and as I packed away a plate I kept an eye on my watch, on the lookout for Eben and Jim. Having collected ten or twelve men—enough to bring up the anchors, and hoist the necessary storm sail—Tom was all for an immediate departure, heading out with the men to ready the shore boat; but still I delayed, holding out for Jim, and considering what on earth could have delayed him.

When after an hour he still didn't appear—when both the thermometer and the barometer had fallen a notch, and the weather shown signs of further deteriorating—Tom at last prevailed upon me to leave a message with Rachel; and hastily scribbling out a note—disliking to leave without him, and filled with misgivings, all the forebodings of the early morning taking on a new shape—I stuffed the paper into her hands, lashed on my hat and went out in the wind. On the shore I found several already hoisting the boat, the rest shouldering sea bags and packs of gear; and so thick was the snow that I had to hasten up to within a yard just to keep them in my sight.

Reaching *Abigail* after a hard pull, pelted by sheets of sleet, snow and spray—climbing her Jacob's ladder in the murk, and hauling up the boat to the rail—we took to the decks and lighted the lamps, manned the helm, cast off gaskets and seizings, threw down running rigging and overhauled the ground tackle, struggling with the new and unfamiliar gear; then rallying round the windlass with the gale in our throats, we hoisted first one anchor, then the other. Setting only enough storm sail for headway and balance—hoisting the jib, two or

three staysails, and the spanker, each roaring in turn and tearing at its ringbolts—we shaped a cautious course out of the harbor, aiming to swing fair of the Mussel Ridge islands, then simply run before it for the day; but we hadn't yet even cleared the Point—hadn't as much as coiled up a halyard, when our lookout hollered "Flare ho! Stahboard beam!"; a shrill note of alarm hastening his voice; and word sped aft to me by relay in the roar.

Knowing at once with uncanny certainty what it was—desperate not to plow straight into the wreckage, equally desperate not to take every stitch out of *Abigail*, or broach her by an untimely move—I put the helm down and brought her into the wind, hailing Percy and Haggai to take the wheel; then racing to the flare site, now over the taffrail, I peered out into the driving dark. Neither flare nor vessel nor headland took shape, nothing save the wailing, wind-rushing snow, and the thrashing of breakers nearby on shore, reminding us of our own peril; yet though no one said so, we all knew what was aground, as plainly as if we could read the sternboard. Struggling to keep her hove back on the wind, we hovered on the brink of our own loss, drifting precariously toward where we knew the shore must be; hovered, half-expecting to feel her lurch hard aground, till—loath to surrender, yet fearful to stay—we were forced to conclude we must shift helm, and be off.

Leaving the rail I was about to signal Tom, when "Flare ho!" broke loose from one of the men, still peering out from the gangway bulwarks; and "Where away?" clamored half a dozen voices, as Jack Tupper gestured into the dim.

"Lahboard beam! must be directly off the light," he bellowed, all hands save the helm crowding round him at the rail; and indeed, though the flare faded, we were near enough now to the Point to catch the periodic beam of the lighthouse, eerily diffuse in the cutting snow. Hastily consulting with Tom I decided to anchor in what I hoped to God was the new channel—had just worked her upwind a bit, to make up for ground lost, and given the order to let go, when the neck of the derrick loomed up out of the murk like a sea monster; and giving a cheer—Haggai booming out "Thanks, Robertson!"—we dropped our hook in the newly-dredged trench, taking care not to

let it down foul of the engine below.

For the first time having a clue as to our position, we mustered at the helm to parley, Tom and me looking to Seth Wingate—as the eldest—for advice; and so fierce was the blast we were obliged to turn our backs, and confer at the tops of our voices. Struggling to pinpoint the direction of the flares, and deliberating the techniques of a ship-to-ship rescue—balancing the threat of the breakers to leeward, the potential for failure of one or both anchors, and the risk of being driven aground at the Point, or even up onto the wreck itself, against the claim of the lives at stake somewhere in the snow—we blustered and hollered in each other's ears, our debate all the more urgent for the unspoken conviction that we knew sight unseen who'd sent up the flares.

“Who's got the turn t' patrol the shore?” shouted Percy Winslow at one point; and like a bolt came my understanding of what had happened to Eben and Jim.

“Good God, I'll bet it's McCabe—no wondeh him an' Robertson ain't showed up,” I bawled back; and as they barked assent my mind raced ahead to trace the inevitable chain of events on shore. Knowing perfectly well the machinations of the entire volunteer lifesaving service, I saw directly what must have taken place: saw Eben out patrolling the beach, taking his usual turn in foul weather, in conjunction perhaps with Tom Longworthy on the east shore; saw one of them run for the boathouse, to fetch the gun cart, breeches buoy and faking boxes, while the other dashed for town to ring the alarm, which must have pealed just after we'd left; saw Jim gallop up in the midst of the action, and—being Jim—decide to ditch me, and commit himself to the more urgent need of the flare; saw him setting up the gun or pushing the boat cart or maybe even, madman that he was, casting in his lot with an attempt to launch a surfboat, if the wreck was too far offshore for the breeches buoy; saw him in the breakers, pulling for the vessel, in the ultimate moments of trying to bring off survivors.

Once I'd seen this no force on earth could have wrenched me away from the invisible drama before us; and when time had dragged

on without further sign of either a flare or a vessel in distress—when we'd paid out as much chain as even the stoutest of us dared, and doubts had begun to creep into our talk—when Tom finally came aft and broached the subject of leaving, his hand a-grip on the sleeve of my coat—I raised all the resistance of ten men, convincing him in the end not only to wait, but to take command while I went to the rail.

Pinning my entire mind on the snow, and scrutinizing its streaming rush for a break—fighting a rising panic and dread, an anarchy of convictions and doubts, amongst them the conceit that events were out of control, their chaos spawned by the failed chances of last night—I peered for an age out into the void; struggled for some gift of clarity and form, till—after an endless span without flare or movement—Jack Tupper beside me yelled “Boat adrift! dead ahead!” Immediately I too saw it, a capsized surfboat just such as the shore patrol used in rescue, and four men clinging to it: a shadowy bulk and thin shapes in the blizzard.

Coming athwartships they were but a moment before us, for the combined gale and tide swiftly carried them downwind; and wildly hallooing we sent up a flare to signal our presence. No faces, no signs of individuality or clothing appeared to us through the dim and the snow; no voices called to publish their names; but instantaneously I knew who one of them was, just as I'd earlier known who'd sent up the flares—knew it as plain as if I could see his eyes, or make out his checkered muffler. Desperately throwing out anything that would float—heaving life-rings on lines, fenders from the bow, benches, even lengths of hatch tackle and blocks—we scrambled and darted pell mell on deck; flamed up with hope as one of them waved, a feeble sweep to acknowledge our throws; then helplessly watched as our equipment fell short, or drifted aft at a slower pace.

Leaning over the bulwarks we could just make them out as they slipped into the curtain of snow—were just in time to see, as they faded from view, one of them let go and sink; and a panic flailing me like no fear I'd ever known, I panted like a beast at the rail. Clutching and unclutching the sleet-crusting wood, I frenziedly cast about for a plan; caught sight of, then discarded, one by one all the deck boats, as

too time-consuming and too risky to hoist out in the wind.

Then all at once my eyes fell on the little dory, forgotten ever since we'd climbed aboard and lashed it to the main hatch; and straightway—as though I'd been granted a deliverance of vision, a precise map or chart of the one route of escape—I was clear on what I should do. Flinging off my oilskins and heavy boots—dashing for the long boat and clapping on a cork vest, the newfangled preserver I'd just ordered and stowed—I began to unlash the dory; and instantly—as if liberated from their stunned witness—the entire crew descended on me.

"It can't be done, man—it's too small—it'll fill as soon as it's oveh," roared Seth, trying to rip me back by the shoulders; and finding the strength of a steamer, I shed him.

"I've got t' do it; let go of me!" I hollered, as others fought to unhand me from the ropes.

"Ye'll freeze t' death, Ben' ye'll never make it—ye've got t' let them go!" cried Tom, in possession of one of my hands; and desperate only at the thought of being detained, I flung free.

"Let them go!" I raged into the blast, tearing again at the stiff, frozen knots; "for Christ's sake, don't ye know who's out there? That's Jim in that boat, an' I'm goin' t' get him!"

Stepping back a little—as if I'd gone mad, and posed a threat to others more sober—Seth gaped at me, then managed to gasp out: "Melchett, ye've—you'hre crazy, ye've taken leave o' your senses! Even if that was God Amighty out there, ye'd neveh contrive t' reach in that boat; an' if ye did, ye'd neveh make it t' shore!"

"I'll do it all right; now let go o' the line! Seth, b'fore God, I neveh struck an oldeh man, but—"

"Ben, for the time bein' I'm standin' here in the boots o' yourh Pa; an' I'm bound t' tell ye, this is madness—this ain't a sound or rational decision!"

"It's the *only* d'cision!" I stamped fiercely at him, nearly losing my footing on the pitching deck. "I'm still masteh aboard this vessel, an' shipped or unshipped, you'hre still the crew; an' by God, if y d'tain me any longer, I'll charge ye all with mutiny in court!"

"Ye'll neveh live t' see the day," groaned Tom, as the dory went

over and landed upright, immediately standing up and down on the seas; and climbing onto the rail, I touched his wrist.

“Tom, take command o’ the ship,” I told him, preparing to swing my legs over.

Gripping me by the shoulder, his fingers quaking in a way I could clearly feel through my pea coat, Tom grappled out in one last attempt: “For God’s sake, man remembh youhr children!”; but my heart and nerve steeled with an unshakeable calm, I soothed him as gently as I could in the gale wind.

“I’ll be settin’ down t’ dinneh with ‘em,” I called as I went over the rail; and taking my seat and shipping the oars, then waiting for my chance, I rowed.

At once I was assaulted by a much fiercer wind, a far keener spray and sleet-driven snow, the foam flying in sheets round my open boat, and the seas running black in chaotic swells; but explicable or no I wasn’t afraid, my eyes on the curtain where they’d disappeared, and an unearthly calm timing my strokes. Because they were drifting and I was rowing, the joint force of the gale and the tide at my back, I knew I could succeed in closing in on them; had only to keep before the elements and stay upright, and home in on the draw which exuded from Jim.

In another state now where logic was futile, and only trust in the unseen availed—clear-headed for the first time in months, as if I’d cut adrift all unnecessary baggage, and jettisoned all top-hamper clutter—I reveled in a confidence never before known; rowed pure, light, direct over the breakers, possessed of an uncanny judgment and skill. With the stinging cold and piercing ice all but blanked out—not forgotten, but neutralized by my calm, and the concentration which sprang from it—I heaved and pulled for an unknowable time, not forcing my chances but taking them as they came, almost as if allowing the tumult to row me; and at last with a lurch of the heart I raised a guess, little more than a glint in the white whirl of a boat.

Capsized as it was it showed up as a sliver, a murky slant in the turbid seas; but it rose and fell with a detectable rhythm, gradually enlarging as I closed; and finally I could make out its shape as a

keel, and clinging to its handholds, one or two figures, frail pencil forms splayed over the hull. Where the third man was—whether riding low on the lee beam, or sunk beneath, spent, like his earlier companion—I couldn't make out in the tempestuous dim; but from the blaze in my chest I knew one was Jim, knew it as plain as if he shone with a light; and I struggled not to lose the grip of my pace. Whether they'd seen my dory lowered, and hence were aware of my pending rescue, I couldn't begin to guess in the din—for the driving snows had by then closed them to our view, and the seas pitched like heights now, periodically shutting us out. But as I hove into sight one of them made a sign, as if I wasn't entirely unexpected; and timing my moves—gauging the force of each swell, keeping the little dory stern on in its trough, then more abeam with the lurch of its crest—I finally pulled myself close alongside.

In the snow-riddled dark I could now discern that there were indeed only two still holding on; but both had the strength to clutch my gunnels, and hoist themselves while I steered and held firm; and first one, then the other pitched forward into the bottom of the boat, then lay motionless, completely done in. Even now it was too dim to make out who they were—to distinguish whether one of them wore a checkered muffler; but I called out "It's me, mate; hold on!" as surely and serenely as if it was daylight, bright day on a warm, benign summer's afternoon; and lifting the oars again, I rowed.

Though I had them in the boat, the most critical leg still remained: that of landing inside the Point, where the hurtling seas slammed into the rock-ridden shore; and easing the bow, I hesitated, undecided. If there'd been any sign of the beach I was nearing—any clang of the channel buoy, warning me away from the crags near the light—it would have helped; would not only have provided direction, but served to further strengthen my nerve; but instead I could catch only the diffuse beams of the lighthouse, disembodied and vague in the streaking snow. Since all the signposts of reason had failed, or were rendered unrecognizable by the tempest, I had no course but to again trust instinct; and choosing a route toward the turbulence of the shore—looking for a break, then steering more or less for a place which seemed right—I felt my way into the tumult.

Several times, shipping water, I kicked the man nearest my feet, who roused enough to bail for a spell; but even partially swamped, both by whitecaps and spray sheets, I didn't give up my self-possession; kept my countenance till—reaching the inshore surf, with its thunder growl of booming and pounding—I from nowhere remembered another perilous landing off this coast; and straightaway my calm was shattered. No longer rowing me, the black seas turned vicious, menacing me with their frigid deep; while the blast of the wind bit into my back and gnawed at my hands as they gripped the oars. Suddenly aware that my wool coat was stiff, stiff as a topsail with frozen brine, my beard crusted and hoary and my feet unfeeling, I stamped my heels and beat my hands on the oarlocks, automatically losing my timing; then as if to further demoralize me, there pierced the night a wild, pitching wail, seeming to urgently beckon or summon, though no words could be discerned on the wind's howl.

Rising and falling, pulsing and failing, it came from nowhere that I could detect— simply beat and throbbed from the very depths of the night, the very lungs and throat of the wind; and paralyzed altogether, I yielded my pace. A-race on the seas, abandoned to their course, I was about to commit us all to the breakers; but just at that moment, through the gale cloud of snow, there loomed up a shade—the dark bulk of the shore; and more glorious still, the blurred lights of a house, my house, every window blazing. Hurtling ahead I could make out the beach—could snatch the hurried forms of men running, the glare of flares and a jumble of apparatus, probably the forsaken breeches buoy; and directly knowing precisely where I was—every pebble beneath me as plain as if I had eyes on the keel—I courted my chance for our final dash; awaited the promising lift of a breaker, then feeling its power, drove in straight for the shore. At once we careened at great speed on the crest top, as if hurled along by an unseen hand, rooted deep in the maelstrom of water; then downward we plunged in a cascade of spindrift, our hearts flying into our mouths with the impact, and the seas drenching us in a torrential smother—a cataract of cold which burned us to the bones. Abandoning the oars I made a desperate grab for Jim, even as men streamed out into the breakers;

gripped him by the chest as we smashed into the wave trough, and landed dazed, but miraculously upright; then more than half-filled we lumbered on for the next roll, swept up and over before we capsized, and Jim and me straightaway went under. Floundering for my feet, for anything solid beneath me—flailing in the searing cold, and the rib-crushing pressure—I finally fought free, borne up by my cork vest; and gasping the air, I found myself still clutching Jim, though he tugged like a dead weight in the welter around us.

Struggling for the shore we went over twice more, wholly submerged each time by the surf; but staggering on we wrung a way through the surges, straining against the conflicting currents. Emerging into the wind—which instantly froze our clothes—we stumbled and fell at last in the backwash, then crawled like crustaceans up onto the beach—Jim at once sick with all the salt water he'd taken aboard. Pausing to help him—terrified by his long exposure, and by how listless he seemed as I strove to get him to his feet—I urgently propelled him towards my house, where I knew they must have set up a lifesaving station.

“Jamie, it’s me,” I tried to encourage, hoarsely battling to top the wind; “up, up higheh now, out o’ the wateh!”; but sick again in the wallow he fell to his knees, me holding him and endeavoring to make him hear. “It’s all right, matey—I’ve got ye—up higheh now,” I kept on, trying to get him up out of the backflow; and succeeding once more I forced him slowly on through the snow crunch, stopping repeatedly for him to be sick: each time bellowing at him, “Up—up now, Jamie—ye’ve got t’ walk—we’ve got t’ keep movin’—no, ye can’t lie down— we can’t stop—keep movin’!”

Wholly alarmed about his condition, I finally maneuvered him up to the house front— floundered through snowdrifts and sand-blasted bare patches with the one thought of shutting out the wind’s fury; but as soon as I’d wrestled him into the hallway I stopped, too stunned for the moment to go on; for the unreal bedlam of lights and confusion which met me was surely no place I’d ever lived in. From both the front rooms streamed a babble of voices—shouts, cries, moans—and flows of people, mostly women in stained gowns and aprons, hurrying basins and piles of linens; while the hall before me

lay stripped of all save the stairway, through the rails of which peered the petrified faces of children.

So intense was the activity that Jim and I went unnoticed; and dazed, I wheeled him into an unrecognizable chamber, its carpets cast off, its fire black out, and its furnishings all swept back under the windows. From wall to wall sprawled the inert forms of men, wild, chaotic heaps of blankets, discarded boots, salt water oozing from them, and tangled upheavals of guernseys and jackets: Kirk and Eben, Anne and half a dozen others scurrying amongst them with pitchers of lukewarm water, which steamed nonetheless in the stark air.

Finding a place for Jim in the midst of the tumult—fumbling at his stiff boots, their buttons a torment, so frozen my numb, giant fingers couldn't work them—then flinging off his peacoat, soaked heavy with brine, I simply grabbed comforters, quilts, anything to hand, and bedded him down on the planks of the bare floor; pulled off my cork vest and crawled in beside him, and waited for him to commence shivering. Surrounded on all sides by the cries and moans of unknowns, coming to or regaining circulation, or grieving, perhaps, for those presumed lost—lying close by the sobs of a young man, dull, wrenching sobs I dazedly came to realize were those of my brother Matthew—I couldn't but take in the mournful commotion; but too exhausted to wonder I dumbly held Jim, with the one aim of simply keeping him conscious. Exhibiting at first the slow pulse and brief, shallow breaths of the long-exposed, he plainly knew neither me nor anyone else; but starting to shiver he gradually gained ground, me trying to warm him with my own wretched limbs, and babble encouragement to him in the clamor. Then finally with a shuddering sigh he spoke my name, even nestled closer to me for warmth; and his tongue loosed by the host of sensations which pressed him he began an incoherent mumble, a murmur of sounds full of distress and confusion which culminated in half-choked words I could detect: "Ben—he's gone—your Pa—I had him—but he—let go—" It was the first I knew for a certainty that our schooners lay out there—the first I realized that those around us weren't strangers, but kinsmen taken off, or townsmen or both—the first I understood

Matthew's sobbing; but still I held him, unabashed in the tumult, my whole mind pinned to comforting his distress.

When at last Eben came by—his face haggard above us, but measured and calm in the flickering hurricane lanterns—and asked “How far along is he?,” I simply answered, “He's shiverin' now—look at his hands an' feet”; and checking his pulse—working him carefully over, then taking a hard look at me—he gave his head a noncommittal shake. “No tellin' what his body temperature is—but his pulse is still slow—an' his skin is white. He put out with the first boat, an's one o' the last I seen make shore. Keep him covehed, an' when Sadie comes by with the cloths, staht with the coolest an' work up t' the lukewarm. The pain should b'gin soon—I'll come by with laudanum if Kirk c'n spare any: he's got the worst cases across the hall.”

Dismayed, I knew what he meant by this last; and fearful lest Jim should lose one of his feet, or worse, his hands, I went straight to work—fetched and laid cool cloths on his arms while Sadie came to minister to his legs. Slow and gentle as we were, beginning with damp layers the temperature of the room, and increasing their warmth by only the smallest degrees, we nonetheless caused him insupportable pain; and it was all I could do to keep on with the task—to continue a therapy which coaxed him to feel.

Looking with anguish on his restraint I finally moaned “Oh, God, honey, yell—everyone else is”; and freed by the extremities of the night he at last succumbed to need, yielding up cries which tore at my heart. Solid as a plank, Sadie worked on, as she had on unnumbered other cases; and battling to pattern myself on her conduct, I laid on cloths and stoically removed them, my mind meantime a perfect churn of disorder.

My father's loss, and the potential loss of others—*Abigail's* danger, and the hazards Tom faced—the schooner's grounding, and the threat to her cargo—Jamie's pain, and his nearness last night—my Portland dream, and my failures to act: all dove and circled and pecked at my limbs, while I struggled to close a grip on any one of them. But all I could manage was the same desperate calm I'd felt from the moment I'd lowered the dory, and the dumb pity that filled me at the sight of Jim's sweat. When at last Eben came by with a

scant teaspoon of laudanum, administered it to Jim and looked him over—when at length he pronounced him tentatively out of danger, and ordered me off to find dry gear for us both—I was so limp I was almost unfit to walk; and I made for the stairs with half-seeing eyes, and knees that seemed to want to come undone.

Upstairs it was dark, luridly dark as befitted this freakish combination of day-night; and the walls reverberated like the skins of a drum to the beating of the hail sheets and gale wind. Dazed by the gloom, I looked witlessly around—went round and round the perimeter of my room, trying to find my chest of drawers; but though I circled and circled—though I came back to the same walls, and saw time and again the same mirror with the carved eagle, the same fire screen with the parrot and bough—I couldn't find my own bureau. How long I might have hunted for it, anyone might hazard a guess; but by chance—on one of my frenzied circuits—my eyes fell on the immaculate washstand, and the embroider-rich linen Anne always set out for visitors; and taken aback, I realized I was in the guest room—that I had been lost in my own house.

Clear-headed for an instant, I found the door, exited and crossed the hall; paused for a moment on the threshold of the next chamber, and studied it before I entered. This, I could see at once, was indeed my room and Anne's; but nothing here looked familiar either, and I fought another flood-surge of panic. Clothes, I had come for dry clothes—something warm for Jim to be ill in, something for me to wear back outdoors, where I knew I was duty-bound to head next; but though I found chests with drawers a-plenty—though I pulled them out, and tore hurriedly at them, my fingers like squirrels' claws in the dry leaves—there seemed to be nothing in them I needed.

Nightshirts, nightcaps, woolen stockings, mittens and flannels and knitted guernseys—these were the garments I'd come to search for; but though I threw things down on the floor, and scrambled and scabbled in wardrobe and closet, nothing came to hand that was useful. Collars, cuffs, buttonhooks, corsets, waistcoats, cravats, reticules, handbags: these I met in every corner; and maddeningly, I ditched them in heaps on the chairs.

If the drawers were eccentric, the rest of the room was more so—eccentric with the shapes of the bizarre; and pausing in my search, I glanced on the bedposts and bureaus around me. Abrupt and stark in the day-night, the settee loomed tall-backed, the highboy hump-backed and freakish with scrolls; whilst there was something indescribably menacing about the armchairs, whose claws appeared unaccountably poised for a move. As in a dream when the familiar turns alien, the mantle seemed about to spring at me, the chair legs to secret some sinister purpose; and I had to force myself to recall that this was the same house in which Jim rested—that this was the same day on which I'd wakened at the inn, with him tumbled close and warm beside me. Now last night seemed like centuries ago, an event in some other life, some other epoch; and this house a stranger's I was attempting to burgle.

When at last I stumbled on a drawer I needed—when I'd pulled out an old flannel nightshirt that would do for Jim, a thick guernsey and woolen trowsers for me—I couldn't wait to quit the place; and I threw off my wet gear and drew on the dry with fingers that fumbled and caught in their hurry. Meeting me downstairs, Eben helped me dress Jim, the two of us easing him gently into flannels; then knowing that he was not in pain anymore—taking a last look on his still face, dreaming on some mute, faraway vista—I got to my feet and lashed on my hat, said hoarsely to Eben, "Look afteh him for me," and went back out into the night.