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The 200 rather shy individuals who live on Tristan da Cunha speak a mixture of Cockney and Southern Negro dialect and are descended from a boatload of British sailors who were stationed there with their wives in 1816 in order to circumvent the possible escape of Napoleon Bonaparte from St. Helena. An occasional shipwreck since then has infused the colony with fresh blood—and furnished some of that most prized commodity, wood for housing.

How this tiny colony lives today—without laws yet without crime, without church or school but with a deep respect for tra-

(continued on back flap)
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ROCK OF EXILE
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For permission to include the map on pages 8–9 and, unless otherwise acknowledged, photographs from his collection I wish to thank Mr Allan Crawford—now Lieut. Crawford of the South African Navy and Welfare Officer to Tristan da Cunha—who was with me on the island during the war.
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Tristan da Cunha
A Spot on the Map

We faced adventure with grim reluctance. The spirit of Drake, if it was present at all in our little party, quailed before the chill, dank breath of the South Atlantic.

Under the darkened coast of the Cape Peninsula we waited on a jetty in Simon's Bay. The day had glowed with promise of spring; but the night was clenched and raw, an unhealed wound of winter. Tiny hopes, hatched in our hearts by the African sun, dropped dead at dusk like ephemeral flies. Waves broke along the shore with a dismal crash, and the ebbing water clucked sadly under the sea-walls.

We waited for an unknown ship bound westward from the Cape. Against the pale expanse of harbour the masts and rigging of moored vessels stood up in hard, black lines. A sombre, mellow half-light lingered over the bay, as if constrained to share our vigil—waiting for the ship that would carry us into exile.

Months previously, in an Admiralty office, a map had been unrolled; a mere spot had marked the position of an island, British property; a pointing finger from a gilt-ringed sleeve had commanded the establishment there of an outpost, its purpose...
officially veiled. And so we, a dozen names on a naval draft-list, had been given our destination—a desolate rock in the southern ocean, inhabited already by a strange colony of people lost to the world.

We waited in silence. The mountains, like humpbacked monsters, crouched around the bay to watch our departure. Under their flanks, the gleaming track of the electric railway threaded a chain of little towns, following the arc of the surf, then swerved away across the dark Flats—'Alle Stasies na Kaapstad': it was a line we had often travelled.

Occasionally, from the doorway of the Africa Station Club, just outside the dockyard gates, came a jagged shaft of light and noise. Inside, not more than an hour before, in the atmosphere of smoke, laughter, and slopped beer, we had taken our last drink ashore with friends whom we should probably never meet again. Now, among kit-bags, hammocks, and chests, we stood or paced on the jetty—another pointing finger that dismissed us with peremptory gesture to try the hospitality of sea-birds and the company of castaways.

We had heard confusing tales about those inhabitants. Some said they were white, that they spoke English, and were friendly; others said they were mad and best left alone.

The first settlers had been British. They had been joined by others, men and women of many nationalities, survivors of shipwreck, recluses, and voluntary exiles, who through several generations had continued the colony. They proclaimed themselves members of the British Empire. But they lived in a world and time of their own, preserving the customs and dress of the early settlers. Their only visitors were whaling ships and explorers far from the regular sea-routes. They could know nothing of our way of life; and we knew nothing of theirs. Until recently most of us had not even heard of the island called Tristan da Cunha.

Like our august superiors in the Admiralty office we had consulted a map. Ours was on a page of a small red atlas. It
showed the whole of Africa and a large blue area of South Atlantic Ocean.

Several pairs of eyes roved the empty sea spaces at the left side of the page, until a cry—‘There it is!’—announced our landfall: a tiny speck between the ten- and twenty-degree lines of longitude. It just managed to edge on to the same page as the continent of Africa. On a map of the world at the front of the atlas the dot appeared almost as near to South America as to South Africa, and a pencil-line ruled from Cape Town to Montevideo passed a little above it.

Almost in the Roaring Forties!

We gazed at it for a long time with mingled awe and misgiving. Its smallness was appalling. It looked like a fly about to land on the giant profile of Africa.

One member of the party tried drawing a ring round it—to make it look bigger.

From the South Atlantic Sailing Directory we acquired facts, but learned little.

Tristan da Cunha is the largest and only inhabited island of a group of three lying far south in the Atlantic—about 1,200 miles south of St Helena, 1,500 miles west of the Cape of Good Hope, and 1,800 miles from the coast of Uruguay.

Its closest neighbour is Gough Island, 250 miles to the south-west. That is uninhabited. Tristan da Cunha is farther from the nearest populated land than any other island in the world.

It covers thirty square miles, but most of it is uninhabitable—an extinct volcano rising to a peak of 6,760 feet above the sea. The other components of the group are Inaccessible Island, eighteen miles to the south-west, and Nightingale Island, twenty miles to the south. These are occupied by birds.

History told a story as bizarre as the travellers’ tales. The island was discovered in 1506 by a Portuguese admiral, Tristão (or Tristan) d’Acunha (or da Cunha), who gave it his name and handed it back to the seals and sea-birds. For two centuries
afterwards it was forgotten, snoring in its foam. In the eighteenth century it was remembered by sealers, whalers, and pirates. Belonging to one of these classes, probably the last, was Jonathan Lambert of Salem, who landed there in 1810 with two of his shipmates, one an American called Williams, the other half English, half Italian named Thomas Currie. Lambert proclaimed himself king of the three islands and rechristened them the Islands of Refreshment. The name survived until Lambert and Williams died—or rather disappeared: what happened to them was known only to Thomas Currie, who lived on as ruler and solitary inhabitant of the islands.

In 1816 a garrison of soldiers was sent from South Africa to prevent any attempt by way of Tristan da Cunha to rescue the exiled Napoleon from St Helena. The soldiers found there a castaway who called himself simply Italian Thomas. He said that he had lived on the island for six years—alone. Questioned about Lambert and Williams, he admitted that they had been there but said they had been drowned while out fishing.

At the garrison canteen Thomas became drunk daily, spending handfuls of gold from some hidden store. When drunk, he made lurid allusions to the disappearance of Lambert and Williams and boasted of the treasure he had, buried in a chest which he and his shipmates had brought ashore. The soldiers flattered him, plied him with more and more drink. He hinted that he would disclose the hiding-place to the man who pleased him most. One day, primed with rum to the verge of revelation, surrounded by a tense audience, he lifted his arm to point and fell dead. The soldiers dug and searched and grovelled, but found nothing.

A year later, when the world began to outgrow its dread of the vanquished emperor, the garrison was recalled from Tristan.

Perhaps it was a lingering hope of finding the treasure; perhaps it was a weariness of the world or the desire for a life of rudimentary hardship; perhaps it was the possession of a brown-skinned wife and two coffee-coloured children, that made
William Glass of Kelso, a Scots corporal in the Royal Artillery, beg permission to remain behind on the island with his family. Two other men, Samuel Burnell and John Nankivel, stayed with him for a while, but subsequently left. It was William Glass who in 1817 founded the colony of Tristan da Cunha.

During the era of sailing ships Glass’s settlement was augmented by survivors of the many wrecks on Tristan and its neighbour, Inaccessible Island. Even when the captains of other vessels offered passage away from the rock many of the castaways preferred to stay there. Whaling ships often called in those days, and sailors deserted from them or were set ashore at their own request to join the growing community, of which Corporal Glass was now called Governor.

Their worst hardship was loneliness. The other settlers envied Glass his wife and children. At last, in 1827—against the advice of their much-married governor—they persuaded a certain Captain Ham, of the sloop Duke of Gloucester, to bring them some women from St Helena, their nearest inhabited neighbour. One man, Thomas Swain, vowed that he would have the first who stepped ashore. When the sloop returned she carried five women, all volunteers to join these men they had never seen. Four of them were mulatto girls; the fifth was an elderly, widowed Negress accompanied by four children. Tom Swain was held to his vow: it was the old Negress who led the way ashore.

These women, with the wife of Governor Glass, were the only coloured settlers in the history of Tristan. Many more men joined the colony, all of European race—British, American, Danish, German, and Dutch. They greatly outnumbered the women. The language adopted as common was English, though the accents must have made a strange medley.

Almost the only crop grown there was potatoes. These and fish formed the mainstay of the islanders’ subsistence. As the visits of the whaling ships, on which the settlement depended for barter, became less frequent, life involved constant privation.
Once a vessel called at the island and found the population facing starvation because of the failure of the potato crop; no ship had been sighted during the previous three years.

From the eighteen-fifties onward missionaries were sent out at irregular intervals by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. The ministers usually stayed for periods of three to six years, and ensured a modicum of education for the children. But there were long spells when the settlement had no clergymen, when marriages, christenings, and funerals had to be solemnized by Governor Glass or one of the successive headmen and the children derived their only education from their parents.

In 1885 came disaster. Fifteen of the able-bodied men put out in their lifeboat to a ship, hoping to barter for much-needed provisions. Some of the watchers on the beach afterwards declared that the boat had been overwhelmed by a heavy sea just before reaching the ship; others maintained that they had seen the men taken on board and that the vessel had immediately got under way again, taking the islanders. The village was left the home of widows and children and four men. At the time there were nineteen families, some with as many as seven young children. Of the remaining men, one—Peter Green, the headman—was seventy-nine; another, Andrew Hagan, was sixty-seven; the third had gone mad and was tormenting the village; the fourth was the only able-bodied man to defend it.

Somehow the settlement survived. The children grew up, the boys learned early in their lives to do the work of men. Many of the families which had emigrated from the island after the death of Governor Glass returned, disillusioned with the outer world. Further shipwrecks brought new blood, including Italian. Again the population increased; and again, as in the early days, there were more men than women. At the time of our setting out from South Africa, in October 1942, the total population, including children, was given as about two hundred. This number, we gathered, was ample to offset any dangers, mental or physical, from intermarriage. Indeed the excellent health and physique of the islanders—and especially the remarkable
soundness and whiteness of their teeth, in spite of their soft potato diet—had become almost a legend.

We had no idea of what our reception would be. About the present habits and conditions of the islanders we had only a few vague notions, founded mostly on the contents of a glass case in the public museum at Cape Town.

That case held the only material evidence for our preconceptions: a pair of oxhide moccasins, the hair on the outside; a model of a canvas-covered boat; a tall, old-fashioned spinning-wheel, the kind at which the spinner had to stand, twirling the wheel by hand; a sheepskin mat; and some stuffed penguins and mollymawks. We knew that the people were without the comforts of life as we knew it and that they would have no knowledge of the mechanized and war-harrowed world of Europe as we had left it. In our more sanguine moments this last fact appeared clearly as a consolation; and the news that a small advance-party, containing a padre, an officer surgeon, and some South African engineers, had already gone out to the island and were in radio communication with Simonstown, had been sufficient to buoy our spirits until dusk marooned us on the jetty and the night wind blighted our hopes.

Gloom, settling over the bay, invaded our hearts. A motor-launch crept mysteriously, with engine silenced, alongside the jetty; and, like a wraith from the water below us, appeared a wiry, brown-faced old monkey of a seaman with faded red badges on his arm. He was the coxswain of the launch and was to take us out to the ship when she arrived. Some rumour of the destination of our draft had stirred in him a malicious and ironic humour. He said little; but his silence, after the garrulity of well-wishers ashore, and the satirical glint of his eye hinted at a wealth of unwelcome secrets with which he could have forewarned us.

We had tramped for miles up and down that jetty before we glimpsed, behind the tracery of masts and spars in the harbour, a new set of masts and two squat funnels creeping along. A ship
THE SETTLEMENT OF
EDINBURGH

K"tjp
LACKlN-fHOLE~V
AMCHORSTOC
POINT
LONG BLUFFS

Scale in Statute Miles:-
steamed slowly into the bay. We heard her anchor go down. Under the expressive gaze of the coxswain we stowed our stores, our kit, and ourselves aboard the launch. She nosed away from the jetty and chugged out across the choppy water, rolling gently.

A lighter, towed out by another launch from one of the other jetties, arrived before us, and as we came in under the tall hull of the steamer some kaffir boys were already loading drums of oil aboard her from the lighter. There was much shouting across the water from them as we manoeuvred to get to the lowered gangway. A few ghostly faces peered down over the ship’s side as we clambered up, dragging our kit. But they had disappeared by the time we arrived on deck. The coxswain of the launch grinned up at us a malicious farewell and from the rail we watched his craft shoot away, churning a great arc of silver as she turned and bounced back shorewards, the light from her hatch flaring out across the dark water.

The ship remained oblivious of our embarkation, until at length a little cockney steward came along, and with a jaunty ‘Follow me, mates!’ led us to some quarters near the crew’s mess. Here we bunked, and later in the night we heard the rattle of the anchor chain coming up and felt the roll of the ship under way.
CHAPTER TWO

A Rock in the Sea

After we left the Cape the weather changed for the worse. Wave crests were lashed to a flying white foam. Our ship, the Highland Chieftain, plunged through deep swells that rolled away beneath her like the furrows of some vast, watery ploughland. At night the wind thrust icy fingers through the openings of oilskins, duffle-coats, and jerseys; the spray lacerated raw faces buried in upturned collars. This weather continued for four days—an ominous prelude to our adventure. Black skies sagged with rain, and as the winds rose our spirits sank. Visibility was limited to a low, ragged horizon, at which we stared in gloomy question. On the fourth day we had our answer.

It was late in the afternoon of 9th October 1942. A clammy mist rose like steam about us. Thin squalls of rain struggled with blasts of wind. Out of the grey and tossing sea, barely a mile away, a great dark rock lifted its head, like the barnacled brows of some forbidding sea-monster dripping with slime.

As we approached, the rock assumed character as an island.
Its peak passed out of view in sodden clouds; the grim, seamy sides were green in patches with a sparse carpeting of grass that looked more like moss; the scarred cliffs were hemmed with a line of leaping foam, where the ocean tide raged at the obstruction. Here and there we saw high, dank crevices, choked with vegetation, and falls of water cascading down grooves in the stony face; but most of the mountain was stark and barren.

This we took to be one of the two uninhabited islands of the group, probably Inaccessible—and rightly named, it seemed, for on the side of our approach at least there was no possible landing-place.

We had come out of the mist from the east. Now we changed course and rounded the northern butte of the island. To our surprise and dismay we saw a broad beach of black volcanic sand under the sheer wall of the mountain; and at the far end of it a low grassy plateau, raised above the level of the beach like a green shelf—on which was perched a miniature village. So this, after all, was Tristan da Cunha.

As we came in closer the little huddles of grey stone took shape as cottages, one or two of them clearly discernible, others almost indistinguishable from their murky background. Soon we could see wisps of chimney smoke harried by the wind, and a flag beating madly against a mast on top of a grassy knoll, with what looked like a toy cannon crouching beside it.

Behind the settlement the mountain slanted steeply back and up into the storm-clouds; in front the cliffs dropped another hundred feet to the strip of boulder-strewn shingle that widened in some places to a beach. A number of boats lay there, hauled up high and dry. Where sand was visible it was black; a bare dune of it formed the main beach east of the ledge on which the village stood.

The sea nearer inshore was too rough to permit a landing that evening. Without dropping anchor, the ship steamed past the settlement and stood out to sea again. Out of sight of the island, in the mist and darkness, we spent the night cruising around at a safe distance from the rock, waiting for a break in the weather.
On the following morning we came in again and this time were able to anchor less than a mile from the shore. The sea was still swelly but the surf appeared less frantic. Tiny figures moved on the black beach, pushing off boats. We watched the little craft lifting their bows to the waves, tipping over, and vanishing in the troughs, then reappearing. For a long time they seemed to be making no headway and to us it looked a superhuman task to pull against such a sea. Then—almost as if the ship herself had suddenly changed position—the boats were within hailing distance. A few minutes later the first of them was alongside, the oarsmen warding her off from our wallowing hull.

The islanders appeared not at all disconcerted by the rough sea. One moment the boat was right under us, her gunwale knocking against the ship's plates, the next moment she was riding away on a great swell, the men still clutching our rope and laughing up at us. Several of them stood erect with careless equilibrium on the thwarts. When the ship threatened to roll over on them, one of the islanders would thrust the boat off again by pressing an oar against the ship's side.

With mingled curiosity and misgiving we looked down at the men who were to be our hosts and daily companions for months to come. They were dressed in a motley of old and patched garments. Many wore sailors' jumpers, white or blue, and peaked blue caps. Their complexions ranged from markedly swarthy to unexpectedly fair and their features were of European cast. Without exception they were tall and muscular-looking.

We had been told that they spoke English, but the scraps of outlandish dialect that came up to us were unintelligible. The boatmen talked and laughed among themselves, but in a quiet, restrained manner. Obviously they were unused to strangers. They returned with interest our stares of barefaced curiosity, but did not call up to us. They had none of the easy, impudent familiarity of the natives of an African or eastern port.

In the first boat came the doctor and a petty officer of the advance-party to meet us. They were accompanied on board by one of the islanders, a large, heavily built man in a blue reefer
jacket with brass buttons. When introduced to us, he dragged a cap from his head and addressed us in a deep, powerful voice, calling each of us 'Sir.' His accent seemed to combine elements of Scots and Afrikaans in a strange, slow drawl. We understood little of what he said beyond that we were welcome to the island. His name, we learned from the petty officer, was William Repetto and, although the men of Tristan claimed to be all equal, he was called 'Chief.' His father had been an Italian sailor shipwrecked on the island, who had made his home there and been recognized before his death as headman.

The present Chief seemed as proud of his parentage as a highland clansman and solemnly conscious of the weight of his office. Throughout our conversation he managed, in spite of his embarrassment and his isolation within a ring of sailors on the rocking deck of a strange ship, to preserve something of the ponderous dignity of an ox—and a little, too, of the slow-wittedness. But there was no sign, either in William Repetto or in the men waiting in the boats, of the mental deficiency we had been led by some informants to expect.

The first business was that of conveying us and our personal belongings ashore. The doctor and the petty officer, a South African, remained on board to direct the landing of the heavier supplies. One by one, carrying our personal kit, we descended the swinging Jacob's ladder into the nearest boat. Helping hands guided us from below, but a stolid shyness precluded any spoken word of greeting from the island men. Our presence among them became at once an embarrassment and an object of intense curiosity.

We found seating space in the stern-sheets, and the oarsmen—as if by a prearranged signal outside our notice or else by some silent mutual understanding—all gave way together and began pulling shorewards with long, deep strokes. There appeared to be no captain, even self-appointed, and no word of command was uttered. It was a long time before even the helmsman spoke; and then it was only to give directions as to our approach to the shore. The quiet, almost apologetic tone of his voice implied
that he was merely issuing information, nothing so presumptuous as instructions.

For a long time we seemed to be coming no nearer to the beach, although the ship receded farther and farther behind us. Then the boat entered a dense tangle of that seaweed known as kelp, with wide, undulating leaves of a dark, brownish green that float just below the surface, and strong pale stems that rise from a depth of fifteen fathoms or more towards the light. A thick reef of this extraordinary growth encircles the island at a distance of a quarter of a mile off shore. The tough, twisting arms of the plant have some of the groping and clutching power of tentacles.

It took us several minutes to thrust our way through the belt of weed, the oarsmen taking short, jabbing strokes whenever possible, each independently. When a blade became fast in the tangle, the rower would jerk the oar sharply inboard until it was free and then thrust it out again into the next space of clear water. Proceeding in this haphazard fashion, rather like a gigantic water spider with its legs weaving tentatively in the air at every step, we threaded our way through the reef, to find ourselves in relatively calm water and not far from the beach. Such was the beneficial effect of the kelp, acting as a bar against the more tumultuous seas. Instead of breaking, the waves were transformed into great, swelling rollers, which bore us rapidly to the shore.

Without any warning, in that same manner of tacit comprehension, all hands stopped pulling at the same stroke. The boat was carried high by the surf and as it grounded on the shingle the island men leapt out, grabbing the gunwale and pushing to retain the momentum, while a rope tossed to the villagers waiting on the beach was caught and pulled by all available hands. We too jumped ashore, while the boatmen, barefooted and with trousers rolled up to their knees, waded through the ebbing surf, hauling their craft up over the squeaking, cascading pebbles and slippery fronds of derelict kelp.

High and dry on the beach, we stood in a hesitant group,
uncertain of our reception, until guidance came in the form of a tall, black-browed young islander who introduced himself as ‘Sindey’ Glass. He had fierce, dark eyes and a swarthy face, which split unexpectedly into a white, gleaming smile. ‘You-all come along of me,’ he said. ‘I show you-all where you gonna live.’

Shouldering twice as much of our kit as any of us could carry, and with half the effort, he trod quickly and lightly over the pebbles. It was then that I noticed his shoes—oxhide moccasins exactly like those in the museum at Cape Town. Their effect was a shock to me: suddenly the world evoked by the strange curios in the museum—a world only half believed in—had become real. It was as if we had landed at Deal and been greeted by Britons in woad and skins.

Sidney—as we suspected his name of being—led the way from the beach up a steep, stony road towards the grassy level above. The men below were unloading our stores, and as we climbed the slope we saw the boat which had brought us ashore being pushed off again, the last man leaping in as the water splashed about his knees.

Above us, on the green knoll by the flagpole, were clustered the women of the settlement, wearing ankle-length dresses of white or coloured cotton, with bright kerchiefs over their heads. They were like a colony of hens fluttering their plumes. We had been prompted by reports in Cape Town to expect an effusive welcome of kisses from them; but these rumours proved as wildly untrue as most other information with which we had been primed. We found the women silent and withdrawn, though agog with interest. On our route up from the beach we passed two girls of about seventeen or eighteen, stray chicks from the hen-roost above. They were huddled against the bows of an overturned boat, scared at their own audacity. As we passed close to them they clung to each other in a tension of fear but returned our gaze with wide, wondering eyes. They looked very odd in their billowing white dresses with coloured sashes, their dark hair drawn tightly back and partly hidden under their
headkerchiefs. Both were fair of complexion and one was attractive, mature, and plump in her youthfulness. But so still and quiet they were, and yet so daring in their solemn-eyed curiosity.

We reached the grassy plateau and, following our dark-faced guide, trudged along the road towards the settlement, passing a little tower of stones in which stood a lantern—evidently a beacon for the boats at night. The road was no more than a track. On either side spread downy turf with outcroppings of the native rock, and huge boulders tumbled in the short grass. Crossing a deep, gurgling stream by a bridge constructed of wooden beams raised at each end on blocks of stone, we came into the village.

Most of the able-bodied population was apparently down on the beach or on the cliff-top watching the passage of the boats to and from the ship; and the few islanders who had followed us kept at a long distance. So the settlement was almost deserted. But as we walked along the rough path between the cottages occasionally a face peered furtively through a window or a bright dress flitted through a low doorway into safe obscurity.

It was now that we became conscious of a sound that seemed to encompass that forgotten settlement, a mournful sound, like an endless threnody woven into the scene around us: the muffled moaning of the surf beneath the cliffs. Its effect was to intensify the lost, eerie silence of the place.

Directly above the cottages loomed the mountain, a disturbing presence, dwarfing this precarious foothold above the sea. About us thatched roofs glistened with raindrops and the wet grass was a dark green. In the cottage gardens—if such one might call mere enclosures within walls of loosely piled stones—flourished a species of tall tussock grass, and the stiff spearheads of Australian flax rattled in the breeze. Everything seemed odd and still, unreal, as if suspended in time. The settlement was like a village that had died long ago, but of which the veiled shape, like a mirage, was preserved in the vapour of the sea, which still murmured, as it had for age after age, night and day, its deep monotone beneath those cliffs.
These first, strained impressions of Tristan gave to our premonitions of the months ahead an uneasy sense of being lost and forsaken, exiled from the world. Our quarters, already prepared on the western fringe of the village, were good; but even about them lurked the same atmosphere of unreality. The very blankets on our bunks, issued from naval stores at Simonstown, had a strange sea smell to them. That odour clung to everything on the island. It was a faint but unwholesome smell, as of things lost in the ocean and changed by the action of the tides. Perhaps, after all, it was only the smell of rotting kelp.

When, in the afternoon of that first day of ours on Tristan, the ship which had brought us vanished in the haze of the western horizon, bound for gaudy ports in South America, a mood of deep dejection closed down on our party. The wireless communication that it was our task to maintain with the outer world seemed a thread of connection as slender as the aerials that were to carry it.
CHAPTER THREE

Worlds Apart

For the first few weeks of our exile—as we chose to consider it—the wind and rain conspired to keep us in that despondency which our first impressions had produced. It was a long time before this mood was dispelled by a closer acquaintance with islanders. In the meantime we had an opportunity of learning a great deal about ourselves and one another.

We were as mixed a party as any selected at random from the Navy's files—no more and no less so. It seemed absurd that in a company so small and isolated there should have developed at once three distinct communities on traditional naval lines. The segregation only further accentuated our isolation.

One group consisted of the doctor—a surgeon lieutenant-commander—who was also commanding officer of the station; his wife and child; a nursing sister; and the chaplain. All of these had arrived with the advance-party. They made up the quarter-deck society and lived a life as remote from ours as from that of the islanders. 'Doc,' we gathered, acted not only as doctor to all on the island but also as magistrate and general advisor to the villagers; they, it seemed, regarded him as the
direct representative of the king, and all his goodwill could not diminish their respectful awe. The position of the padre was even more difficult. Previous ministers had all been civilians supported by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. They had lived for relatively long periods on the island alone with the islanders and had mixed with them freely. Our padre had the virtually impossible task of combining the role of village pastor with that of naval officer and chaplain.

The second community at 'the station' was composed of N.C.O.s—two petty officers, a leading hand, and a storekeeper. Aligned with them were the 'met.' staff—a sergeant and two corporals of the South African Air Force. The sergeant was actually an Englishman by birth, Allan Crawford, who had previously visited Tristan as surveyor with the Norwegian scientific expedition in 1937. Of all our company he was the one who knew most about the island.

In the long 'bunkhouse' known as the Single Men's Quarters—though some of the occupants had wives far away in England—lived the rest of us, forming the third community. There were nine operators: Ginger, Jock, Cyril, Charlie, Johnny, Ernie, Fred, Nick, and myself. We were the most junior elements, in every sense, of the station's complement: our average age was about twenty. There was also 'Old' Jock, the stoker; and there was Bill, the cook. A temporary fourth community, closely associated with ours, was that of the 'Springboks,' the party of South African engineers who had constructed the station. They would soon be returning to Cape Town.

Such were the disparate elements of our outpost on Tristan. The purpose of it was in the wireless station, from which we passed weather reports and other more important radio traffic to the naval base at Simonstown.

We had our hours on duty and hours off duty, organized on the system of ship's watches; there were always some operators listening or transmitting day and night. We had a limited amount of other routine work at the station, cleaning quarters and maintaining equipment. We had very little restrictive
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discipline and no need for any. Our rig-of-the-day consisted of sea-boots, jerseys, woollen caps, sheepskin coats, and whatever else was warmest and most comfortable; beards were grown by myself and several of the other ratings.

To all appearances we led a life unrelated to naval custom except in the handling of radio signals. Clustered together, the quarters, mess, engine-room, store, receiving and transmitting rooms, and the meteorological station formed a second and smaller settlement slightly west of that of the islanders, but still remote from it. Here, in this little world of our own, we passed through a series of friendships, enmities, and alliances until we arrived at that state of mutual tolerance and acceptance which was to be the bond of our confederacy against loneliness in the months ahead.

Arrived at this state, we were ready to learn about the villagers and the world they lived in. Contact was difficult. The men we met occasionally on the paths about the settlement were polite, almost excessively so, ready like children with their 'Good mawnin', Sah.' Now and then we exchanged a few words with them, but they remained shy and conversation was strained. The older people seemed friendly enough, but the younger ones, especially the women, were too timid to permit any acquaintance. The moment anyone of our party was seen approaching, the girls fled to the shelter of the nearest cottage; and as we were still hesitant about intruding uninvited over the doorsteps we had to consider ourselves lucky on rare occasions to surprise one of the women into a flustered response to a greeting across a garden wall.

From the South Africans and from our own observation, as we roamed in our off-duty periods, we learned more about the village. It was named Edinburgh Settlement, after the Victorian Duke of Edinburgh, who had visited it in 1867 during the royal cruise of H.M.S. Galatea. It consisted of thirty-five tiny cottages, rather like those of Hebridean crofters, built of rough-hewn stone which the islanders quarried from the mountainside. These were constructed low, to withstand the gales that were said to be
a feature of the local climate. The roofs were disproportionately high and steep, thatched with tussock-grass or flax, their ridges sealed with turf sods. The few windows contained glass that, we learned, had been cherished by succeeding generations, being almost irreplaceable since captains no longer regarded barter as a normal form of trade.

Most of the cottages had gardens and some of the gardens even had flowers—pale marigolds and a few wild-looking roses just budding. But these gardens were the exceptions: the typical one was merely an enclosure within a dry-stone wall, with an opening left as a gateway but hardly ever boasting a gate. It contained a yard of tramped earth and a bed either of the tall Australian flax or of the even taller tussock-grass. This tussock was grown for thatching. Formerly, we were told, it had grown wild all over the island, but now it had to be transplanted from Nightingale and Inaccessible, where it was still abundant.

Fresh water came to the settlement by two 'watrons'—presumably a corruption of 'waterings'—that rushed gurgling down from the mountain to leap over the cliffs into the sea. These streams embraced a wide, green common extending in front of the village for about a hundred yards to the cliff-top. Cottages were not built near the edge of the shelf. The nearest had apparently been built by a missionary for himself: it now stood in ruins.

Although we encountered cattle on this common and donkeys among the cottages, we met remarkably few people. Sometimes we saw a man riding one of the donkeys or coming from the mountainside with an immense bundle of brushwood on his shoulders; but somehow he was nearly always in the distance. Such shyness appeared almost furtive, as if there were some local secret that had to be kept from us.

Nevertheless in the end it was by the islanders that the approach to friendship was made. It came in the person of old Bob Glass—a direct descendant of the original settler—who presented himself one morning, unheralded, outside our quarters. We emerged from breakfast and there he was—
standing stiffly, supported on a stick that he held tensely a little way in front of himself and gazing ahead with the fixed stare of an old man. He was tall and crooked and thin, like a bent bean-stick. With his long hair and in his odd array of ill-fitting garments he looked like a guy or a scarecrow that someone had set down outside our door during the night. Yet he had obviously put on his best clothes in honour of the visit. Folded neatly across his chest under his jacket was a frayed white silk scarf, secured just below the throat with a large gilt pin. Prominent above his breast-pocket and displayed for our inspection at the earliest opportunity were three medals, inscribed ‘Transvaal,’ ‘Cape Colony,’ and ‘Orange River Colony.’ Of these the old man was inordinately proud, as visible proof that he had for a brief period in his life experienced the ‘houtside warl’.

He spoke in a cracked drawl, telling us his life-story before we had even mentioned the weather. As a young man, it appeared, he had left the island to serve in a whaling ship and had settled subsequently in South Africa. His recollections struck an incongruous note. He had made more than one visit to England and even spoke with bizarre affection of ‘the old “Empire” at Liverpool.’ In the Boer War he had, by his own account, been personally responsible for at least one British victory. He related with great amusement to himself how, just after that war, he had met an Afrikaner friend of his named Pieter and had discovered in conversation that they had both taken part in a certain engagement, but on opposing sides. ‘I tell ’im,’ chuckled the old islander, ‘if I’d know ’e was there I sure I would ’ad a pot at ’im.’

Eventually out of his simplicity emerged the true reason for Bob’s visit. He had come to ask that, if ‘we-all’ had any washing to be done, we would let his wife Charlotte do some of it. This, we sensed, was not merely an offer of generosity but a move towards some contract. We gave a non-committal reply and he thanked us with dignity. His name, he informed us magnificently, was Robert Franklin Glass, but he conceded by way of anti-climax: ‘Everybawdy jest call me Bawb’—which he pronounced with a comically elongated vowel. He assured us,
earnestly and somewhat unnecessarily, that all the other villagers knew him and could point out to us his cottage. We should be welcome there at any time. He left us with a hearty laugh at his own little joke—designed, of course, to remind us what a man of the ‘warl’ he was—that we should not forget his name if we thought of him every time we had a glass of beer in our hands. He didn’t mention where, on an island that had no alcohol, we were likely to have the experience.

This invitation by Bob Glass was the first that we received to an island home. Others soon followed, showing that hospitality had been waiting only on temerity. The approach was usually made by a husband or son, with a request from wife or mother for the privilege of washing for us; but it was invariably accompanied by an invitation to the house. We divided our contracts among several families, so that each of us became assured of the services of a private laundry. No reference was made to payment; and as there was then no currency on the island we were left wondering how to repay these services. But not indefinitely: when they came to know us better, the island women found a host of ways of exacting their reward. As their shyness waned their demands waxed. Almost anything that we were able to supply from our store—and many things that we could not—they were in need of: tea and sugar for the housewives, tobacco for the men, sweets for the children, and a quite impossible flow of presents for the grown-up daughters. However, it was many weeks before that stage of intimacy was reached.
CHAPTER FOUR

Dance of Welcome

Our first opportunity of seeing the islanders en masse since they had gathered on the beach at our arrival came after we had been several weeks at the settlement. A village dance was held partly to welcome us and partly as a farewell to the South African soldiers, who, now that their work of preparation and installation was done, would be going home by the first available ship.

We were told by these men, who had been some months on the island, that dances were events of great local importance and almost the only form of communal entertainment. Preparations in the form of dressmaking and sock-knitting would occupy the women for weeks beforehand. The younger women especially placed as much store by their appearance on these occasions as any English girl at her first ball. By the older people, who came rather to watch than dance, tea-drinking was considered an essential part of the festivity. No other drink was available; and since the tea plant which had once been plentiful on the island was now almost extinct tea itself had become a valuable luxury. It had to be bartered from ships, which visited Tristan rarely now,
and was often hoarded until an incident of sufficient local importance justified the holding of a 'dawnc.' Even in their pleasures, it seemed, the islanders were obliged to practise an austere economy.

At this, our first island dance, the stock of tea was supplemented from our own stores and provided even the oldest inhabitants with an inducement for attending. Most of them were still strangers to us. However, Bob Glass was present to wave his stick in familiar greeting. The ceremony itself turned out to be very different from our expectations. If it had been a colonial governor's inaugural assembly it could not have been more formal. The villagers arrived at the hall in little family groups, greeting one another more like strangers than intimate neighbours. The unmarried women were carefully chaperoned.

All the girls wore their best dresses, with their brightest sashes and ribbons; coloured kerchiefs, knotted loosely under their chins, formed their head-coverings. These they kept on inside the hall, though some allowed them to fall back, revealing glossy, dark hair, which they wore combed sleekly across the brow and coiled at the nape of the neck. White woollen stockings were the uniform for men and women. The men wore theirs outside their trouser-legs, to show the rings of coloured wool knitted in the tops; the more dapper paraded in white duck trousers which they had acquired from sailors and treasured for just such occasions. White was the fashionable colour on Tristan, and white trousers tucked into white stockings with coloured worsted tops were obviously thought very elegant. A few of the islanders possessed boots or shoes, but most of them wore the familiar oxhide moccasins.

Behaviour was rigid and restrained. The women ranged themselves around the walls, securing whatever seating accommodation was to be had. The men stood awkwardly in groups in the middle of the floor, talking and laughing with noisy embarrassment. Their wives were more self-possessed, sitting primly and quietly, many with children in their arms or clinging to their long, full skirts. The young, unmarried girls attached
themselves closely to their mothers or other matronly relatives. Only the oldest men were expected to sit with the women.

At length the music struck up. There were two accompanists for the dancing: an accordion-player, Alfred Green, and a fiddler, a merry-faced, monkey-like old man of St Helena stock, called Andrew Swain. It was unfortunate that, although the two could play only the same tunes, they could not play them in harmony; so that dances had to be performed alternately to the asthmatic wheezing of Alfred's accordion and the hilarious screeching of Andrew's fiddle. Often we had to listen to concurrent rival interpretations of the same piece.

The dances were all of the species of barn dance, simple, unvarying patterns of jigging, shuffling, and stamping. At times they became alarmingly, though solemnly boisterous. Many of the tunes had been imported from South Africa—well-known Afrikaans choruses such as 'Sarie Marais,' 'Vat you Goed,' and 'Suikerbossie'; others were old English favourites, such as 'Little Brown Jug,' 'Sweet Lovely Nancy,' and 'Annie Rooney,' which had become 'island tunes' by the accumulated distortions of both words and air that made them almost unrecognizable. Although to our eyes the steps seemed to be all the same, we were assured that there were many different ones. Some were waltzes, some were foxtrots. Others resembled sailors' hornpipes, Irish jigs, or Scots reels. They had such names as 'Heel and Toe Polka,' 'Hook Legs,' 'Black Tom,' 'Donkey Dance,' and 'Break 'er Down Dance.' At one stage in the evening it was announced that we were about to have a 'short tea.' This we took to mean an interval given over to tea-drinking. But not at all: the phrase appeared to be a corruption of 'schottische.'

The method of extracting a partner from the compressed row of women along the side of the room was rather like tearing a rose from a bramble hedge. A young man, selecting what he thought an accessible point in the hedge, would advance with unsmiling countenance as soon as the music started and, saying nothing, with averted eyes, would seize one of the wrists lying limply for that purpose in laps and pull its owner to her feet. The process was
so arbitrary that we wondered how often a man found himself actually in possession of the partner he had meant to pick. Perhaps he didn't care. With every appearance of unconcern, having secured a girl, he proceeded to stomp with her round the floor, gyrating continually in the direction of the mob.

The men danced with a great deal of energy, making as much noise as possible but showing no visible signs of enjoyment. The women were very prim and punctilious, almost as if resentful of being torn from their thicket; yet it was what they had come for. Held almost at arm's length, they stared at their partners with blank, serious faces that seemed to profess a complete ignorance of the amazing antics of their feet below the swirling skirts.

Custom forbade conversation between dancers. This ensured the proper degree of impersonality. The precaution was hardly necessary, since the noise generated by the regular thump and shuffle of moccasined feet and the occasional scrape of heavy boots was sufficient to drown all speech—as well as, perhaps mercifully, the thin squeaking of the fiddle. Each dance ended, finally and irrevocably, with two emphatic stamps. In the ensuing silence, while the dust settled and the boards stopped their trembling, the men laughed shakily between gasps and the women retired to their seats to wipe their shining faces with their kerchiefs. In this din and bustle it seemed incongruous to see a young mother bare her breast and suckle her baby with peaceful absorption between dances.

Among the girls one or two were noticeable for the regularity and softness of their features. Most of them had dark hair and eyes, though their skins were often pale and clear; one or two were fair-haired with blue eyes, and I noticed a number of children with the same colouring.

My attention focused on one dark-haired, gipsy-like girl of about eighteen, at which age the women of Tristan were often married and looked mature, even matronly. Her complexion was inclined to duskiness, but clear and fresh. Her face was rounded, with russet cheeks like a ripe apple and very full, red lips. Her features looked sensual and almost heavy in profile.
In spite of a shyness that was due, no doubt, to the public occasion, her eyes sparkled with natural vivacity. The roundness and fullness of her figure were probably exaggerated by the number of her billowing skirts gathered in at the waist by a red, silken sash. Her outer dress was white, accentuating by contrast the warm colouring of her skin and the dark splendour of her hair. Her gaily patterned head-cover had slipped back, and in the activity of the dance a few stray curls had escaped from the tight bun of hair at the back of her neck. From one of the advance-party I learned that the girl's name was Emily.

The concluding and most remarkable item of the evening's entertainment was called a Pillow Dance. All the people present made a single row round the walls of the room. Within the rectangle so formed an islander holding a pillow in his arms danced slowly round the floor until he found a woman whom he favoured. He dropped the pillow to the floor in front of her and the pair knelt on it, facing each other, and demurely kissed. It was then the woman's turn to dance with the pillow, the first man following her, until she found another partner to her taste. The business was repeated until there was a long queue following the pillow.

The performance proceeded solemnly enough for a while but then became a hopeless muddle, owing mainly to the fact that old Andrew the fiddler, in his desire to watch the progress of the pillow, forgot that he was required to provide music for the dancers. Moreover most of the girls were too shy to play the game properly: once placed in possession of the pillow, their only impulse seemed to be to get rid of it as quickly as possible; after a few faltering steps they invariably dropped it before the nearest male relative. The young men made no pretence at all of dancing with the pillow: as soon as one found himself in possession of it he set off on a lumbering tour of the room, often going round and round until all curiosity about his choice of a girl had sagged into boredom with his apparent inability to make one. When at last he did throw the pillow down he invariably remained beside it with a stupid grin on his face, while the partner he had
chosen covered her blushing cheeks with both hands and all the other women shrieked with laughter at what they evidently considered her misfortune.

The kiss, when it eventually took place, was never more than the slightest contact of the lips; and it soon became clear that the pillow itself was the trophy for which the youths un gallantly competed.

Among the women and older people interest in the game lapsed, and many of them began to make preparations for departure, gathering up their children, reknotted headkerchiefs. At length, at the far end of the room a friendly tussle broke out between two young men for the possession of the pillow; and while many of the villagers were already leaving the hall the victor was seen trundling round the room on his own with the pillow tucked under his arm, for all the world as if he were looking for a place to sleep.

In this ridiculous state of confusion it seemed to be generally understood, with no announcement to the effect, that the evening’s entertainment had reached its appointed end. The dancers began to make their way home through the darkened village, with boys carrying naked firebrands, which flared and smoked in the wind, giving to the scene just that touch of festive brilliance that had been lacking from the dance itself.
CHAPTER FIVE

On the Shelf

On Tristan there are two directions: up the mountain and down to the sea. Such is life on a shelf. Two of our company climbed the mountainside as far as a promontory from which, they found, they could go no farther, up or down. There they perched for an hour and shouted, until their plight was noticed and some islanders went up and brought them down. After that we took our exercise in off-duty periods about the settlement and on the beaches below.

For our walks about the village we had a network of paths to choose from. They were like a gigantic cobweb laid on the ground, its meshes broken or distorted by projecting roofs, walls, and knobs of rock. Some paths led to doorways; others to the openings of sheep-pens; some skirted playfully round garden walls to meet others head-on, or raced one another to empty gateways. And all these openings stared with forlorn fixity at the horizon. The Tristan islander lives with his back to the mountain and his face to the sea. The realization of this confirmed our sense of being stranded on a ledge.

Two tracks, wider and more deeply defined than the footpaths, led from the village to the beaches. These were the 'roads.' The Upper Road led to Big Beach, the Lower Road to Little...
Beach. A third road wandered westward from the settlement to the Potato Patches, which lay just 'round the corner' of the mountain, at the far end of the shelf. The total length of this habitable ledge was nine miles and at no point was the width more than one mile. Its narrowness drove our feet continually towards the beach, as if in an effort to escape.

Once, on the road to Big Beach, Jock and I met a young islander leading a bullock-cart. The cart, on two solid wheels of wood, still showing the bite of the axe, seemed absurdly small; and it contained nothing more interesting than a few large stones. The pair of slow-treading bullocks appeared disproportionately huge. The 'road' was so deeply rutted that one wheel was lumbering along a foot higher than the other, while the cart on its wooden axle lurched and creaked at an amazing angle. Youth and oxen moved with the same patient, plodding indifference. But the moment they saw us, all three stopped, as if by a common impulse, to stare with mingled embarrassment and suspicion. From the young man we extracted a grudging 'Mawnin', Sah.'

'What are you doing?' asked Jock.

'Drawin' stone,' he replied with unassailable accuracy.

'What are you going to use that for?'

'Mendin' wall.'

Two words at a time seemed to be all he could spare. Even that number failed him when I asked where he got the stone. The most he could manage was to point vaguely at the mountainside above Big Beach. Yet, as soon as he passed on towards the beach, we heard him 'ho-ho-ho-ing' his oxen with commanding urgency to the village.

On the beach there was fascination in the beat and growl of the surf, the rattle of shifting pebbles, and the strange, acrid smell of the giant kelp-weed. There was also the chance of conversation with a little band of fisher-boys who were less shy than the young men. The two beaches were separated by a knoll, where an ancient ship's cannon stood on futile guard, like a toothless watch-dog, beside a flagpole. Beneath this headland a ridge of boulders called Julia Reef ran out to sea, sloping under the
surface like a sunken breakwater, to lurk in wait for incautious landing-parties. Here, among the rocks clad with kelp and laver-weed, the tide left pools, in which the children fished.

Scrambling over vast, crannied stones, wading bare-legged with feet hardened to the cut of pebbles, they lifted up the life-crawling tangles of kelp in search of crayfish. Sometimes they found instead a villainous-looking cuttle-fish. One impudent, four-year-old urchin—the smallest of that band of diminutive beachcombers—related, in a sharp, treble voice, while his black eyes shone like polished stones, how he had swum in one of these pools and been clutched round the waist by the tentacles of a ‘catfish,’ as he called it, striving to pull him under.

‘Tell you what,’ he piped, ‘I wrestle ’at boy all right. ’E wanna drag me down, but I drag ’im ashore instead an’ give ’im waffa! I chop ’is legs off one by one with my old fish-knife till ’e let go an’ fall on the rock. Then I tear ’im up an’ use ’im for bait.’

The boy’s voice went hard with triumph, and his shrill laugh cut the air like a whip-lash:

‘Ha-ah, take more’n a catfish to get this fella!’

On another occasion I found the same gang of children splashing barefooted through the rock-pools as they stoned to death a penguin that had marooned itself high on the beach. The bird was nearly helpless out of the water, falling face down over every large pebble, lurching awkwardly to its feet again, agitating its useless flippers and tripping over strips of seaweed in its impotent anxiety to reach the sea’s edge, where it would be gone like a flash of a shark’s fin.

Every time it stumbled erect, the boys would bowl it over with hard-flung pebbles, their voices chorusing a single, sharp yell of exultation. Their motive was not cruelty, but amusement: they stared in silent wonder when I suggested that the penguin had feelings for pain as they had. Their intention was not to hurt it—the idea was beyond them—but merely to knock it over, as if it were a tin can on a fence that obligingly set itself up again each time it was toppled down. Their cries were as wild and inhuman as those of the ravenous, hook-billed sea-birds.
Little Beach, the boys' favourite hunting-ground, was a steep strip of shingle, where the tide often threshed right up under the cliffs. It differed completely in character from Big Beach on the other side of the headland. This was an expanse of black sand, ribbed by the tide and sparkling with tiny gems of grit. There were no pebbles here, and only a few boulders like blackened teeth among the white froth of the surf. It was not really a big beach, but it seemed long enough as I walked along it; the ends stretched out before and behind me like the tails of a black scarf. On one side the mountain advanced threateningly, driving me towards the long-reaching arms of the surf, which leapt over the boulders on the other side of me and rushed across the sand, growling as it fell back defeated.

At the far end of Big Beach was a ridge called by the islanders Pigbite. From its top I looked down on a wild glen of tree-fern, bunch-grass, and scrub, interspersed with naked outcrops of stone, like the miniature mountains of a rock-garden. It was a barren reward to have trudged the beach for; but two tiny lagoons, like upturned eyes, stared blandly at the sky. Their blueness was as refreshing as liquid. They seemed too beautiful to be anything but a mirage; and then, from among the bushes beside them, appeared a bent old woman, assisted by two urchins to load sticks into bags on a donkey. The boys kept leaving their work and chasing each other in play. The donkey stood like a figure carved in wood, with one knee bent and one ear drooped, the bags slung panier-wise across the ridgy hump of its back. The old woman's voice creaked in the distance, like a door on rusty hinges, as she called the boys to gather more wood.

The boys, however, had seen me, and curiosity drew them to the ridge. They ran barefooted among the rocks and bushes until they were a few yards from me. Then they stopped. It was several minutes before they came edging shyly round a boulder into my presence. The taller boy appeared ready to run away at the slightest alarm. The smaller one—I recognized his round, mischievous face and bright eyes—held his ground; but even this intrepid wrestler with catfish and stoner of penguins
seemed to lack some of his boldness now that he was confronted almost alone by one of the 'strangers.'

I asked their names. They giggled. After a minute the little one pointed at the other and said:

'At's Dondil.'

Donald, I presumed.

'And what's your name?'

'Pee-uss.'

Of that I could make Piers or Pearce; I preferred the former.

The boys had the look of brothers, the younger one about four or five years old, the other about seven. The little one was obviously the brighter. His piping voice now volunteered further information. Pointing to the old woman, he announced:

'At's Grannie Toodie.'

'What about the donkey?' I asked. 'Has he got a name?'

They stared, glanced at each other and bubbled into shrill laughter. With withering scorn, between shrieks, Piers cried:

'At ain't a dawnkey! 'At's a jenny!'

At last, overcoming his amusement, he added with more politeness: 'At's Black Tippy. She belong to ow sister Hemly.'

I would have asked more about Emily—was she the same Emily as had drawn my attention at the dance?—but the boys were scampering away among the rocks, laughing again in sharp, treble voices at the ignorance of outsiders who didn't know a 'jenny' from a 'jack' donkey.

Beyond Pigbite the mountain wall shouldered its way out to sea again, closing the end of the shelf. This immurement only emphasized our isolation on Tristan. Shut out from the rest of the world, we were shut in even on the island. For months we should be able to look at nothing but the mountain in one direction and the sea in the other.

Presently I saw the little procession of 'jenny,' old woman, and rascally grandchildren making its way slowly back along the beach. I followed their footsteps home to the village; for, whether we liked it or not, that tiny settlement must be 'home' for us, as for the islanders, so long as the Navy kept us on that narrow shelf.
CHAPTER SIX

Alone with the Past

On the rare occasions when, in those early days of November, the sun shone on Tristan, the wind was roused to a gale of anger. It whipped the sea to a roaring, mad-capped frenzy, while the sun turned the crests to a dazzling white. Into the bay below Herald Point—on the exposed tip of which a tiny hut had been perched at the Navy's instructions, far removed even from the rest of the station—long, curving rollers raced to the shore. Inside the hut a solitary operator sat with crackling ear-phones clamped to his temples; outside the wind whistled and hooted and charged against the door like some demented creature pounding for entry. Aerial masts quivered and strained at their bases and the wires whined in a shrill, sad key.

For long periods the wind kept off the rain that hung in heavy clouds. Over the sea lay a bright haze, pierced by a few gold rays, and from indoors the windows appeared misted with a fine vapour, which was neither rain nor spray—rather as if the wind by sheer force had beaten the moisture out of the atmosphere.

Then came a squall. Without warning the wind drove a
spatter of drops against the hut. The sun darkened and tl
heavy, mournful rain-clouds seemed to collapse over the islan:
Water streamed down the window-panes and splashed on tl
wooden steps outside. The onset lasted only a few minute
Then the squall could be seen moving away across the grey-haze
wave-whipped expanse to the east. Sunshine, struggli
through, created a luminous arc of rainbow. Timid rays glir
mered through the dripping panes, like laughter emergi
through tears.

Such was the weather persisting throughout the first month
our stay on the island. At this time our isolation was complet
by an event which took place on 1st December. We r
ceived our first visitor from the world outside—a little tran
steamer, bound from South America to the Cape. She had be
dverted from her course by instructions to call at Tristan
Cunha and pick up the contingent of South African soldie:
whose work was now finished.

The ship came upon us out of a morning mist, with a bew
dered air as if she had experienced difficulty in finding tl
unfamiliar rock. She anchored off Little Beach, from which t
islanders promptly launched a boat in the hope of doing sou
trade. Most of us found an opportunity of going on board i
the pleasure of seeing a few strange faces and hearing some ne
from the ‘outside.’ In the afternoon the whole populati
assembled on the beach for the leave-taking of the soldiers, wh
acquaintance among the islanders had had time to become clo
The effusion of kisses and tears from the women amazed us; w
wondered whether our departure, at a date still distant, wo
evoke similar demonstrations. We thought it impossible at t
ime and were more disposed to envy the Springboks th
prospect of spending Christmas in Cape Town.

In the weeks following their departure, with our circle of fa
shrunk still closer about the mess-table, we learned the value
the weather in making the days on Tristan skip lightly by or d
like the links of a heavy chain. At last it began to improve.
the cottage gardens, besides the clumps of tussock-grass, a few flowers began to appear, like hopeful sprigs on an old maid’s bonnet. The wind retained its querulous note and the sibilance of the surf accompanied us through our days and nights; but as December advanced the sun became a more daring visitor and the squalls more intermittent.

We still saw little of the islanders. Social activities, we realized, were not absent from the life of Edinburgh Settlement, but they were more formal and discreet than might have been expected in such a small, enclosed society; and, excepting such solemnities as the recent dance, they were organized on a family basis. So far we had not penetrated that milieu; we could only roam in the vicinity, half attracted, half repelled by the dark interior that showed occasionally through a cottage doorway.

Each threshold consisted of a wide, smooth-worn stone sunk into the ground. The door was always made in two parts, upper and lower, like stable doors in England. The top hatch seemed to be kept open in all but the wildest weather. When the sun gleamed—more often now—on the unpainted, weather-beaten wood of the lower half-door, the void square above peered at the passer-by like a cavernous eye from under the shaggy brows of thatch. Sometimes we glimpsed a face in the opening. Sometimes a child’s head peeped over, wide-eyed, between tiny hands that gripped the edge of the wood; but it always dropped out of sight as soon as it became aware of being seen. We were still, after a month on the island, a source at once of wonder and fear.

At this stage it seemed to us that of all the living things on Tristan human beings were the rarest and most difficult to meet. Other creatures were both tamer and more familiar. On the grassy common in front of the village waddled little detachments of grey-and-white geese, wagging their fluffy tails, paddling pink feet or dipping red bills in the ‘watron.’ In the very centre of this green stood a miniature covert of gorse-bushes. Here, in the dusty hollows made by their own bodies among the clumps, black island pigs rolled in contentment on sunny days while a few lean hens pecked the insects from them. The sheep were
evidently kept on higher ground at this time of year, though the
grass near the settlement showed evidence of their nibbling and
the breeze carried their bleating from the mountainside. Only a
few cows were to be seen, but there were numerous bullocks,
used for drawing the carts. Sometimes, when a young bullock
was being broken in to the yoke, he would be left to wander all
day with his yoke-fellow, their necks imprisoned together in the
heavy wooden collar. If encountered in this fashion, the bullocks
were timid; but unencumbered they could be dangerous, es-
pecially at night, when they would charge at anyone carrying a
light.

The commonest animals were donkeys, small, sleepy-eyed,
shaggy, grey or brown. They roamed among the cottages,
through gateways and into gardens with a casual, proprietary
air and far more self-possession than the people. On a narrow
footpath I have often stood aside for one to pass and received not
so much as the droop of an ear in notice of my existence. At
night, going out to the hut on the Point, carrying no torch for
fear of the charging bullocks, I have more than once fallen head-
long over a donkey sleeping in my path, as immovable as a
boulder. Even long-dead ones were a familiar sight, startling
enough in broad daylight, gruesome at dusk. In silent, green
hollows, among shadowy rocks, in the bottoms of gulches, I have
been pulled up sharply by the staring eye-sockets, long jaws, and
grinning teeth of a skull, sometimes a complete skeleton, its
cage of ribs bleached white, the grass growing up through it as it
lay like a resting spectre. There were so many long-nosed asses’
kulls, so many horned skulls of cattle and small-boned sheep’s
heads littering the plateau that we walked about half in fear of
coming on the unburied remains of human castaways—until one
day, along with Ginger, Jock, and Charlie, I was shown the
islanders’ cemetery.

It was just another enclosure with a tumbledown wall of stones,
distinguished from the neighbouring flax gardens mainly by its
greater state of neglect. Beside it ran a deep gully or ‘gutter,’ in
the bottom of which flowed Big Watron. We were standing
here, looking down at the stream, when we saw our acquaintance, old Bob Glass, coming down beside it, complete with hat and stick. He greeted us from afar in the tone of a now-familiar friend—'Good day, gen’lmen!'—and arrived on faltering steps. 'I see you-all down 'yah by the graveyard, so I come fa’ to show you grandad’s grave.'

He climbed out of the gully and waved his stick commandingly towards an opening in the wall. Like sheep we allowed ourselves to be herded into the enclosure, while Bob fussed at our heels, holding his stick out like a shepherd’s crook.

Obviously the parish afforded no sexton to trim the grass and paid little attention to the places of its dead. Most of the graves were unmarked in any way. Here and there was a rough wooden cross with a name and date scratched on it. One or two rudimentary headstones lurched at different angles out of the ground. Only one grave, in the far corner, was distinguished by anything worthy of being called a memorial. To this grave we were led—or rather shepherded. In respectful silence we read the inscription on the marble tombstone, which had manifestly not been made on the island.

WILLIAM GLASS
BORN AT KELSO, SCOTLAND,
THE FOUNDER OF THIS SETTLEMENT AT
TRISTAN D’ACUNHA,
IN WHICH HE RESIDED 37 YEARS
AND FELL ASLEEP IN JESUS,
NOVEMBER 24TH, 1853. AGED 67 YEARS.

Asleep in Jesus! far from thee
Thy kindred and their graves may be;
But thine is still a blessed sleep,
From which none ever wakes to weep.

The sign above the inscription showed that William Glass had been a freemason. The stone, Bob said, had been sent out from America by relatives living there. The descendant of the original founder then pointed out for our amusement where he
and his brothers had in their boyhood prised the lead out of the lettering with their knives, to melt down and make pellets for their guns.

This story set the old islander at first gleefully, then wistfully, on a train of reminiscences. It appeared that the young people of Tristan, as in every other generation of every other community in the world, were 'not what they used to be. . . .'

The village was hidden from our sight by the nearer prospect of tall flax in the adjoining garden. Standing there in the little graveyard among the neglected stones, we were as if stranded between the mountain and the sea. The old man's voice rustled vaguely, becoming confused with the rustle of the distant surf. A breeze moved among the flax, rattling the dry stalks together; its passage was like a shiver of loneliness. Bob's words, as he talked on and on, came to us thinly, with a reed-like sound, lost on the wind, as if he were a long way off, in another world, among those forgotten figures of his youth.

He seemed to be talking not to us, nor even to himself, but to the wind and the sea and the dreary flax and the crude grave-stones that alone with him recalled the names of those dead ones. Slowly, like a dreamer awakening, he came back to us out of his world of memory, saw us again and recollected his hospitable intention of inviting us up to his house for a cup of 'strong drink' and to meet his wife, Charlotte.
Along the grassy bank of the stream in the bottom of the gully we followed Bob Glass in the direction of his cottage. The promised introduction to his wife was prefaced with a timely warning: 'You-all ain't gotta be skeered of my wife, 'cos she's a big woman—biggest woman on the island.' There was a ring of pride in his voice and perhaps we should have pleased him if we had shown signs of fear.

As we trooped behind the old man through the low doorway, she rose from a seat at the corner of the hearth and advanced to the middle of the room, as if prepared for any encounter. Without being especially tall, she was certainly 'big.' Her voluminous black skirt effectively concealed a wide area of cottage floor. Her large, red hands were wiping themselves, unhurriedly, in a small white apron at her waist. Her heavy bosom was constrained, with difficulty, in a white blouse. Meagre, greying hair appeared in a roll in front of a faded green kerchief on her head. She held the centre of the floor, as immovable as a rock, and surveyed us sombrely from large, dull
eyes as we advanced in turn to take her hand and receive a mumbled 'Ow you do, Sir?' in greeting. Then, the encounter over, and no ground yielded, she retired honourably to her coign of vantage by the hearth, leaving to her husband the social duties of seeing us seated on various boxes and chests about the room.

With slow, deliberate movements, eloquent of her determination not to be flustered or even perceptibly interested by the unexpected arrival of strangers, Charlotte filled a pot with water from a tall pitcher and placed it on a grid over the fire. Then, settling her enormous bulk back on the tiny box which served as her seat, she relapsed into stolid silence, looking occasionally at us but more frequently at the pot.

We gazed round at our first cottage interior. The room was fairly large and was well kept. The roof, walls, and floor were boarded inside, the actual stone of the building visible only in the wide, open fire-place. Some attempts at decoration had been made. The walls were painted in two colours, the top half white, the bottom blue. The paint had presumably been acquired from some ship. Coloured pictures cut from an ancient magazine had been stuck here and there. The tiny recess of the single window had been neatly boarded and curtained with a rag of butter muslin. A small square table stood against the wall near the window and was covered with a faded green cloth. The boxes on which we sat were of the same kind as sea-chests, painted and covered on top with pieces of fabric—one of them embroidered unexpectedly with the name ‘Jane Austen.’ No doubt this treasure, like many others in the house, had been acquired either from a passing ship or from well-wishers in England who occasionally sent parcels to the island through a missionary society. On the mantelpiece were various oddments, including a clock, and some shelves in a corner bore a few antique articles of crockery. All these domestic possessions looked old and well worn, but everything was clean and neat.

This room appeared to be the all-purpose living-room. The only other apartment in the cottage was a small bedroom, which was nothing more than a box-like portion of the main room
partitioned off by a plank wall in which a tiny square of window space, devoid of glass, had been cut to allow light to enter the bedroom from the living-room. There were no windows in the back wall of the house: the only window letting in light from outside was that in the front wall, which had small glass panes in it. The inside of the house would have been very dark had not the upper half of the main door been left open. It appeared that some person slept in the living-room, for along the back wall, opposite the window, was a long wooden sofa, covered with dark blankets, obviously a bed as well as a couch. It was on top of these blankets that old Bob himself had taken his seat—as if it were a customary one—in order to direct our attention with his walking-stick to the points of interest in his home.

He told us that the wood used for lining and furnishing the house, as of many other cottages in the village, had been salvaged from the sailing-ships wrecked on Tristan in the old days. At one time, he admitted, it had even been the custom of the settlers to pray in their church for God to send them a ‘good’ shipwreck. However, the ministers sent out from England had dissuaded them from the practice. As a consequence, Bob seemed to imply, the young people of Tristan nowadays had often to wait three or four years to get married until the bridegroom had collected enough drift-wood to construct the ‘principals’ of his house. Since the advent of steamships, wrecks, and even visits, had become rare, and this had increased the value of drift-wood. Sometimes the derelict bough or trunk of a tree, originating from a shore many hundreds of miles away, would be washed up on the beach, crusted with barnacles that it had accumulated on its sea-passage. This would be rescued and hoarded by the lucky finder. Once, Bob said, a trunk of immense size—perhaps a South American redwood—had been washed up and had been frugally chopped at by the whole population for a year.

The old islander sat stiffly erect on the sofa, his hands resting on the knob of his stick, which was held between his knees, his bright, protuberant eyes swivelling from one face to another as he talked. At the corner of the hearth, Charlotte, balancing her
weight precariously on the small box, said nothing, but divided her attention between us and the pot. It was an open question which drew the larger share of it. Eventually her grudging interest in our presence and remarks so completely usurped it that the pot had to remind her of its need by bubbling loudly. That was our little triumph; but the ensuing brew was hers—a species of thick tea that certainly justified Bob’s adjective ‘strong.’ We sipped it with perseverance from mugs that were very thick—and very big.

Bob accompanied our sipping with the account of his life in the Orange Free State, where he had married his first wife, Elizabeth. His three eldest sons had been born in South Africa, two more by Elizabeth on the island after he had brought his family to his native Tristan. The first of these two was that same dark-browed Sidney who had led us up from Big Beach on the day of our arrival. Pointing with his wavering stick, Bob drew our attention to a large, framed wedding portrait of himself as a young man with a huge black moustache and the same prominent, ever bright eyes, and his wife in white, demurely downcast under a lofty crown of dark hair and a diminutive straw hat. The wife had died after the birth of her fourth son—there had been some daughters too, but Bob was vague and indifferent about the number of them—and almost at once he had married the placid island-born creature who throughout his narrative had sat hunched on her box, staring at us with her large, opaque eyes and something of the cud-chewing imperturbability of a cow.

About the island itself Bob had much to tell us. It was apparently not what it used to be. In his youth food had been far more plentiful and varied. Of eggs and milk there had never been any shortage, and all the women had known how to make butter and cheese: now the young women knew nothing. Ships had been regular callers then and there had been plenty of ‘trade.’ In exchange for fresh vegetables warships had given cash, which the islanders had spent on board at the dry canteen; whaling vessels had paid in clothes and groceries. Now ships hardly ever called.
On the subject of whales, Bob told us that he himself had started a whaling 'industry' on Tristan after his return from South Africa. He described with enthusiasm the sport the island men had had out in their boats, harpooning the whales.

'Did you kill many?' we asked.

'No,' he replied in a tone that seemed to rebuke us for irrelevance, 'we never killed none.'

Once seals had also been numerous on the island. They had come ashore there to do their courting, Bob said, and a noisy business they made of it. Now they had all left. When asked why, he explained, without any sense of responsibility, that the islanders had shot so many of them that the others had stopped coming.

The birds, too, had all migrated to the neighbouring islands, Nightingale and Inaccessible, to which the men had had to row or sail to fetch penguins', petrels', and mollymawks' eggs. Again we ventured a question, though by now we knew the answer.

'Why don't the birds nest any more on Tristan?'

'Because the islanders shoot them off.'

Our host persistently referred to his fellow settlers as a people apart from himself, for whose vagaries he felt in no way accountable.

After a pause, he offered us another example of the island's deterioration:

'Even the goats iss gone!'

Also shot, we supposed. But no! It appeared that one day they had all run down a slope of the mountain and hurled themselves over a cliff into the sea. We waited for a further explanation, but Bob did not seem to think any was required. His sorrowful headshake seemed to imply that such happenings were natural on Tristan—and that when we had lived there longer we should not think them strange.

On this forlorn note he ended his recital of the blessings of his island home. For a long time he sat gazing at the floor, and Charlotte, as if in sympathy, gazed mournfully into the fire. Our presence seemed to have been forgotten, and no one thought
of anything to say. The silence stretched tauter and tauter until it was snapped by the sudden irruption into the room of a young man and a dog. They were in the house before we had time to perceive their entry, the young man having swung the half-door open and stepped well into the middle of the room on his soft oxhide soles without noticing our presence. When he did become aware of us, he appeared to undergo an abrupt attack of paralysis and lockjaw simultaneously. The dog at his heels seemed no less aghast at our unfamiliar presence: he stood transfixed, head and tail down, forgetting even to sniff. It seemed a long minute before old Bob roused himself to break this second tension.

'This 'yah's my youngest boy—Wilson,' he announced, and then added as if disclaiming all liability in the matter: 'E's Shawlutt's son.' It was a moment before it became clear to us what he was explaining: that this was his son—the only child—by his second wife.

We greeted Wilson, but he neither spoke nor moved, unless it was true—as it appeared—that both he and the dog leaned back a trifle as if from a sharp gust. Then Charlotte's voice, heard really for the first time during our visit, jerked him out of his trance with a shrill, harsh question:

'Ain't you got no talk, Wilson?'

In spite of the harshness of the tone, there was a note of strong, proprietary affection in her voice now, and her attention seemed fixed at last on an object that fully engaged it.

Wilson dragged his cap from his head and began to wring it mercilessly in his hands while he treated the company to a tortured and vapid smile. He was about twenty years old, slim, and of a fair height; his vacant appearance was due perhaps more to shocked embarrassment than to stupidity. But we had no chance of making sure. As quickly as he had entered the house he retreated, the dog crowding his heels in an equal anxiety to escape from the situation. This departure set a precedent for ours. Before leaving, two of us pledged ourselves to Bob's wife...
privilege of washing our clothes. We could either bring them, she said, to the cottage or Wilson could come to our quarters regularly to fetch them. After his recent display of inarticulacy, we rather doubted Wilson's hardihood for such a task. Charlotte, however, seemed to have no doubt at all of his obedience.

Old Bob accompanied us to the door, hobbling on his stick, and even Charlotte hoisted her unwieldy bulk to its feet and wished us a 'Good awfternoon' in her drawling island speech. Our parting glimpse of the old man, after we had promised to return soon, showed him stiffly poised in the dark void of the doorway under the frowning thatch of the cottage. There was no sign outside of Wilson or his dog, but we had no doubt that from some concealed vantage-point the eyes of both watched our departure.
CHAPTER EIGHT

A Year Begins

SPRING and Christmas advanced hand in hand. With an appropriateness that was, to our northern minds, incongruous, the season of new growth coincided with the beginning of a new year. Early one morning the sun entered, disguised as a shaft of brilliant, restless dust, through the east window of the hut on Herald Point; it stretched an arm across the operator’s table to the chair in which I sat hunched before the receiver, and alighted like a gentle tap on my shoulder. I looked up as if a stranger had entered.

The face of Tristan was being transformed. The flax in the gardens was bursting into dark red buds and its sombre leaves had a fresh green lustre. The solitary thicket of gorse-bushes on the grassy common in front of the village was spurting little flame-like jets of yellow blossom. Even the mountain laid aside its shawl of cloud to reveal shoulders clad in a new garment of green scrub, blazoned with patches of furze. In the growing warmth the village opened like a flower. The cottagers emerged from their chrysalis, too busy to be shy: men drove ox-carts laden with
brushwood for the Christmas cooking-fires; women sat in doorways carding wool; boys carried home the first early potatoes; girls clustered in chattering groups, their knitting-needles flying as their tongues wagged.

Our acquaintance began slowly to widen, largely through our contacts with old Bob Glass and with Kenneth Rogers, who acted as mess-boy and assistant cook at the station. Working among us daily, Kenneth had lost all shyness in our presence and had acquired many of our ways and even our expressions, so that he hardly seemed to us an islander. At twenty he was young enough to be adaptable. He was full of curiosity about our world and its strange machines; he soon learned to hold his own in the humorous back-chat at meal-times, and he soon mastered the methods of cooking and baking in our galley, so different from those in an island kitchen. He was cheerful, fresh-coloured, well built, with a strong, resonant voice and intelligent, well-shaped features.

As Bob Glass was our link with the older generation, Kenneth was our sponsor among the young people. He had soon introduced most of us to his family. The home was dominated by his mother, Agnes Rogers, a small but energetic person with bright eyes, a quick manner of speaking, a ready smile, and a face as wrinkled and red-cheeked as a ripe crab-apple. She was not a native of Tristan, but an Irishwoman—the sister of Bob Glass's first wife, Elizabeth. She had come to the island at the same time as her sister, had married first a Joe Glass, who had died, and then William Rogers, who had become blind. The whole management of the household had fallen on her slight shoulders. She had brought up a family of three children by her first husband and five by her second, and had managed to provide them all with a rudimentary education beyond that of most of the other islanders. Agnes was a Roman Catholic and had taught her children in the same faith, conducting services in her cottage, so that the Rogers family formed yet another separate little community within the colony of Tristan.

The cottage was not always clean or tidy, but it offered an
atmosphere of unstrained friendliness and welcome. We met Kenneth's brothers, 'Bunty' and Rudolph, who were twins, and his two unmarried sisters, Asturias Ann, as pretty as she was plump, and Marie, a gay tomboy of fifteen. Among them Ken was called by a local nickname, 'Hecca.'

Often in the evenings the house would echo with merriment far removed from the sombre conduct which had seemed to us to characterize the islanders. Through it all, blind William sat in his chair, his gaze fixed in front of him in a listening stare, joining in with a loud laugh at every joke. Agnes was at once sufficient of an islander and sufficient of an outsider to provide a shrewd, half-ironic commentary on the life of the settlement. Sometimes she acted for us almost as an interpreter.

With these livelier contacts during our off-watch periods and the daily improving weather, our time of exile began to pass pleasantly enough. Almost before we realized it, Christmas was upon us; to our English imaginations it seemed almost a blasphemy that it should arrive with the season of shooting grass, fresh buds, and sunshine.

On Christmas Eve a party was held at the station, 'Doc,' padre, sister, and the others of the 'quarter-deck' joining with us in nostalgic imitation of parties at home. Perhaps because of the warmth, the sun in the evening, the absence of a coal-fire, of holly, mistletoe, and fir boughs, the atmosphere was all wrong. Presents from the store were distributed by the padre masquerading behind a cotton-wool beard; party games were played in the recreation space of the mess, sobriety putting on a false heartiness that was worse than drunkenness; for one evening we tried, unconvincingly, to imagine ourselves in England, shutting out consciousness of the bleak island outside the windows. Possibly we should have done better to go into the village. How Christmas Eve was being celebrated there we did not know; certainly the children would not be hanging up their stockings in expectation of presents.

On Christmas morning several of us attended service in the village. The little church of Saint Mary-the-Virgin stood in the
very centre of the village. It was a low, long-shaped building, stone-walled and with a dry-stone enclosure, just like another cottage; but it was distinguished from its shock-headed neighbours by a corrugated iron roof, at one end of which was erected a little white-painted wooden cross and at the other the rescued ship's bell of the wrecked *Mabel Clark*.

The islanders sat in silent, close-packed rows, on benches—men on one side of the aisle, women and children on the other. There was something child-like in the rapt attention of their faces as they listened to the story of the birth of Christ. Near the altar was a model, built in a wooden box by the padre, showing the inside of the stable, complete with manger, tiny doll Jesus, cardboard cut-out figures of Mary, Joseph, and cattle. It was illuminated by a small, concealed electric torch bulb, which turned the miniature interior into a magical, glowing world of its own. It had been designed mainly to interest and instruct the children, for whom the minister provided Sunday-school; but throughout the sermon it drew the wondering gaze of the men and women. Even during the carol-singing, having no hymn-books to read and only the padre's voice to follow, they could keep their eyes and imaginations turned towards that window-like glimpse of the unreal.

During the afternoon a party was given at the station for the village children, who came with their mothers. Presents of sweets were received with wide-eyed, if solemn, delight. The children's shyness made it hard to organize games, but as soon as the accordionist struck up familiar tunes boys and girls, even the youngest, stood up in pairs to dance the local steps in earnest imitation of their elders.

In the evening, in the same room, we were hosts to the grown-ups at another 'dawnce.' Once again there was the screech of Andrew Swain's 'woileen' and the drone of Alfred Green's melodeon; the wooden floor resounded to the rhythmical drumming of moccasined and booted feet. Faces shone with sweat, for the night was as warm as an English midsummer's eve.

From Kenneth we learned more of the customs of dance nights.
1. Hauling roughly trimmed stone into position on the gable top.

2. The 'gable-ends' are completed first, and then the walls.
3. 'Principals' and rafters are made of drift-wood and salvage from packing cases. (Rudolph 'Twin' Rogers)

4. The roof is thatched with New Zealand flax and the ridge sealed with turf.
As in church, it was not considered proper for the men to sit with the women. A husband, having brought his wife to the hall, left her to find her own seat while he mingled with the other self-conscious males in the middle of the room. Still less pardonable would it have been for a young man to place himself beside one of the unmarried girls or hold open conversation with her. Only after long courtship and recognized acceptance was he permitted to escort her to and from the hall.

We were surprised by Ken's assurance that it was on these dance nights that many of the island love-affairs began. The segregation was so strict and the dancing itself so rugged that there appeared no opportunity for intimacies. Custom, however, had evolved an explicit though unformulated code for the affections. Selection of partners, as Kenneth explained, was by no means as haphazard as it looked. If a girl 'stood up' for the first dance with any young man other than her own brother or cousin, she was openly acknowledging him as an admirer; great would have been the scandal if a wife had danced that number with any man but her husband. During subsequent dances, if an unmarried man chose the same partner on three occasions, he was declaring—for all to see, including her parents—his wish to 'come a-co't'n'. 'Annie Rooney' was the 'sweethearts' dawnce' and carried a special significance.

We began to appreciate how heavily charged with undercurrents was the atmosphere in our mess-room on this occasion. 'You-all gotta watch out,' as Kenneth warned, 'else you come 'yah fa' to dawnce an' you go 'way fa' to git married.'

Among the young women present I again observed Emily, the girl I had noticed at the previous dance. She was obviously in demand, but she changed her partner with every number. Among those who danced with her were Wilson, Bob Glass's youngest son, and—for one stumbling attempt—myself. After the first blushing murmur of consent, she remained silent and kept her black eyelashes lowered. My own concentration, her shyness, and the general hubbub of the dancing made conversation impossible. At a false step of mine, her embarrassment threw
off a quick, wild smile, which showed a flash of white teeth and lifted the curves of her cheeks. Beneath the momentarily raised lashes her eyes brimmed with a dark life that was almost liquid. For the next item I was succeeded as her partner by Kenneth Rogers—smiling broadly. To my surprise I observed Emily talking volubly to him throughout the dance, her eyes raised and sparkling; and repeatedly as she talked, her dark gaze flashed in my direction but withdrew instantly when it encountered mine.

At what we considered the early hour of ten the entertainment ended, the family parties reassembled and crowded out through the door as if in fear of being left behind. In a remarkably short time they disappeared in the warm darkness under the mountain, where the cottages lay hidden. Only Kenneth stayed to wash the tea-cups while I lingered to set the chairs again around the mess-table for breakfast.

'Tell you what, sonny,' he called from the kitchen, 'reckon I know which gal you'se gonna visit night-time come the Noo Yah.'

'Which?' I asked.

'David's Hemly,' came the answer.

'Who's David?' I demanded sharply.

'David Hagan,' he said—then added for my comfort: 'Hemly is David's daughter.'

'Hagan! I haven't heard that name before. Are there many families on the island called Hagan?'

'There ain't bare one left. All the others is gone away to Sout' Africa, else America,' explained Ken, adding as a malicious afterthought: 'Guess you won't find no trouble in makin' out David's house.'

'I noticed you were busy talking to her,' I accused.

'Reckon it was Hemly was talkin' to me,' he returned; and having waited in vain for me to put the question, he called out:

'You know what she wass sayin'?

'What?'

'She say you was a rale sawny fella.'

'What does that mean?' I asked hopefully.
Kenneth’s head appeared round the door. ‘At means you ain’t got no talk. You didn’t say no sweet wo’ds while you was dawncin’.’ The head withdrew with a roar of laughter.

‘Noo Yah,’ as Ken called it, approached in a blaze of sunshine, the nights like a series of hot gasps. True to the Scots origin of the first settler, the islanders reserved their private merrymaking for that occasion. On New Year’s Eve boisterous groups passed from house to house. The men were fantastically disguised, some dressed as women, others with soot-blackened faces and equipped with cows’ tails. Sidney Glass was beating a big drum—an oil drum—and old Andrew’s fiddle fairly squeaked with delight. In each cottage that they visited an impromptu dance and sing-song were held; but these were private festivities and the music reached us only as veiled sounds.

Until late in the evening the sun was mellow. Its last rays, catching the rims of the gulches, kindled them to a greenish-gold effulgence. Minute shadows picked out the bushes, giving a wild shagginess to the mountainside. Up there the sheep moved in changing formations, pale shapes in the dusk. But one of those pale shapes was not a sheep. Beside the ‘watron’ on the lower slope near the cottages, a girl in a white dress was walking among the rocks. She would vanish, I knew, if I climbed up there; but the sight of her, identified in my imagination with the girl of the dance, made me realize how remote we still were from these islanders. Surrounded by neighbours exchanging visits in the spring twilight, passing to and fro among the low walls of the flax gardens, I was still an outsider. It might be worth the perseverance needed to win their confidence, to penetrate their secrets—perhaps to catch up with that white dress fluttering on the mountainside.
MAKING friends with the islanders individually was by no means easy. Shyness among the younger ones was still an obstacle. The limited number of Christian and surnames added to our difficulty; we often found ourselves confusing one islander with another whose combination of names was the same.

There were only seven family names: Glass, Swain, Green, Rogers, Hagan, Repetto, and Lavarello. The Glass family had been longest on the island. The first Swain and the first Rogers had also belonged to the early days of the settlement. The Greens were descended from a Dutch sailor, Peter Green or Pieter Groen, who had been shipwrecked on the island. The Hagan family derived from Andrew Hagan, an American whaling captain who had chosen to settle there. The Repettos and Lavarellos were the most recent stock, originating from two survivors of a wrecked Italian brigantine, Italia.

One of these castaways still lived on Tristan and was among the earliest acquaintances we made—largely because of our association with old Bob Glass, already recognized as our link with the village elders. With my colleague ‘Ginger,’ I had now become a
regular visitor to Bob’s cottage, and from him we gained introductions to those he called ‘the Old Hands.’

The opened upper half of the cottage door formed a frame for the blood-red flax-buds that nodded against a prospect of stone- and sheep-dotted turf and the vying blues of sea and sky. It had become a familiar picture.

Across that picture often moved—while ‘Ginger’ and I sat listening to Bob Glass’s ruminations—the head and shoulders of a little old man who seemed to be Bob’s neighbour. Truncated by the lower hatch of the door, he appeared momentarily within the frame as little more than a floppy, broad-brimmed hat and a large white moustache. The hat was worn at a slightly rakish angle, throwing over the face a shadow, from which only the prominent moustache emerged, flecked silver by the sunlight. We asked his name. Bob said that he was Gaetano Lavarello, who had been cast away on Tristan fifty years before. He had married an island girl and was now the head of a family of three generations in the village.

His name, we found on seeking his acquaintance, was invariably shortened to Gaeta; and by many of the young people, even those unrelated to him, he was affectionately called Uncle. He was short and stocky, but still active, dressed usually in a seaman’s blue jersey and a pair of oversize trousers that he rolled up over his ankles. His head was disproportionately large, with a wide, flat crown and silvery hair that curled in clusters over his ears but had almost vanished on top. His face was the colour of sun-kissed stone and remarkably expressive. The silvery bars of his moustache lifted as he smiled, giving the lie to the grey, tufted eyebrows which he dragged down in a frown of mock severity to hide the twinkling of his eyes.

Talking to Gaeta was like looking into an old mirror which magically gave back reflections of fifty years before; and his Italian accent combined to droll effect with his Tristan dialect. He had been born in the town of Camogli, near Genoa, and some of the sunniness of his native climate had passed for ever into his nature, surviving even the winds of Tristan. At the age of eleven
he had run away from the vineyards and gone to sea in a sailing ship. His first passage, he remembered, had been from 'Swanse-ah' to Odessa—where the cold made him long again for Italy. He had loaded 'teaka wood' at Rangoon and 'colda beefa' in South America, while still no more than a boy:

'I musta could on'y been some littla fella then, for I'se on'y a littla shorta fella now!'

He had been impressed into the Italian Navy—'t'ree years a bluejack'—and had been glad to escape. He had visited many British ports, including Liverpool—at the time when work was begun on the Mersey Tunnel:

'Guess they musta got 'eem a finisha before now! Guess they musta gotta some sorta wagons to taka the peopla t'rough!'

Gaeta, while still young, had seen much of the world—too much. Three times he had been shipwrecked; and on the third occasion he had decided to stay where the sea had cast him. With him had stayed his shipmate Andrea Repetto, who had acted as interpreter. For the young Gaeta had spoken no English. Only after the death of Andrea had he set about learning the language of his adopted island. Many years later, when we visited him, we found him the father of five sons and a daughter and grandfather of twenty-two children on that island. And he could no longer speak Italian.

The long, cabin-like room of his cottage, next to Bob Glass's, was often crowded in the evenings while Gaeta spun his 'yarns,' as the islanders always called them. When his meaning became knotted in the still intractable dialect, he released it by eloquent shrugs and gestures. His wife Jane was a neat, matronly woman, some years younger than her husband, still fresh-coloured but with grey hair, neatly parted. How she would shake and shriek proudly with laughter when Gaeta told the assembled company about the black women in Africa who carried their babies on their backs and had breasts so long that they had merely to 'tossa' them over their shoulders to feed the babies! None of the islanders believed Gaeta's stories, but that only increased his power of amusing.
'Tell you what!’ the young folk would exclaim as they left his cottage in the evening. ‘Old Gaeta can make you laugh!’ And that on Tristan was a great recommendation.

Gaeta himself had loved gaiety as much as any other seaman. Screwing one eyebrow down in a ragged wink while the other was cocked in roguish innocence, he would recall his nights ashore in ‘Gibee-alta’ and ‘Spanishland’—‘plenny musica, plenny dancing, an’ plenny pretty gals alla night!’

But the pleasure of seafaring had proved less constant than its hardships. In a spirit more cynical than romantic he had turned from them fifty years ago to the arms of the island girl he had married—without being able to speak her language. In time Gaeta had come even to doubt the authenticity of his own youthful exploits. Their vividness in memory had faded like the colours of an old ship’s ensign. He had become a familiar sight on the island, returning from the Potato Patches with his fork on his shoulder, always to the fore on the beach to wave the island boats into a safe landing with his unmistakable gestures, an agile little figure dodging among the rocks, as excited at the return of any expedition as the dogs that barked and chased one another about the beach. But Gaeta himself never went out in the boats or aboard visiting ships. He had caught in his youth a seasickness that would last out his life. When asked why, at the age of twenty-five, he had turned exile, he would only reply:

‘Because I was a-tired of a-being a-shipwreck.’

Andrea Repetto had been a man of character, who had taught the islanders many things and had been, in his last years, recognized as their headman. His widow survived as headwoman and was the only woman of the village we heard regularly referred to by the title of Mrs and her surname. A visit to Mrs Repetto we felt almost as a duty.

With one exception, her children were married and lived with their families in cottages of their own. The exception was her eldest son William, who lived at home—the most eligible bachelor in the community. To his mother he was Willy; to the
rest of the population he was 'Chief.' We knew him as the stolid, heavily built, middle-aged man who had come on board the ship on the day of our arrival.

The Repetto house was the biggest and best furnished in the village, standing well back near the mountain slope. It had a large flax garden in front and there were two steps up to the door. Inside it was lined throughout—a feature we found to be unusual—with timber, all of it from wrecked ships. The whole interior suggested a ship and showed the skill and industry of the late Andrea. Boards from decks formed the floors; masts and spars appeared as beams and supports; cabin doors gave access to rooms. Over the open fire-place in the living-room had been inserted the painted name-board of a ship, the Mabel Clark; the brightly painted sea-chests, used as seats, were relics, we were told, of the same ship.

Mrs Repetto, now sixty-seven, was a rather stern-looking woman, with a brown, lined face, angular and masculine but shrewdly intelligent. Her scanty hair was drawn severely back and bound in a tight bun behind: like everything else about her, we felt, it was put firmly in its place and dared not stray. She told us something of her position and that of her son, the Chief. Both had been officially appointed by one of the missionaries, Father Partridge, who had been empowered by the British Government to create a headman, a headwoman, an island council, and other officers. The appointments had been made but meant little to most of the islanders. The council consisted automatically of the heads of all the households. The officers were simply such friends and neighbours as the headman or woman called on for assistance in matters affecting the whole settlement. The Chief's position was particularly anomalous: he could hold no more power than the other men were disposed to acknowledge him, since he had no means other than the force of his own character of imposing his will. In this respect, we gathered, Mrs Repetto met no obstacles; but 'Willy,' she declared, was not firm enough with some of the less energetic villagers.
Ever since the time of Corporal Glass, the original founder, who had been known as Governor Glass before he died, there had customarily been one man to whom the other settlers turned as leader. From the first of the Glass family the role of nominal headship, though without the title of Governor, had passed to an old man-of-war’s man, John Taylor, alias Alexander Cotton, frequently recalled by the islanders as ‘Taylor Cotton’; but the actual leadership had quickly become associated rather with the Dutchman, Peter Green (originally Groen), from whom the numerous Green families in the village were descended. He had evidently been a man of strong but gentle character, greatly loved and respected on the island. He had filled with dignity a position which he had defined with simplicity to Prince Alfred, the Duke of Edinburgh, during his cruise in 1867: ‘I am in no way superior to the others. We are all equal. I merely speak for them.’

This feeling for equality had remained traditional among the settlers and tended to restrict the power of the nominated headman. In any event, his duties were mainly formal. As there was no record of crime in the settlement, there had been no need of a magistrate—and the most effective policeman was public opinion. In trading with visiting ships or welcoming travellers and expeditions a spokesman was necessary; and in the absence of a minister the headman had often conducted marriage, christening, and burial services, as a ship’s captain may. For these functions it was natural that one of the more educated members of the community should be chosen. Our friend Bob Glass had at one time enjoyed the distinction, after his return from South Africa, and still told us with pride of the ‘sermons’ in which he had displayed his ‘larnin’.’ Eventually Andrea Repetto had been designated Chief by the missionary and on his death his son Willy (William Peter) had succeeded, his powers further circumscribed by the presence of our own naval garrison, with its padre and surgeon commander.

On the other hand Mrs Repetto had acquired, as much by the force of her own character as by her standing as headwoman,
a position of real influence among the women of the island. She was the repository of much knowledge of home medicine and midwifery that had been handed down among the old women and that was more essential to the life of the settlement than the formal ministrations of the headman. Moreover she was ready to interfere in any matters when she thought necessary. On one occasion she had led a party of her henchwomen to the home of Long Lena, the laziest housewife in the village, and had cleaned out the cottage. When Lena had shaken her fist at the women as they were leaving and had called insults after them, Mrs Repetto had brought the matter before the Island Council. The offender had been sentenced to sit for a day in specially improvised stocks on the patch of grass in the middle of the village and to be excluded from church on three consecutive Sundays—a severe punishment where the weekly church-going was a valued form of social enjoyment. This was the only instance we heard of in which the community had had to take action against a 'criminal.'

The headwoman exercised the same strictness over her own home. She had brought up a large family to observe rigid rules of conduct and assured us that her children had always been the better for a good 'hammering' when they misbehaved. Her household was characterized by a strong matriarchal discipline, which extended not only to the Chief but also to her married sons and daughters. In that respect the house of Repetto was exceptional in the village.

The typical family governance on Tristan was patriarchal and the women's position was subordinate, even subservient. An example was the household of the oldest inhabitant, Sam Swain, whose imperious will—after eighty-six years of life—still held sway over a home as crude and disorderly as that of Mrs Repetto was impeccable. Old Sam himself was an imperial figure with full white beard. His face was dark brown, marking his descent from that Thomas Swain, whose rash vow had united him to the Negress among the early settlers. But Sam's features had nobility: a high, wide brow traced with fine lines; silvery hair
flowing back from a well-defined hair-line; large dark eyes and arched grey brows that gave him a touch of arrogance. He was proud of his ancestor for two reasons: first, because, as his tombstone showed, Thomas Swain had lived to the age of a hundred and two; secondly, because he had served under Nelson in the *Victory* and had been, according to the legend preserved among his descendants on Tristan, the very seaman who had caught Nelson in his arms when he fell at Trafalgar.

Sam Swain showed signs of rivalling the longevity of his grandfather. He could still hop agilely across the 'watron' that flowed near his door, and he seemed to carry his stick as much for flourish as for support. His laugh was hearty and revealed a strong set of teeth. His voice could still deepen to a stentorian bellow when he was crossed. In his straight-backed chair in the middle of his slovenly room he would sit with his favourite grandson playing at his feet, and visitors approaching the door would hear the peremptory thump of his stick on the floor and the ring of his voice summoning his daughter or his son-in-law, who lived with him: 'Rachel! Harbert!' Once a month one of his sons came to trim the old man's beard, of which he was very vain. The moustaches swept down over the corners of his mouth, but he would deftly lift them back to claim a kiss from each of the young girls who visited him.

Old Sam was a great pipe-smoker, yet he had not taken up smoking until the age of seventy-four. He had saved the pleasure till his old age.

'What did you smoke before we came, when you couldn't get tobacco?' we asked.

'Dock leaves,' he answered. 'They's rale hawt on the tongue, but they bu'n foine.'

Sam knew how to do many things which had been practised by the first generation of settlers, things unknown to his neighbours. He grew a variety of vegetables unseen in the other gardens. And he said he could make matches. They consisted of slivers of wood dipped in melted sulphur, which he obtained from a small outcrop at the far end of Big Beach.
'Do they burn well?' we asked.
'Sure, they bu'n foine,' he said, 'so lawng as you-all got a foire or a tinder-box fa' to loight 'em.'

The older men of Tristan seemed more individual than the younger ones and were certainly better talkers. There was Big John Glass, brother of Bob Glass and a few years younger. He was a noted humorist. Even in his appearance he managed to combine the comical with the impressive. He always wore an old sea-captain's cap, complete with tarnished gold braid on the peak, which he had bartered on board a visiting ship. His voice alternated between a deep, hoarse rumble and a cracked, falsetto squeak—the result probably of pitching it too high, as the islanders always did, when shouting against the wind out in the boats. Nearly seventy now, he still showed the remains of a fine physique, with exceptionally broad shoulders and immense hands. In his younger days Big John had been rated the strongest man on the island, credited with the ability to break a bullock's neck with those great hands of his.

Another leader of the elder generation was Henry Green, a widower, who lived alone in a cottage at the eastern end of the village, close under the mountain. He was a quiet, self-reliant little man, and although seventy-eight he was still active and pulled his weight in his boat. His head was covered with a tight mat of white, woolly hair, like a knitted skull-cap, contrasting vividly with the brown of his small, wizened face. Henry was the local authority on ship 'wracks'; he knew them all and welcomed strangers to whom he could tell the histories. Sometimes, when entertaining a visitor in the evening, he would break into a long, quavering solo—usually a song of shipwreck. At the end of it, he would sit silent, gazing into the crackling wood fire while the wind mourned in the chimney. One would imagine that he was remembering some sea tragedy of his own; but Henry, unlike Gaeta and Bob Glass, had lived his whole life on the island where he was born. His only excursion had been as guide for the explorers of the Quest on a trip that included Nightingale...
and Inaccessible and also Gough Island, 250 miles to the south—and Henry had not 'reckoned much' to Gough Island.

These and others like them were the elders of the settlement—the 'old hands.' They had set the standards, and it was right that we should come to know the village first through them. But we looked also for friendship among our own generation of islanders.
CHAPTER TEN

The Spinning-wheel

The New Year had brought a new animation to the village scene. Women sat out of doors knitting or carding wool; some washed clothes at the stream, pounding them with large stones to loosen the dirt, spreading them on garden walls to dry; children played ‘down on the grass’ in front of the settlement, their sharp voices rising above the ‘quanking’ of geese in the ‘watrons’ and the bleating of sheep from the slopes.

Early in the year the sheep were sheared. First, the boys and the dogs went up the mountain and drove them down. They came in their hundreds, sweeping over the common, engulfing the village—rams with curly horns, tucking their chins into their fleecy necks to produce deep-throated ‘ba-a-a’s’ of indignation, ewes with outstretched necks following the rams, lambs bleating peevishly after the ewes, boys yipping, dogs yapping, as the avalanche swirled over the grassy level in front of the cottages. There the flocks were left milling together, until finally they settled down to their grazing, which had been interrupted only for a few minutes by this wild, dog-driven dash from the mountain.
The shearing was done in the evenings, after the men returned from work at the Potato Patches. The sheep were penned about fifteen at a time behind frail hurdles in the stone paddocks. They were released one by one and as each sheep came out its owner would claim it. Rolling it off its feet, he would grasp its head between his knees and swiftly clip away the matted fleece with a pair of small hand-shears.

When carded and spun—operations that might be carried on indoors by the women at any time of the year—this wool provided a lasting supply of yarn for the ever-hungry knitting-needles. Woollen garments formed the entire underwear and a great part of the outerwear of both men and women. It was the almost incessant task of wives and mothers to knit stockings and guernseys for their families. Every minute that could be spared from working in the house or assisting at the Patches or on the beach was devoted by the women to knitting. They walked about knitting, sometimes in two's and three's, paying neighbourly visits during the warm evenings, clicking their needles at one another as they talked.

The wool was soft and white, when washed, and was never dyed. A small stock of coloured worsted, bartered from 'outside,' was kept in most houses for the brightening of stockings or white 'ganzeyes.' Indeed a ganzey was not considered much of a ganzey unless it had several rings of 'marking' wool round the bottom. The same applied to the tops of men's stockings, which were always worn outside their trousers. There was a special language of 'markings' that gradually revealed itself to us as the courting conventions of the dance had. When a girl received with favour the attentions of a young man, she would knit for him a pair of stockings, and—later—a ganzey; and the strength of her affection was told in the number and brightness of the markings. When he appeared in a ganzey emblazoned with four such marks of her love, it was known that he had reached that stage of acknowledged tenderness in which he was permitted to make her moccasins for her, in place of her father. On such evidence relatives could expect a wedding.
Before the wool could be knitted, it had to pass through several processes. First, it had to be combed or 'picked,' to remove the knotted lumps, then it received its preliminary washing; next, it was oiled slightly, to make it cling together better for carding. The purpose of 'carding' was to shape it into rolls suitable for spinning. It was done by means of two hand 'cards'—small, rectangular pieces of wood, each fitted with a short handle and faced on one side with stubby bristles, which might simply be bits of fine, stiff wire driven into the wood close together. One card was held, bristles uppermost, on the knee and a handful of wool flicked on to it. By skilful brushing with the bristles of the other card, this wool was teased into a tight little roll, which was then removed.

The carding was done mostly by the older women, who often formed little schools or carding-parties, where their tongues might wag as their cards scraped. On sunny evenings, three or four neighbours—such as Charlotte Glass, Gaeta's Jane, and John Glass's wife Mima—would sit in a row on a bench at the 'gable-end' of one of their cottages, carding for hours. The action of their wrists seemed tireless and quite automatic: it never distracted them from their gossip. Like their knitting, it was the most social of occupations.

Spinning was the work of the girls, who were sometimes 'hired out' between several families for this purpose. It was done on huge, old-fashioned wheels, as tall as a man—the kind at which the spinner stands. Smaller, more modern ones, at which the spinner might sit and treadle, had been sent out once from England, but the island women had never learnt how to use them. Spinning continued to be done on the high, stand-up wheels, turned by hand, which had been taken there in the nineteenth century. Their use required a great deal of energy, skill, and grace of movement—the grace being an essential part of the skill. The occupation displayed a young woman's figure to advantage.

In warm weather, this work—like the carding—was often done out of doors, though not in groups. It was the intermittent
whirring of a spinning-wheel and the sound of a clear, girlish voice singing snatches of song in the intervals that led me one evening through an opening of a garden wall into the presence of Emily Hagan. She was alone in a little yard between the house and a large flax enclosure. The ancient wheel stood on four stubby legs in the shade of the wall, and near it was a primitive chair on which lay a heap of carded rolls of wool, like fluffy tails, ready for spinning. Emily had just stepped back, her right arm lifted high in a curve, the strand of wool running smoothly out of her hand as the wheel spun—when I stepped through the opening. Her arm remained stationary in the air, her mouth open around the last uttered syllable of her song, as she stared aghast. The shock of my sudden appearance had checked even the usual impulse to run into the house. She stood transfixed in her pose like a waxwork figure. The wheel whirred slowly to a standstill; the strand of wool running from her hand to the spool stretched thinner and thinner—and snapped. It was like the snapping of a nerve.

'Now you've done it!' I accused.

Her only answer was a blush that mantled the whole of her ripe-cheeked face. But she dropped her strained immobility and, lowering her eyes, took another fluffy tail of wool from the pile. With fingers that had just learnt how to fumble, she began to 'splice' it on to the ragged end of the torn strand. Her white blouse had short sleeves—unusual on Tristan—revealing the soft upper part of her arms. Her elbows looked rough and slightly red by contrast. With the fingers of her left hand she twirled the wooden spokes of the big wheel, then moved backwards with a light, tripping step, like a dance step, her right hand drawing the wool gently back and upwards as it ran on to the spool; her wrist arched like a swan's neck. For an instant her eyes were raised to mine, but dropped immediately. The colour flowed again beneath her dusky skin and her movements became stiff and awkward.

'Do you mind if I sit and watch you spin?'

She made no reply, but her glance followed me apprehensively
as I took a seat on the chair, gathering into my lap the pile of woolly tails. As the spool devoured the strand that was running from her uplifted right hand, she allowed the wheel to run down again and her arm fell to her side in an attitude of helplessness. I offered her a fresh roll of wool from the pile I had appropriated. She stood still for several seconds before slowly reaching out her hand to take it. A shy smile crinkled the corners of her eyes but never really got as far as her lips. And the fire of embarrassment glowed so brightly in her cheeks that I felt compelled to turn my inspection upon the cottage.

It was a large one and had once been painted white. Four hollow-worn steps led up to the front door, and in the far corner of the yard was another door giving entry to a lower storey, the ‘cellar’ which made the Hagan house unique on the island.

The girl’s composure was partially restored and several more rolls of wool had been spun out, when her mother appeared at the half-door at the top of the steps and called:

‘Hemly, wheah’s you’ manners, gal? Waffa’ you don’t hakse anybawdy up the house for a cuppa drink?’

Then, looking at me momentarily and opening the bottom half of the door as a gesture of invitation, she hazarded a ‘Good hevenin’’ as she withdrew into the dark interior.

I had risen from my chair, still holding the pile of carded wool, but made no move towards the steps. Emily was faced with the ordeal of making the formal offer of hospitality, as instructed by her mother.

It came at last in a small, breathless whisper through the spokes of the spinning-wheel. They were the first words I heard her speak:

‘If you wouldn’t moind going up to the house, Momma will make you-all a drink——’

She broke off and stood watching me with an almost anxious expectancy. I gathered that I was intended to climb the steps and enter the house alone. The girl showed no sign of conducting or accompanying me. She seemed, rather, to be
hoarding some sort of grudge, perhaps at the prolonged interruption of her spinning. Yet, when I was seated inside the cottage and drinking the cup of strong, black 'tea' with which I had been plied by her mother, I heard no more of the whirring and clicking of the ancient wheel in the yard outside.

Where Emily had gone I don't know, but it was half an hour later, when I had exhausted the slender conversational powers of her mother, and when the gathering dusk made necessary the lighting of a bird-oil lamp on the table beside my drained cup, that I became aware of a white-clad figure in the doorway of the room: the tiny, leaping flame revealed it leaning motionless against the door-post. From soft shadow the girl's eyes held me in silent scrutiny.

'By the good Massy!' exclaimed the mother. 'How long 'at gal been stood there watchin' like 'at? Hemly, ain't you got no manners?'

With a change of tone, as she recovered from the slight shock of seeing the girl, she asked: 'What you done wid the wheel?'

Emily pointed out through the door.

'Well, if you ain't gonna do no more spinnin' to-night, you best go an' put the wheel in the cellar.'

Disregarding the mother's protest, I rose quickly.

'Let me carry it for you.'

Down in the yard, I lifted the tall wheel on its four-legged stand while the girl flitted ahead to open the door of the cellar, which was like a cave beneath the house and to which I descended by a slight incline in the corner of the yard. Staggering a little under the ungainly wheel, I heard a faint exclamation of solicitude inside the cellar. I was aware of the girl there in the darkness as I set the spinning-wheel down on the earthen floor, then she seemed not to be there any more. I had not heard her move, but when I emerged she was waiting outside.

The night air was an enveloping golden presence as we stood at the break in the wall. I was conscious of bare, rounded arms and the fragrance of thickly clustered hair. The lingering day was full of noises. As the sky darkened to a deep umbrageous
blue, speckled with starlight, and the village was swallowed by
darkness at the foot of the mountain, from somewhere in that
blackness came the throaty plaint of an old sheep, like a voice
from the mountain. From that other obscurity, silver-gleaming
below the cliffs, came the muttered irony of the surf.

The girl waited only a few minutes before her full lips breathed
'Good night' and she slipped towards the house.

'Shall I come to see you again?' I called softly.

She may or may not have answered 'Yes.' If she did, it was
probably from politeness.
CHAPTER ELEVEN

Unfriendly Neighbour

After three months on Tristan we had contracted the islanders' habit of observing—with an interest suspiciously akin to boredom—the weather signs of the sea and sky: the ground swell, the white caps, the extent of the lee, the direction and speed of the cloud movement. Our gauge of visibility was the grim outline of Inaccessible Island as seen through the west window of the hut on Herald Point. Every morning at sunrise the operator on duty consulted that mass of rock eighteen miles south-west of Tristan; every evening at sunset he observed it again fiercely silhouetted against the slash of amber sky above the horizon, then fading in the deepening glow until it vanished like a sinking ship. This disappearing trick gave Inaccessible an air of mystery. There was always the query: would it be there again the next day?

Often, as far as we could see, it was not. For days the island would be lost in the sea mist. Then one morning it would re-emerge startlingly clear, with all its crags boldly outlined as if treading the water towards us. Across the intervening sea-way it seemed to exert a remote but baleful influence on the human
intruders on Tristan, forbidding yet challenging an invasion of its own shores. If the peak of Tristan was a disturbing host to have looming always at one's shoulder, Inaccessible was a scowling neighbour that one felt obliged to visit, even in the certainty of a hostile reception. The islanders made the excursion early in the year to collect guano. Curiosity made me join them.

The morning was fine and sunny, the sky a clear blue; a light breeze was freshening. After the rush of preparation at a very early hour, there were the usual delays and uncertainties before the trip was started. Eventually the women and children on the beach had kissed the men good-bye, some tearfully, as if the three or four days' separation might be extended to a lifetime; six boats had been pushed off and pulled clear of the kelp. There we stood by for the word 'Hyshe away' until the women, halted at the top of the bank, had responded to the customary three cheers from the combined crews of the boats.

I was in the Wild Rose or, as she was more often called, the long-boat. She was reckoned the best boat for sailing but slow for pulling, being slightly heavier than the others. We had been the last crew to put off from the shore and pull clear of the kelp reef. The favourable breeze made it possible to 'hyshe' sail 'fair off the beach,' and the long-boat picked up her lead.

There were five islanders in the boat, of whom the only one I really knew was 'Bunty' Rogers, the brother of Kenneth, our mess-boy. The other hands were two of old Gaeta's sons, Robert and Lawrence Lavarello, with Robert's son Hilden, and a dark, long-faced fellow wearing the discarded cap of a ship's officer: this I learned to be Emily's father, David Hagan. Leaning back in the bows, relaxed to the gentle lurching of the boat, he smoked a pipe and watched with a slow smile but never contributed to the conversation.

Robert Lavarello was considered one of the best helmsmen. His commands were issued in a quiet, almost apologetic tone that
mingled with the soothing voice of the sea. The breeze sang in the cordage. On shore it had seemed a very gentle breeze but now it proved brisk enough to send the boats skimming like white cloudlets over the water. We travelled at a surprising speed. Occasionally an extra 'puff' would billow the sail of our craft and send her flying across the waves in what the islanders called a 'sleigh ride': the water rushed with a bubbling sound under the canvas bows, breaking into two foaming sluices, as the boat raced into a trough and over several crests before losing speed. Spray flew in our faces; the tang of salt was on our lips. The men laughed, and sang out to one another from boat to boat, their deep voices pitched high and carrying thinly across the water. In the long-boat the sail was continually being lowered to take in another reef or to wait for the other boats to catch up, for it was considered discourteous to make the destination ahead of Chief's boat, Canton (pronounced CANTon). Robert called softly for a tightening of a slackening of the jib; the heavy boom of the mainsail thumped rhythmically on the gunwale, its tip often breaking water as the boat heeled over.

From the sea I had my first unimpeded view of the peak of Tristan, which had been shawled in mist on the day of our arrival at the island. I was surprised to see that the great precipice rising up to what the islanders called the 'base' and comprising our whole prospect of the mountain from the settlement was in fact only a third of the total height and that the low plateau on which the village stood was a mere ledge appearing from a distance to be raised barely above the line of the surf. For over two hours we watched that imperious peak furling its grey dignity about its shoulders, receding into its own mist, yet the smaller, grimmer mass of Inaccessible seemed no nearer. The third island of the group, Nightingale, was now in sight twenty miles away to the south. It looked a peaceful, friendly little island, with a more irregular profile than its bigger neighbours.

It was the middle of the afternoon before Inaccessible began to present itself in clearer detail. Soon we could see the white streak of the waterfall, marking the locality of Salt Beach, where
we should land. As we came in closer I noticed trees high up on the ‘base,’ larger and more luxuriant than any on the home island. The fall cascaded into a slight bay, hardly a bay at all, a mere indentation of the cliff-face, with a curving ribbon of beach. Here we lowered sail and waited our turn to land. The Canton went in first. In the choppy water of the bay the other boats bobbed and pranced like restive horses, their motion sickening.

Around and above us rose the cliffs, echoing to the wild cries of disturbed sea-birds. The walls seemed to cast a dark, damp, forbidding shadow over the expedition. The island had an air of belonging to a remote world, alien to human contact. It seemed to brood in the solitude of mid ocean, instinct with a life of its own. Its only inhabitants were the birds that wheeled, screaming, about its craggy sides and the noisy penguins that nested in the long tussock-grass above the beach. There was a wildness and a strangeness different from that of Tristan—the aloofness of a place unfrequented by men.

The wailing of the sea-birds was echoed several octaves lower by the moaning of the waterfall, which poured over the rim of the mountain through a V-shaped cleft revealing a vivid segment of green vegetation. The face of the cliff was matted with long, coarse tussock-grass, which hung shaggily in a great swaying curtain down the precipice. That which grew near and behind the cascade was wet and luxuriant, a glistening stairway for the leaping water.

One after another the boats were run ashore, and the first job to be done when they were all unloaded was to haul them up to the ridge of sloping shingle, where it gave place to the miniature jungle of tussock that extended from the cliffs to the beach. Here each boat was overturned and canted up at one side, the raised gunwale being propped up by a wall hurriedly constructed of the biggest stones that could be found. A doorway was left in the front. All the other spaces were blocked in with pebbles. In this way the boat became a tiny, windowless cottage, with a square hole of a doorway and a high, arched roof of wood and
canvas sloping down to the ground at the back. We collected armfuls of tussock and spread them over the pebbles inside, to soften the floor that was to be our bed.

There was drift-wood along the beach; soon fires were smoking and pots of water and cans of potatoes were on the boil. After the meal I walked on the shore as far as possible—a distance of less than a mile. Beyond that the cliffs dropped sheer into the sea again. The beach itself varied in width from about five to thirty yards and was strewn with rocks and gigantic boulders that had rolled down from the mountain. Behind it ran a low escarpment, rising at some points to a height of twenty feet, at others dropping almost to the level of the beach. On top of this bank waved the tussock. The whole of this side of the island was covered with this growth. High on the walls it looked like green matting; lower down it hung like tangled, shaggy hair; from the foot-slopes it rolled in gleaming, swaying waves to end in a ragged, upstanding fringe above the low forehead of the beach. Only in a few places was it interrupted by bare patches and pinnacles of rock.

Walking below the verge of this forest of grass, I was almost deafened by the honking of thousands of penguins that crowded within its depths, out of sight. At a point where the tussock came down to the level of the beach, as if spilt over, I entered and was overtopped by eight-foot grasses. The sea was lost to sight. Stooping under arches of green blades, I was met at every turn by indignant penguins that made no effort to move out of my way. They shuffled about like little men, all very busy, very noisy and very short-tempered, occasionally bumping into one another as they marched along the narrow tracks that criss-crossed among the clumps of grass roots, sometimes even stretching out their necks to peck vindictively at the legs of the intruder; I was glad to be wearing sea-boots. I felt like Gulliver in a Lilliputian jungle.

The islanders were already taking advantage of the fine evening to collect guano from the rich deposits which lined the floors of these miniature galleries and green aisles. I came upon them
at intervals busy with their spades filling the bags they had brought with them.

I wandered among the tussock until I began to feel lost in a strange underworld. At length I emerged, and in the lingering, mellow twilight walked back along the beach. Tiny 'starchies,' or land-thrushes, kept running out of the tussock as if chased out by the inhospitable penguins. The boom of the surf accompanied me back to the camp, where the islanders were preparing to retire under the upturned boats. Each boat formed a temporary house for the members of its crew; I found my way to the 'house' bearing the name asoy yitum, where Bunty had already laid out my blanket on the pebbles. It was a hard bed, but dry and warm. With the prospect of a full day's work on the morrow, the men wasted no time in talk before sleep. Pipes were tapped out and placed with little tins of precious tobacco on the thwarts of the inverted boat, which formed convenient shelves over our heads. An empty guano bag was stretched across the doorway as a curtain; in the darkness we fell asleep.

I must have slept soundly, for the next thing of which I was conscious was Bunty crawling into the 'hut' with a cup of hot 'drink' in the morning. Outside rain was pouring down. I was comfortable enough under a blanket, though the strewn grasses did little to soften the impact of the pebbles, which seemed to have grown sharper during the night. Hilden Lavarello and David Hagan were still lying in their blankets at the far end of the 'hut.' Lawrence, lacing up his moccasins, kept up a lively banter, mainly haranguing the weather. The sack in the doorway had been hitched back at one corner. I supped Bunty's black brew, listening to the tattoo of the rain on the taut canvas of the boat and the steadier, heavier dripping outside from the gunwale—the eaves of our house.

We were compelled by the rain to spend the morning stretched out on our blankets, leaning against the boat's side, smoking, talking, chaffing, passing jocular remarks and fills of tobacco from one to another. David Hagan puffed placidly at his pipe in his
corner under the bows: it seemed to be his character to look on benignly from a corner, smoking the pipe of peace. I lay back and contemplated the rafter-like pattern of the arched roof made by the ribs of the boat. Eventually Robert, the helmsman, thrust his head into the hut to announce that the rain had stopped and a fire had been lit. We crawled out into a wan, watery daylight. After a meal the work of collecting guano went forward. The filled bags made a slowly mounting pile on the beach.

Just behind our camp, near the waterfall, were the remains of a stone-built cottage, the last witness of an attempt which fourteen of the men from Tristan had made, a few years earlier, to start a companion settlement on Inaccessible. The settlers had brought sheep and pigs across from the main island and had built the cottage and a storehouse. The sheep had found their way up on to the plateau, where they thrived; the pigs had become dangerous beasts lurking in the tussock forest. Of the little storehouse only one gable-end remained, looking like the forsaken altar of some savage deity. The cottage seemed to have sunk into the undergrowth. Its roof sagged and grasses sprouted through the thatch. The door-posts still stood, like the projecting ribs of a wasting carcass. Nature had defeated the scheme with an ease which made it all the more evident how precarious was the hold these exiles had, even after a century of settlement, on their own island.

In the grass about the abandoned hut was to be found the little 'island cock,' formally named *Atlantisea Rogersi* after the Rev. R. M. C. Rogers, who had been the third missionary on Tristan and the first to visit Inaccessible. The bird is a species of flightless rail which has long been extinct in the rest of the world. Owing to its inability to fly, it cannot migrate even to Tristan or Nightingale Island. It is a black bird with a red bill, similar to a common English moorhen, but smaller. It runs over the pebbles on frail black legs but is difficult to catch; and it is so delicate that it does not survive in captivity long enough to be carried alive to Tristan. The other bird-life on Inaccessible includes a kind of
finch and a 'noddy' or wood-pigeon, which in spite of its name is a sea-bird. Most of the species familiar on the main island were to be seen in greater numbers on Inaccessible: long-winged fulmars, known by the islanders as 'black eaglets'; a kind of tern which they called a 'king bird'; blue petrels or 'night birds'; another bird of the petrel family called a 'pediunker'; the 'pio' or sooty albatross; and occasionally the great white 'wandering' albatross, known by the seaman’s traditional name for it, the 'goney.' On rare occasions I had seen the bird wheeling in its graceful flight over Tristan, but none ever nested there and only a few on Inaccessible. When the islanders caught one, they used the hollow bones from its wide, powerful wings as pipe-stems.

Lastly, of course, there was that noisy and prolific amphibian, the penguin—not the smooth-headed type, but the rock-hopper, with a crest of black and yellow 'tossels' forming an angry, war-like topknot on his head.

In the evening all these birds combined to form a mournful chorus bewailing our presence on the island. When the guano-collecting was finished, all the men assembled round a fire that had been lit close under the cliff-face. We sat in a tight circle gazing intently at the flames, our backs turned on the sea, as if to shut out the wild sighing of the surge and the keening of its birds. The cry of the petrel was particularly disturbing, a sharp sobbing wail that sounded intolerably like that of a child in distress.

To repel the sense of desolation with which the island was trying to destroy us, a sing-song was proposed, but the natural diffidence of the islanders interposed an obstacle. Many of them had good bass voices but at first no one was willing to sing a solo. Attempts were made to persuade George Glass, or 'Gillie' as he was called, but he would only reiterate in an embarrassed rumble: 'Oi doan' know no sawngs!' or 'Oi ain't got no wice!' At last, without preliminary, Arthur Repetto burst into the opening verse of a long ballad about the ship Golden Wanitee. He was singing in a high, strained voice, far above his normal deep
speaking tones. With every chorus the rest of the men would join in:

'An' they sink 'im in the lowlands,
Lowlands, lowlands,
An' they sink 'im in the lowlands low.'

This song went on for a long time and was hardly less doleful than the sobbing of the petrels. Afterwards old Henry Green proffered a quavering solo, then Dick Swain sang a rollicking but unintelligible song about a certain 'Whisky Wan.'

In the intervals between the singing, the surf chafed at the shore. The baffling, inhuman enmity of the place seemed to take the heart out of the singers, and as we retired to sleep beneath the upturned boats, the screaming of the sea-birds seemed to have a sharp note of derision. They swooped low over our heads, their wings cleaving the dark air.

The next morning brought the inevitable indecision as to whether the wind and sea were suitable for the return voyage to Tristan. The men gathered in conclave about the Canton, where Chief's deep voice resounded with the accession of authority that came to him when he was away from the preponderating influence of his mother. There was no need for hurry, it was agreed; the wind was in the wrong quarter, it was agreed; nevertheless they would attempt the crossing, it was agreed. The 'huts' were demolished, the boats righted, the bags of guano loaded, and one after another the crews pushed off and pulled away to hoist sail.

It took us seven hours to return the distance that we had travelled in three. The boats drifted too far out in the ocean and could find no breeze. The sails flapped lamely against the masts and the light craft were dandled up and down for hours by the waves, while the sun scorched us unmercifully. When at last we did arrive off Little Beach, we found almost the whole population of Edinburgh Settlement waiting there to welcome us back and to assist in hauling up the loaded boats. As we rose on the surf I recognized the sturdy little figure of Gaeta capering at the edge of the water to catch the rope tossed by David Hagan from
the bows of the *Wild Rose*. On the beach Charlotte Glass waited with her 'pawt o' tea' and two cups, one for her son Wilson, who was with his stepbrothers in the *British Trader*, and one for myself. I had a sense of homecoming, of being welcomed back in the same terms as the islanders. David Hagan, I observed, was being greeted with a touch of soft lips by his daughter Emily. My own attention, however, was proprietorially demanded by old Charlotte.
A change had come over our exile. I felt it in myself and saw it in others. Partly, of course, it was due to the change of weather.

As I leaned over the half-door of the hut on Herald Point an early morning fragrance hung in the air—was it the memory of yesterday's heat or the promise of to-day's? Strung out along the sky, cotton-wove clouds, poised still, patterned the sea with their white reflections. In the east, where the sun was streaming through, they gathered in a bank of dazzling whiteness, below which the sea shone serene and blueless.

I looked at Inaccessible—an acquaintance now, however unfriendly. Out of the western haze it emerged as a blur of pale cliffs topped with a fringe of greenish-grey. Rising slowly from its southern tip to a lofty forepeak, it came into view like a low-sterned cruiser, with a drift of cloud trailing like smoke from its crest.

The world around the hut was wide awake. In the foreground, where the turf at the cliff-edge made a green rim against the sea, sheep—'blocked home' since the shearing—were already grazing, taking little foreward runs between nibbling,
keeping their muzzles in readiness a few inches above the grass as they moved. They followed one another like automatons; their tails flicked as if by mechanism, and the yellow-flecked eyes that they raised for a moment to look at the man in the doorway had a mild, unseeing blankness.

It was especially at this early hour that I was aware of the change. Leaving the hut, I glanced up, as always, at the mountain—those high slopes of rock, scantily clothed with drab-green moss—or was it really grass? There was a curious power of vitality in the sombre, grey walls of the extinct volcano. They no longer seemed oppressive, as they had when we arrived. There was a calmness of spirit to be derived from their strength, from the stillness up there, the dark quietude at the tops of the gulches, the stern, unavoidable gaze of that graven face.

The change was really a clearer perception. It had come slowly—yet, in the end, suddenly. At a moment when the sun was gleaming on the backs of the grasses and trying to hide in a friendly haze the bald head of the mountain—making it seem farther away, so that it could be seen more objectively—the realization had come: here was peace and dignity and a still, quiet beauty.

In myself the new outlook had something, too, to do with the growing familiarity of a white dress. When, during February, David Hagan went away again with the other men to collect guano on Nightingale Island, I did not go; and in his absence I came to know fairly well the rest of his household.

Once, in the time of Andrew Hagan, the American whaling captain who had been the first of that name to settle on Tristan, the family had been the wealthiest on the island—wealth being measured, of course, in sheep and cattle. Now it was one of the poorest. David did not even own a yoke of oxen: he had to borrow from a neighbour. But the family still lived in the old house, which was one of the biggest and most solidly built in the village. The interior was divided into two parts, one occupied by David, his wife and four children, the other by his widowed mother, old Susan Hagan.
OLD SAM SWAIN

MRS REPETTO—THE HEADWOMAN
A 'CARDING' PARTY

1 & 2. The wool, after being 'picked' to remove knots and lumps, is slightly oiled and then worked between the wooden 'cards' into rolls ready for spinning. (Emma Green)

(Alice Glass—Sidney's wife—and Margaret Repetto)
A 'CARDING' PARTY (3)

A BULLOCK 'TRAIN' BRINGS WOOD FROM THE MOUNTAIN
ISLAND BOATS AT THE START OF AN EXPEDITION

The men wave their caps and reply to three cheers from the women on the beach before hoisting sail.

HOISTING SAIL
The first time I saw her at the house I recognized the widow as the old woman I had seen at the far end of Big Beach collecting wood with the two urchins. ‘Grannie Toodie,’ I now understood, had been their rendering of Grannie Susie. The urchins themselves greeted me anew with a mixture of shyness and familiarity. The elder of the pair, Donald, at seven years old still spoke imperfectly and was obviously less intelligent than his brother. The only thing positive about him was his love of the seashore. He was as amphibious as a young seal. It was his mother’s incessant complaint about him that ‘all ’e ever wanna do is pynte for ‘at owd beach.’ Several times a day he would return home sodden with brine. In all other matters he was ruled—and often fooled—by his brother Piers, a bright-eyed, saucy-faced imp of four, who in features greatly resembled his sister Emily. The boys referred to each other as ‘buddy’ which meant brother, and to Emily as ‘tiddy’ meaning sister. There was another sister, Angela, a silent, shrinking, watchful child, three or four years younger than Emily, with great black eyes like polished bosses. She resembled her mother.

Emily, the eldest of the family, for all her shyness of the moment, had an abundant vitality and a sparkle to her eyes that suggested a love of mischief equal to her little brother’s. She was still spinning on the first few evenings when I saw her, but the wheel had been carried up into the main room of the house. This may have been because she feared the embarrassment of being surprised again alone in the yard; but it may equally have been because she saw no reason why I should sit in the house talking with her mother while she was left outside with no better company than her spinning-wheel.

For days the acquaintance made little progress. She displayed before me all the arts and graces of a skilful spinner, and sometimes when I turned quickly from speaking to her mother I found the girl’s dark gaze fixed on me. She would blush and even smile. But she would not talk. It is true that conversation was virtually impossible as long as the spinning continued. The whirling of the big wheel set up such a rumbling vibration in the
wooden-floored room that I could do little more than nod and smile my appreciation of hospitable words or gestures. Such complete remarks as achieved utterance at all were wedged uneasily into the brief silences when Emily was splicing a fresh roll of wool to her yarn.

A climax came when I arrived one evening to find the spinning-wheel silent and leaning against the wall with something of the dejected air of a stringless cello. I could not see what was wrong with it, but I felt that in some way its power of endurance had been overtaxed. Nothing was said about it. Indeed after the preliminary greetings almost nothing was said at all. The room seemed unnaturally quiet, and the quietness had a kind of tension about it.

For nearly an hour conversation fought a losing battle against the clacking of three pairs of knitting-needles. For Grannie Susan, who for some time had taken a surreptitious interest in my comings and goings, had hobbled through from her part of the cottage into the main room on the 'wes' soyde,' where she now sat hunched over her knitting while her eyes flitted from face to face and her mouth occasionally twitched as if at some secret amusement.

The younger children were out of sight. Emily and her mother knitted intently. The room had an uncomfortable air of waiting and the needles seemed to fly faster and faster. I longed for the homely rumble of the spinning-wheel. At last the old woman's voice croaked up: 'I knew 'at Hemly would be too skeered to akse 'im.'

Knitting-needles fell defeated into laps and the girl's face flooded with shame.

'What is it you were going to ask me, Emily?'

She sat very still for a moment, then took a deep breath—deep enough to bring out in one long, prepared recitation: 'Would you-all be so kind as to give me some cord to make a new rim for my spinning-wheel?'

The last of that long breath expired in a little sigh of relief as if her part in an arduous affair had been completed.
‘How much will you need?’ I asked.

With quiet casualness and but the smallest intake of breath she replied: ‘About two fathoms.’

From that moment barriers melted like ice-floes, the future rippled ahead in a straight, blue channel and the knitting-needles joggled with merriment.

‘Now you’ll have to knit ’im a pair of Tristan sawks,’ the old woman prodded. But Emily only smiled and lowered her head demurely over the pair she was already knitting.

The little ‘buddies,’ Donald and Piers, came running home from somewhere, full of prattle and curiosity. Angela peered round a corner—she seemed to go through life doing it—to see if the coast was clear. I could have told her that it was as clear as her sister’s complexion. But it would not have been in Angela’s nature to believe it if the coast itself had spoken and told her.
CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Workaday Week

A narrow shelf of land just above the reach of the surf; an outlook restricted to the varied monotony of the sea; a background composed of a miserable mountain that seems to have a chronic cold in the head; such is the world of the Tristan islander, to whom any intrusion from beyond the horizon is like a visit from another planet.

Ask an islander what he does all day and he replies 'spadin' — that is, digging his potato patch.

'And what do you do when you're not spading?'

'Oh, puttin' in'—potatoes, of course.

'But you don't do that all the year round?'

'No, some time we go fishin'.'

And that is as far as you get. Apart from that and an occasional trip to one of the neighbouring uninhabited islands to collect guano or penguins' eggs, or an excursion up the mountain or round to another beach for drift-wood, there is 'nawthin'.' Life is stripped to its bare bones, like the bleached ribs of dead donkeys that we so often came across in the gulches.
The younger generation of islanders were, as Bob Glass alleged, much less enterprising than their ancestors. Sam Swain, the oldest inhabitant, could recall the days when the island population, numbering then less than a hundred, did a brisk barter in poultry, potatoes, and other provisions with passing ships. An export trade in cattle had been carried on with St Helena and even with the Cape. But now Tristan had become a land of want.

Even if the whalers had not ceased to frequent the waters around them, the islanders would not have had the provisions with which to barter from the skippers the articles they required. Where hardship had stimulated the original settlers, want and neglect had stultified their descendants. Only a few cattle were kept now as milking cows and, as old Bob had complained, the housewives had given up making butter and cheese. Poultry were scarce and the villagers were content with penguins' eggs or the even less savoury petrels' eggs, fried in the birds' own oil, to vary their monotonous diet of potatoes and fish. Only one or two of the 'old hands,' such as Sam Swain and Henry Green, still made the effort to raise a handful of green vegetables in their cottage gardens. The only fruit was the apples which had been planted long ago at Sandy Point on the eastern side of the island. From these the islanders made a sour cider which they called 'Old Tom.' This was less potent than the black 'tea' they brewed; and even the tea plant no longer flourished.

Fortunately fish were still plentiful, and now that mild weather had set in and the seas were calm the men and boys spent many hours in their dinghies, tied up to a kelp-reef about half a mile off shore. Often they would spend whole days in this manner, lazily lopped on the tide, sometimes rowing out a couple of miles in search of the larger blue-fish.

For the purposes of fishing, the islanders had developed some skill in boat-building, making good use of their resources of drift-wood and canvas acquired at rare intervals from ships. With the exception of the ribs, which were made of apple-tree wood from the plantation at Sandy Point, the entire frames of the boats were made of drift-wood. Over the ribs were laid
horizontal pieces called 'slabbies' and on these was nailed the canvas, oiled and painted. The building of a boat took several weeks, as the frame had to be left out in the open to weather and to set into the requisite shape, to which it had been bent by the use of cords. In its early stages, it looked like the skeleton of some ancient Viking galley washed up on the strand.

The boats were of two sizes. The larger ones, of which the biggest was about twenty-six feet, could be rigged for sailing, and were used for the longer trips to the other islands of the group or to the farther points of Tristan itself. The smaller ones, the dinghies, were used for fishing and for collecting drift-wood from the beaches around Big Point. The large boats had names, most of them commemorating ships which had visited the island. Chief's boat—that is, the one manned by Willy Repetto, his brother Johnny, and several other 'hands'—was the Canton; Joe Repetto had his share with the Glass brothers in the British Trader; old Gaeta's son, Robert Lavarello, was helmsman of the Wild Rose; some of the Swains manned the Lorna, affectionately termed the Lonnie, others the Violet; Johnny Green was coxswain of the Morning Star, Arthur Repetto of Pincher. One boat was named Doctor Christophersen, after the leader of the Norwegian scientific expedition that had visited Tristan, but those who found the doctor's name unmanageable were content with the sobriquet 'Ticket.' Only one dinghy bore a name—that of Shackleton's famous Quest, which had called at the island on its last voyage.

The names of the boats were painted either on the bows or on the stern-boards in large but uncertainly formed letters, the name Violet being misspelt 'Voilet'—and pronounced 'Woilet.' All the traditional names of boat parts were in use, having been handed down from one generation to another: gunwale, strakes, thwarts, stern-sheets, knees, rowlocks. The stern was always the 'starn.'

When not in use, particularly during rough weather, the boats were hauled up the steep rock slope from Little Beach by means of an old capstan erected on the cliff-top. There they were stored in a sheltered hollow, which acted as a haven and in the
banks of which were cut neat, rectangular recesses, each meant to hold one boat. The boats were lashed in position by ropes passed over their tops and secured beneath large boulders on the ground. This somehow gave the impression of rows of stalled oxen, comfortably sheltered from wind and weather. The impression was strengthened by the inexplicable habit the islands had of building a little barricade, two stones high, across the mouth of each recess, as if to prevent the boats from breaking out of their stalls. Altogether the boat-haven was a snug place, shielded by its own banks from the wind above, cut off from any view of the settlement and with the surf pounding the beach just below.

At the inland end of the hollow huddled the decrepit structure of an old boat-house, with cruel wind-rents in its thatch. Inside this, on a floor littered with odds and ends of tackle, ropes, blocks, derelict sea-chests, boxes of fish-hooks, tufts of sheep-wool, rotting calf-skin bags, all resembling so much animal refuse, was kept—like an old bull that must be penned aloof from the stalled cattle—a large wooden lifeboat that had been presented by the captain of a visiting ship. It was rarely used by the settlers, being found too ‘bull-headed’ and unmanageable. The twisting ‘island-tree’ rafters, the sagging thatch, and barefaced walls contributed a byre-like effect to the inside of the building. Unconsciously one looked for a manger at the boat’s head.

In the life of Tristan boats were of great importance. While still young, the boys were allowed, encouraged, to go out alone in the dinghies, fishing off the shore; and as soon as a youth acquired strength and skill enough he took his place in a boat’s crew. Generally he bought, for potatoes, a share in the boat, so that he could take part in the trips for eggs and guano. He had then fulfilled his ambition to begin ‘work.’ For the same reason every young man of ambition had a dog and a donkey and hoped to have a yoke of oxen.

The dogs were never treated as pets, though they had names—names which like those of their masters were common to many owners. ‘Knock’ and ‘Watch’ were probably the commonest.
There was only one ‘Lancher’: that belonged to Chief. Ken Rogers had a ‘Bruno,’ Wilson Glass had ‘Dinty,’ George Glass had ‘Darby,’ and several households included a hybrid species of sheep-dog known, quite unironically, as ‘Query.’ The donkeys rarely had names beyond being classified as Somebody-or-other’s Jack or Jenny, and they were all so much the same mixture of shaggy brown, black, and grey that we wondered how their owners distinguished them. Cats were not plentiful—certainly not as plentiful as rats. The few we saw seemed all to be elderly tabbies known as Tibby. Though they lived more familiarly in the houses, they were treated with no more obvious kindness; on the other hand, there was no conscious cruelty and we often heard a mother’s voice shrilling to her children the highly moral precept: ‘Don’t cruelize the cat.’

Most of the children’s games were imitations of the work of their elders. The little girls played at housekeeping, though without dolls: at an early age they learned to knit, to card, and spin wool. The only toys I ever saw the boys playing with were miniature hand-made models of the local ox-carts. The model boats made by many of the young men were not intended as toys but as souvenirs for trade with visiting ships. Yet the boys had a happy time: they had cliffs to climb, surf to splash in, dinghies to row, and donkeys on which to gallop out to our wireless hut on Herald Point or down to the beach when the men were bringing boat-loads of drift-wood from other sides of the island.

Wood was a precious commodity. It was needed for building boats, cottages, bullock-carts, and gates and as fuel under the cooking-pots. Firewood was often brought from the mountain, where a species of low, spreading tree known only as ‘island tree’ provided gnarled and twisted branches that burned well even when green. Such branches were used also as the knees of boats. Frequently a lone islander with a huge bundle of such sticks tied to his shoulders could be seen descending with rapid goat-leaps the steep mountainside.

At other times a dinghy would be pulled round the promontory which in daily conversation loomed appropriately as the Big
Point to a gap called Rookery Gulch, though the penguin rookery which had occasioned the name had long disappeared.

Here drift-wood was washed ashore. It was a common occurrence to hear that So-and-so was ‘down fa’ wood,’ which meant that he had rowed round the Point: to go ‘up fa’ wood’ meant, of course, to climb the mountain. When the boat returned in the afternoon, the boys would call out to one another: ‘The dinghy is hup!’ Donkeys, tethered in readiness near the cottages, would be set off at a gallop for the beach, where their backs would be piled high with wood, precariously lashed with rope. In the event of an outsize boat-load, such as a large trunk from a distant forest, a yoke of oxen would be put into service to haul the dinghy up the beach, and the prize would be brought home by cart.

These carts were valued possessions, owned only by a few. Even if a man had the bullocks, he might have to wait years for suitable drift-wood to make wheels, axle, shaft, and even a small body. The carts were often referred to as ‘trains.’ Once Andrew Swain, or ‘Doe’ as he was called, the fiddler who played for the dancing, was shown a picture of a railway train. He looked bewildered at first, then laughed knowingly. ‘At ain’t a train,’ he declared. ‘It ain’t got no bullocks.’

The men—and the older boys—appeared always to have work to do. In spite of the lack of enterprise in crop-growing, there were many local occupations. During the day the men were rarely seen near the cottages: they were ‘spadin’’ or ‘puttin’ in’ or ‘cleanin’ grass’ from their patches, or they were fishing or boat-repairing—or they were ‘up’ or ‘down’ for wood. They might even be manufacturing line with the spinning-jenny that had been salvaged from the ill-fated Italia and the use of which they had been taught by the late Andrea Repetto. Even on wet days, when they could do little out of doors, the men had a task awaiting them: with a jack-knife, a leather palm and needle, a roll of twine and some squares of hide, the head of the house would sit making moccasins for his family—and the earnest suitor would do the same for his girl-friend.
Such was the working week for the islander, while we tuned transmitters and sent out strange messages to a world that he hardly believed in, listened with bewildering intentness to faint sounds in reply and occasionally scrubbed floors and recharged batteries. His life appeared at least as purposeful to us as ours did to him. It was a life with hardships and enjoyments and a firm, if somewhat barren, ground for contentment. From his acceptance of it emerged a calm fatalism that found expression in a saying that we heard often on the lips of these villagers:

Go day, come day,
God bless Sunday.

In that crude couplet was the bare but adequate philosophy of their lives.
CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Weekly Custom

On Sunday the islanders did no work. Yet it was in some ways the busiest day of all: the day of social intercourse. Its difference from the rest of the week was marked by abstention from all manual occupation, by the wearing of a different suit or dress (a 'best' one—not always a newer one) and by the substitution for the usual daily routine of a weekly one equally unvaried in pattern: in the 'mawnin'—'charch' and 'wisitin'; in the 'hawf'noo'n'—'wisitin' and 'co't'n'; in the 'hevenin'—'charch,' 'wisitin', and 'co't'n.' The last-named—courting—was the solemn activity of the day: church-going was the entertainment.

The little tin-roofed church had been filled every Sunday, since the arrival of the chaplain, with a prim and sabbath-faced congregation of islanders. It was possibly not the parson's fault that the people gave the impression of slinking self-consciously, even shamefacedly, into their seats when the bell rang—like school-children facing the day's lessons. Inside, the men and women separated: the men in their most uncomfortable clothes, clutching their caps, sat on one side of the aisle; the women, with their hands conscientiously crossed in their laps but itching for the forbidden knitting-needles, sat on the other. From a pulpit that
looked like a teacher's desk the minister delivered his lesson. During the singing most of the mouths moved obediently enough but little volume of sound issued. One or two people, such as Mrs Repetto and her daughter, Mary Swain, stood in the front row and sang in high-pitched, warbling voices that could be heard above all the others: they were the 'swots' of the class.

Enjoyment did not seem to be the keynote; yet none of the women at least would voluntarily have missed a service. Every eye was noting meticulously the dress, expression, position, and demeanour of every other member of the congregation. This was the opportunity of storing the mind with those details that would enliven gossip for a week to follow. This was the chance of studying at close quarters, even if only out of the corner of an eye, the exposed frailties of one's neighbours. This was the occasion when the young men had time and freedom to stare at the young women—and when the young women, from across the aisle, were able surreptitiously to observe the men while seeming to observe nothing.

The greatest delight of church-going came after the service, when the released congregation assembled outside. Then the tongues began to wag, the women preened themselves in their best dresses, the young men strutted gawkily in their Sunday suits. This was the weekly festival of flaunting one's children and flouting one's neighbour. The scene was a patch of foot-worn grass where the roads and paths converged and the cottages edged away to leave an open space in front of the church. Here the girls clustered in groups, laughing and chattering, displaying their backs; while the young men stood in a row against the wall of the churchyard—almost sitting on it, but not quite, because of their best trousers—and watched the backs of the girls. As the congregation slowly dispersed, groups of relatives, who had seen one another every day of the previous week, invited one another home for tea and gossip. 'Wisitin' was actively practised for the rest of the morning, as if people who worked side by side all the week had their only real opportunity of meeting on Sundays.

Our own religious service, conducted by the same padre, was
held at the station, which by now had—as all good naval establishments have—its quarter-deck, with a mast and yard-arm for flying the ensign, and its Sunday Divisions. Rig-of-the-day was uniform—‘Number Ones’—in place of the multiform array of jerseys, sheepskin coats, and knitted caps that we wore on week-days. The service ended just in time for us to hurry to the store-room and draw our daily tot of rum—the only alcoholic drink then allowed on the island. That ritual over, we followed the local custom of Sunday morning visiting among the families we knew.

These visits, like all ‘public’ occasions in the village, were staid and formal affairs. On arriving at a cottage we found a roomful of women in rustling skirts and men in ill-fitting Sunday best sitting on boxes, side by side, around the walls, as if waiting for the appearance of some public performer. The hostess was always seated at the hearthside superintending the boiling of water for the tea of hospitality. The appearance of any of our expedition was welcomed; the woman of the house seized the opportunity of displaying her familiarity with us, of putting us on show—as if we were the ‘entertainers’ whose arrival seemed to be expected. Often, as we moved from one cottage to another in leisurely progress, we found that the same group of ‘spectators’ had hurried ahead of us to witness our next ‘appearance.’ We didn’t know whether to feel like celebrities or freaks.

The same repeated appearances were noticeable of the cups in which tea was offered to us. Few of the housewives possessed sufficient crockery to provide for more than two or three visitors; and the children were kept busy on Sunday mornings running from cottage to cottage borrowing crocks—so that a guest often found himself drinking from the same chipped mug as in the previous house he had visited.

At these social assemblies I was frequently aware of a curious feature of the islanders’ conversation: when they addressed us, or obviously intended us to be included in the talk, their speech—once we had learnt the accent—was perfectly intelligible; but when they exchanged remarks among themselves, not intended
for our attention, they relapsed into a dialect that was incomprehensible. This was particularly noticeable when a child or young girl from a neighbouring cottage came with a message or request: over the half-door she would engage in dialogue with the mistress of the house, who replied from the hearth in a shrill, raised voice, sometimes in scolding tones and always in what seemed a foreign language. Perhaps we were not intended to hear the substance of these exchanges.

Another strange feature of these visits was the tacit understanding—almost a kind of telepathy—by which, even at a moment when the conversation seemed to be at its liveliest, all the visitors would suddenly, without any previous indication by word or gesture, rise and leave. There was no exchange of good-byes. In an instant, by some common impulse, everyone stood up and quietly walked out. The hostess, completely unconcerned, bent over her pots or poked the fire. That was how visits by the islanders always ended.

On Sunday afternoons the centre of activity moved farther afield. If the weather permitted—and it needed a hurricane or a downpour to keep the island men indoors—the settlement was empty while its inhabitants walked ‘hout.’ The cliff-top above the beaches—the ‘bank,’ as it was called—became the local boulevard, where village society paraded for its own inspection. The husbands walked beside their wives as far as Herald Point, where the abyss of Hottentot Gulch compelled them to reverse their solemn promenade. The little girls looked picturesque in their sun-bonnets, or ‘kappies,’ their sashes, billowing dresses, and white stockings; the little boys looked pain-wracked as they walked with their hands in empty ‘best’ pockets, forbidden even to throw pebbles into the surf. The young men acknowledged to be ‘taken’ walked stiffly beside their brides-to-be. Those whose fate was still to be sealed dawdled in affected nonchalance near a cluster of bright dresses. In a row along the bank, like sea-gulls along a breakwater, sat the unengaged girls, passing chatter to and fro like a bag of sweets, their impudent backs turned on their would-be suitors. On an island where the
number of eligible young men exceeded the number of marriageable young women, the latter could afford a feeling of security. Their laughter had a note of care-free assurance missing from the occasional guffaws of their admirers.

The Tristan girls mature young and courting begins at an early age. Engagements, however, often have to be long, until the future husband has enough wood to build a house and enough sheep and cattle to support a family. There may be great rivalry for the hand of a favourite girl, the most sought-after being generally not the prettiest but the one whose father can offer the biggest dowry.

During the week courting was conducted in the evenings. A young man trying to win a girl would visit her home after his day’s work; he would walk straight into the house, where the whole family was gathered round the open hearth; he would find a seat on a box and join in the conversation. Nobody would take much notice of him, least of all the girl. If she was a coveted prize, there might be several suitors sitting in the room side by side, night after night, on the best of terms with one another. All of them would bring presents—and as a rule all the presents would be accepted, so that competition was maintained. When a girl allowed a lover to make a pair of moccasins for her, she was favouring him. When she knitted him, in return, a pair of socks he could estimate his chances by the number of rings of ‘marking’ wool round the tops: if there were four such ‘marks’ of affection, he knew he was the favourite. Acceptance was signified when she invited him to bring her his clothes to wash. After that they would appear openly as an engaged couple, walking together on Sunday afternoons. There was even a special part of the common near the bank-top which was, by general understanding, reserved for the engaged: others did not walk there on that day.

Naturally the presence of naval ratings on the island was of great interest to the girls. At first they were distressingly shy, and oddly enough it was with the young men that we first became friends. If one of us approached the girls, they would rise like birds from their perch, to settle again farther along the bank.
Only after many Sundays did we win their confidence. The younger ones were less diffident than their elder sisters. Tomboyish Marie was more easily addressed than her sister Asturias Ann, one of the two prettiest—and plumpest—girls on the island. Emily, the other favourite, still hid her vivacity in public behind a provocative bashfulness. Ida looked saucy, but said nothing. Isobel, conscious of a figure more slender than was common among the village girls, practised aloofness for a while, studying how to be graceful in retreat. Even after we knew them well, the girls would display out of doors a shyness that they dropped when visited at home.

The young men, so far from resenting any attentions we paid to the girls, apparently welcomed them and eagerly forwarded our advances. They seemed to take our interest as a compliment to themselves and were prepared naively to follow our choices: if we thought a girl attractive, they concluded she must be so. We were careful, however, to keep clear of the ‘engaged’ enclosure.

The greater part of Sunday afternoon was given to this serious business of ‘co’t’n’. It was early evening when the single church-bell again loosed on the wind its tremulous call, like the distant tinkle of a sheep-bell. Obediently the promenaders turned like scattered sheep and converged on the church, the bright dresses of the girls fluttering like banners to the fore.

After evensong a few of the elders read their Bibles for an hour or less, not so much from devotion as to mark their superiority over the greater number who couldn’t read their Bibles. Most of the women went to bed as soon as the evening meal was cleared away, being at a loss what else to do when knitting was forbidden. The men smoked for a while, then followed, seeking the simplest excuse for removing clothes in which they could neither work nor lounge at ease.
CLOSELY associated with the church on Tristan was the school. In the past the ministers had always instituted an elementary education for the children. In the long periods when there was no minister, this had been continued desultorily by the more literate of the elders. Education was consequently uneven among the villagers, the children of Agnes Rogers, Bob Glass, and Mrs Repetto having been taught more than the others.

During our stay the school was revived under the direction of the chaplain, and several of our party were enrolled as assistant teachers. Lessons now took place in a vacant room at the station; the old school-house behind the church, built as the people would say ‘in the time of Father Rogers,’ had passed from school-house to council chamber and dance-hall and finally into disuse. The school brought us into close acquaintance with the ‘lads of the willage,’ especially the ten-to-fourteen-year-old ones, who formed a homogeneous band which seemed rarely to split into factions. The leading spirit was Edwin Glass, aged about fourteen, known by nickname sometimes as ‘Cabby,’ sometimes
as 'Spike.' He was a merry-grinning, wiry, black-eyed boy, just beginning to shoot in height, so that his white trousers, once ankle-length, were now little more than knee-length and—being worn, in imitation of ours, outside his socks—gave him a Huckleberry Finn appearance. Some visitor or missionary had given him a diminutive, red and black quartered, school cap, which seemed never to leave the back of his head.

His younger brother Joseph, about twelve years old, was as tough and keen as a whip. There was a younger brother still, Conrad, whom Joseph introduced to me:

'This 'yah's my buddy Conrad. Together, we is name' awfter Joseph Conrad.'

I stared.

'At was a ship which call 'yah,' Joseph explained.

Others of this regular band were Basil Lavarello, insultingly called 'Bawboon' by the rest; Gilbert Lavarello, of blond, Scandinavian colouring; Dennis Green, of freckled face, reddish hair, and pale skin; Hubert Green, a tall, lugubrious boy known either as 'Nero' or as 'Teachus,' and 'Barnett' Repetto, whose full Christian names were Bernard Dominic Andrea. Followers, of a slightly younger generation but equally ready to join in the wildest escapades, were Emily's two brothers, Donald and Piers Hagan; Benjy Green, aged six; and a whole tribe of bare-legged urchins with English, Italian, or Norwegian names—the last, such as Lars and Sognaes, commemorating the expedition of Norwegian scientists to Tristan in 1937. The younger boys were small, thin, and frail-looking, but the older ones were already developing the tall, muscular bodies common among the men.

Associated with this juvenile brigade in mental rather than chronological age was Tom Swain, familiar to station and settlement as 'Sack.' At first meeting 'Sack' had appeared to us a particularly friendly and talkative youth, always ready to laugh at a joke that he felt he ought to understand, full of half-comical innuendoes, quick to copy our expressions and to pretend a knowledge of our affairs. It was some time before we realized that, in spite of his youthful appearance and the villagers' treatment of
him as a ‘lad,’ he was actually a man of forty. He was not exactly stupid: he was adept enough at boat-pulling, fishing, and all the other island occupations; but he had the mind of a boy, and even his body was slight and under-developed by Tristan standards.

The older youths, from fourteen upwards, considered themselves too nearly men to join in the excited, boastful argumentative, scoffing conversations and the racing, pebble-throwing, rock-climbing, surf-wading activities of the mere boys. But they were eager to take advantage of the school and turned up punctually with their newly issued pencils and writing-books. Even Ken Rogers and his brothers, some of them married, Wilson Glass, and other relatively educated young men came voluntarily to add to their knowledge. Agnes in particular encouraged her children to learn and Kenneth had a thirst for education. A few of the girls, notably Ken’s sisters, Asturias and Marie, shared this desire, but most of the girls were content with illiteracy. Although Chief announced, at the doctor’s bidding, that school was compulsory for girls as well as boys under the age of fourteen, they did not attend regularly. Of those who came the motives were questionable: the main desire was to see and be seen by the teachers and to be the centre of a new kind of social gathering from which parents and elderly female relatives were excluded.

Most of the children learned fairly quickly once they overcame the initial shyness imposed by the strange classroom. They studied elementary arithmetic and how to read and write. The biggest obstacle was that the English they were being taught to read and write was so different from the language they spoke. It was easy enough to show how to write the letter ‘v’; the problem was to teach its purpose, since it was never used in local speech. When it came at the beginning of a word the islanders always pronounced it as a ‘w,’ as in ‘winegar,’ ‘willage,’ and ‘Victoria.’ When it occurred in the middle of a word, they turned it into a ‘b,’ as in ‘hobber’ for ‘over.’ Illogically they pretended that they could not render the ‘w’ sound, otherwise so popular, in the middle of ‘flower’ or ‘flour,’ which consequently
became 'flobba.' Similar problems met us with the vowel sound 'er' and the consonant 'th.' The islanders said 'charch' for 'church,' 'Harbutt' for 'Herbert,' 'parple' for 'purple'; and 'barfday' for 'birthday,' 'Marfa' for 'Martha,' 'Roof' for 'Ruth.' Lessons in spelling helped to correct some of these mistakes such as the use of 'akse' for 'ask' and the promiscuous scattering of 'h's' in words such as 'hanimals' and phrases such as 'heating heggs and happend.'

To correct local grammar would have been as difficult as it would have been pointless. Some of the oddities gave added vigour to the speech. Double and triple negatives were used to pile up emphasis. Stranger to us was a curious kind of double positive:

'Sometimes he allus go fishin'.

'Look at those boys firing (throwing) pebbles. That they allus do sometimes.'

The auxiliary verb 'to do' was overworked, sometimes with comical effect. It solved all problems of past tense. Not only did we hear 'I done went,' 'I done finish my spinnin';' we also heard such dialogues as this:

'Wilson, is you done all you' wark?'

'No, I ain't no done done no wark.'

In their everyday speech the islanders used many nautical words. The men were always 'hands.' String was invariably 'line' and was measured in fathoms. The words 'left' and 'right' were redundant on Tristan. The points of the compass were always in mind and the islander spoke naturally of the north or south wall of a room or even end of a table. To walk through the village towards Big Beach was to 'take the heast'ard'; to walk towards the Patches was to 'take the west'ard.'

At its best the local speech was vivid and vital. It lent itself to imagery. A person chilled by the cold was 'as blue as dimin'; a little boy who had eaten his fill was 'done round out like a punkin' (pumpkin). To someone whose hair had been tousled by the wind a girl might say: 'You' hair is all done root up. You look like you bin haul' t'rough a bush backwa'ds.' Perhaps
The islanders were not without imagination. They had a fondness for 'spinnin' yarns' and describing scenes. The girls were attracted by reading: the boys had a stronger desire to write. Sometimes in the evenings at David Hagan's house I would help Emily with her 'larnin'. She could print a round, clear hand fairly quickly and spell better than many, but had not the patience to develop a cursive handwriting. At first this coaching was an amusing game to her, an excuse for us to sit close together at the table. The bird-oil lamp shone on her face as she bowed it unnecessarily low over the paper; the soot from the lamp blackened her nostrils; her hand continually needed the guidance of mine in forming its 'hays' and 'hesses.' But she tired quickly of a game which required stillness and concentration without feeding her imagination.

Reading, on the other hand, could hold her entranced for an hour on end—which was a long time for Emily. It was a new and satisfying experience. Simple stories of which an English child has exhausted the charm at five years old could enthrall her at eighteen. 'Cinderella' held its glamour after several readings. She was not interested in hearing it read aloud by someone else: that was merely like listening to a yarn spun; any of the islanders could provide that. She had to read the story herself, her full lips forming each word, as her forefinger traced its course, and her voice becoming a rich, wonder-laden whisper as the story emerged—sometimes so slowly—from the page. This was a new magic we had brought into the lives of the young people.
I still paid regular visits, usually with 'Ginger,' to the home of Bob Glass, where we delivered our 'washing' into the coarse but capable hands of his wife Charlotte. We became familiar visitors during the long evenings, when old Bob revealed more and more astonishing facts about his life in many parts of the world.

From his seat of authority on the wooden sofa he would issue orders in a quavering but peremptory tone to his wife:

'Put some more wood on 'at fire, Shawlutt. Set the pawt on, woman, and make the gen’lmen a drink.'

Occasionally he would let his stick lie idle between his knees while he condescended to stretch out his bony wrists to hold a skein of wool for his wife to roll into a ball ready for knitting. It seemed an incongruously domestic and familiar action.

His voice was soft and weak, with a curious lilt, a half-American drawl. Age had mitigated in it some of the harsh fullness of the island speech, subduing it to a melodious drone, in which he meandered interminably. From time to time, while talking, he would bring the gaze of his round, protruding eyes...
into line with one’s face and hold it there, like the revealing but unseeing beam of a ship’s searchlight. The habit was disconcerting, until one realized that he was looking beyond one at the pictures in his memory—or at the mere vacancy of an old man’s dream. When he swung his stare away again, one could almost see the beam of it whisked across the furniture of the room and out through the window.

Of his thoughts, of his character, of what passed—if anything—within his mind, we knew nothing. We could only make guesses on the evidence of the stories he told of his own experience. Even these stories were never told directly: they seemed to come up inevitably, in an ever-recurring rota, like the steps on a mill-wheel. We could not honestly claim to hold conversations with Bob Glass, we merely ‘listened in’ while he ruminated aloud.

By now we knew his history well. At the age of eighteen he had left the island and gone to South Africa. There he had worked at a candle factory in Cape Town. He had left it to join the whaling schooner Swallow, of which his uncle was skipper. From him he had gained his ‘edication.’ He had made two trips, the first as ‘boatsteerer,’ the second as third mate. Later he had joined an American barque, the Wild Rose, on a sealing expedition to Gough Island—the very ship that had called at Tristan and taken away the wrecked shipmates of Gaetano Lavarello, the ship after which the island long-boat was named. He had been to England and several times to America. He had returned to the Cape and had been working there at the time of what he inveterately called the ‘Bluebonnet’ plague—as if it had been a particularly vexing epidemic in feminine fashions. During the Boer War he had served as one of Kitchener’s Scouts. Afterwards he had tried diamond-mining and farming in the Orange Free State but had given them up to return at the age of thirty-four to Tristan, bringing with him his Irish wife Elizabeth and five children. After three years on Tristan and the birth of her eighth child, Elizabeth had died and Bob had married the island-born Charlotte—a daughter of Old Sam Swain.
He had never again left the island; and yet there had been disillusion in his staying there. He had returned full of plans for using the island boats as whale-boats and so enriching the settlement with an industry in blubber oil. The chronicle of that endeavour, as he had already told it to us, was both amusing and pathetic. Perhaps it was this failure that had fixed his thoughts so firmly in the past and away from his native island. His talk was always of the 'houtside warl', especially of the South Africa of his fighting days. He said once:

'Some folks don't loik wars. But when Oi was soighting the Boers, 'at was the happiest toime of my loife!'

When asked if he would like to leave the island again, he replied, gently, honestly, but with a resigned smile:

'Yaas, but it's too late now. I'se got too howld to go.'

At the time when we listened to Bob Glass's ruminations, he had acquired a certain wistful dignity. Yet there remained something elusive about him, even about the features of his face. I believe he had a wispy, white moustache: but, even at the time of knowing him, I was never quite sure. Apart from the staring eyes and something about his stance that distinguished him from the other village patriarchs, I always forgot what he looked like, even in the interval of a few days. It was as if he were not quite real, like a shadow or a silhouette. Every time that he greeted us anew at the low doorway of his cottage, there had to be a rapid process of identification and recognition: 'Ah yes, that's Bob! I'll remember him now.' But I never did.

In the end I never had the chance to. During the week of his seventieth birthday Bob Glass died.

Seventy years was not a long life by Tristan standards, but in Bob's case it seemed to have been longer than usual. In the last days of his illness he received visitors in the tiny bedroom which was nothing more than a dark corner of the living-room shut off by a wooden partition. Light entered it only through a small opening cut high up in the partition. To the gloom of that box-like compartment, where he lay somewhere on a wooden bunk,
my eyes never became accustomed, so that he seemed at the end nothing but a voice, growing daily weaker, talking still of the past and issuing out of obscurity. It was as if the old man had been discarded and put away in a cupboard, where he still protested feebly against his fate.

On the day of his funeral his coffin was carried all around the settlement by a little cortège of villagers and finally buried in the little cemetery where, not very long before, he had pointed out to us his ‘grandad’s’ grave and retold for the last time the pranks of his boyhood, while the flax in the neighbouring patch had rattled like dry bones in the blighting wind.

Now the flax, in all the gardens, was a dark fire of bloom. Children playing near the graveyard pointed to a new turf mound and some even called it ‘grandad’s’; but there was no headstone from which to prise the leaded letters for pellets—not even a little wooden cross to steal and use as a sword.

On my first visit to Charlotte’s—such it had become—I became aware at once of change. Furniture had been rearranged and the whole cottage had a fresh, rejuvenated appearance. So far from the constraint of grief, there was a sense of release, a new, unrestricted spontaneity. It seemed permissible now to raise one’s voice in that room where, in Bob Glass’s company, conversation had always been conducted with incongruous formality. Charlotte revealed, beneath her bovine inexpressiveness, an unsuspected wry humour and a shrewd eye for the foibles of her neighbours. Her snort of high-pitched laughter often startled the walls of that cottage where old Bob had welcomed guests with his unfailing, threadbare dignity.

The truth is that it was an undeniable relief to be free, in that house, of his vaguely disturbing presence. Charlotte was a creature at once more earthly and more earthy, with a local wisdom closely related to the black, volcanic soil of the island. She resembled in some ways a certain old she-goat that we had heard about from the islanders: having caused damage to village gardens and flax beds, the goat had been taken by several men in a
boat round the Bluff and put ashore on the beach called Anchor-stock on the western side of the island. The next day men working at their potato patches were amazed to see her returning purposefully along the road to the village, scornfully ignoring the stares of the men who had been responsible for her having to climb—at her age!—the steep, trackless sides of the Bluff.

Charlotte had about her since her husband's death that same purposeful and impenitent look as the old she-goat—which had never again been banished from the settlement. Soon the islanders came to regard her in the same light, as one for whom exceptions had to be made—even to the extent of letting her knock down the walls of propriety and wilfully uproot the flowers of custom. Her widowhood had set her up in a position of independence in the village such as Tristan women seldom knew. Her life centred now, with possessive devotion, on her docile son Wilson: him she ruled as despotically as her weak and aged husband had ruled her, permitting him to raise his voice only when addressing his old dog, 'Dinty.'
When we had left Simonstown at the start of our exile, we had been told that our stay on Tristan would be short—three to six months. A more permanent staff, married men accompanied by their wives, would be coming to relieve us. We had been ordered to 'hold the fort' until their arrival. The phrase had conjured up mental pictures of ourselves as the meagre garrison of a beleaguered outpost. Instead we found ourselves in the most peaceful of backwaters, unstirred by the tide of war. Except for radio broadcasts we should have known nothing about the world struggle that was the occasion for our presence on the island. It was as if we had been dropped out of the conflict, lost or forgotten. And yet, if one 'side' had mislaid us, there was always the possibility that the other would find us. An enemy submarine might surface in view of the settlement and send a landing-party to investigate.

The thought did not occur to us often, but the contingency had to be considered. The station consisted of low wooden buildings, masked to some extent from the sea. At night the
windows were blacked out. The faint glimmers of light from the cottage lamps were almost invisible. But in the day-time there were the aerial masts and the ensign to proclaim the outpost. Our entire armament was a few machine-guns and revolvers and enough rifles to equip the station personnel and some of the able-bodied islanders.

Occasionally an ‘alarm’ was practised. Arms were issued, the islanders ‘evacuated’ to the upper reach of Hottentot Gulch and certain of the radio staff disappeared to an ‘emergency’ station hidden among hill slopes. The whole practice was enjoyed as a kind of game and the excited hubbub of voices from the gulch echoed all over the settlement shelf. A number of the island men were organized into a local militia—the Tristan Defence Volunteers. They were taught to handle rifles. Sometimes a competition ‘shoot’ was held between the Navy and the T.D.V.: such an event was a local sports day. The only use of a revolver was by the operator on duty at the hut on Herald Point: during a slow afternoon watch he would sometimes relieve the tedium by shooting at flies on the wall or through the open door hatch at a can on the fence outside.

Life at the station was a quiet, monotonous routine. We slept in one wooden building, we ate in another. The doctor and the padre lived on the other side of the grass rectangle of ‘quarter-deck.’ The store-keeper spent his days in a dark interior of his own; Bill the cook built himself a bakery adjoining the galley, to enlarge his domain; Jock the stoker lived with oil-cans and cotton waste in the engine-room, from which came the power to operate the transmitters and receivers and to supply light to the station; the ‘met.’ staff cultivated mysteries in their own sanctum; and in the wireless-telegraphy room the operators tapped morse keys and turned dials.

Since the departure of the soldiers there had been a few other changes in personnel. The store-keeper and the leading telegraphist, who had come with the advance-party, had been relieved. We had some extra N.C.O.s, a second cook, and six more operators. The circle round the mess-table had become
slightly bigger, but the core of the original draft remained, and
the newcomers could not be strangers for long in so limited a
company.

By its nature our work cut us off from the islanders. Through
the language of telegraphy we communicated with operators in
distant shore stations and occasionally in ships. We were in
regular touch with Simonstown, and at the end of an official
‘routine’ transmission we were allowed—by a special concession
made to us in consideration of the loneliness of our position—to
hold private conversation, in morse, with the telegraphists there.
We came to know their names and to have a vicarious familiarity
with them ‘over the air.’ We even learned to recognize the
distinctive morse hands of several of them, so that from the speed
and rhythm of a signal we could say: ‘So-and-so’s on to-night.’
It is amazing how personal an instrument a morse key can become
to the ear of an intent listener: it can transmit friendliness, cold-
ness, sarcasm, exasperation, or ribald amusement. This ‘tone’
was quite independent of the subject-matter of messages, since all
our traffic was in code.

Radio was our link with the outer world. It even brought us a
sort of remote-controlled acquaintance with the ‘sparkers’ on
other islands in the South Atlantic. When the time came to
make a routine call to Simonstown, there would be a friendly
rivalry between us and the operators on St Helena and the Falk-
land Islands to establish communication first. Our call signs
had the familiarity of nicknames. Sometimes it seemed that we
had a closer relation with those unseen fellow key-tappers than
with our hosts on the island.

In addition to the main wireless-telegraphy office there was the
receiving hut on the Point. It was just big enough to house an
operator’s bench with its equipment, a chair for the operator on
duty, and a bunk for the keeper of the middle watch, who would
take over at midnight. This tiny structure had become a kind of
masthead position, a crow’s nest from which to survey the daily
round of activity on the island, the passage of the seasons, and the
infinite variations of the sea. ‘Hold the fort,’ we had been told;
and at first sight, the hut, standing aloof from the main buildings of the station, a square, wooden box with a window in each wall, raised on short stilts so that its floor was clear of the ground, surrounded by a stockade to keep marauding animals away from the aerial bases, had actually had the air of a little fortress. At least it was a kind of refuge. Those of us who worked in it had a feeling of ownership: of all the buildings on the island this one was most peculiarly our own. To it we could withdraw from too close a proximity with our fellows at the station or from too pressing a familiarity of friends in the village. Its smallness made it inevitably private; and curiously enough, in that closed company of people on that isolated island, there were times when privacy seemed a rare and desirable thing.

Among the islanders ‘the hut on the Point’ was always an object of curiosity. Its purpose they accepted, without comprehension but without question. When told that messages from far away were ‘caught’ by the wires above and carried down to the operator’s ‘listening box,’ which enabled him to hear and understand them, they merely smiled, glancing up at the wires. They were too polite to contradict or laugh outright. They chose rather to accept the hut as a convenient social pivot. Its situation, separate from the rest of the station and sufficiently far from the village, gave it that value. They would not have visited our mess or the engine-room or the transmitting-room, except on a definite errand. But the Point was just a comfortable distance for a walk, and there was the reassurance that only one or at the most two of us would be there.

On Sunday afternoons especially the hut became a focus. Couples and families strolled past and leered in through the door at the telegraphist on watch. Sometimes they stepped inside to pass the time of day, and sat uncomfortably for a few minutes on the bunk, accepting a fill of tobacco or a cup of tea: it fascinated them to watch the electric kettle boil. The ‘gals’ always chose a portion of the cliff-top immediately in front of the hut for their Sunday afternoon perch, while the young men of the village dawdled in their vicinity. The Point was also the most
convenient place from which to watch the boats returning from Nightingale or Inaccessible; and so it became the scene for the local rodeo, when the boys rode out on their donkeys to watch the progress of the boats and amused themselves by galloping round and round the hut.
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Work in the Sun

The summer days followed one another with busy haste, perspiring gently. The men had many seasonal tasks to finish before the winter winds set in again. The fishing dinghies had to be put in order: sails had to be stitched and the boats painted and repaired, even new ones built. Some men climbed the mountainside to catch young ‘mollies,’ which, cooked in their own fat, were a favourite delicacy. Others were reboarding their houses against winter draughts and making new spinning-wheels for their womenfolk. The women themselves were making new dresses for Easter, and all of them were cleaning their homes in readiness for the holiday at that season, which would last a week and during which all work would be forbidden.

Even Paddy Rogers, who was by nature far from industrious and who had been content for two years to live, with his wife and two children, in a portion of his father’s cottage, at last began work—aided by other ‘hands’—on a house of his own. In the early stages of construction it looked just like another sheep-pen, and it seemed a long time before that resemblance began to be modified.
BOAT-BUILDING

BOAT PAINTING

(Willy Lavarello)
Marie knits as she rides, carrying a hoe and using her feet to urge the donkey. Beyond hillpiece in the background lie the Potato Patches. The 'road' passes between hillpiece and mountain on the left. The cliffs on the right fall to the sea.
THE PATCHES

1. On the left the mountain, on the right and in the distance the sea. Beyond the first group of patches lies Big Sandy Gulch.

2. Women 'puttin' in' at the Patches.
DONKEYS ARE RIDDEN BY MEN, WOMEN, AND CHILDREN

They are used for carrying loads but not for drawing carts. The rope halter about the neck is the only harness used.

A ROCKHOPPER PENGUIN, OR 'PINNAMIN'

From the black and yellow head 'tossels' the islanders make decorative table mats.
Chrissy Swain also 'had hands in,' to assist him in renewing the roof of his cottage, damaged by last winter's weather. First, new 'principals' and rafters were inserted, then the roof was rethatched fore and aft with sheaves of tussock-grass.

It was customary for an islander, when faced with any major undertaking such as this, to 'call' as many of his friends and neighbours as he needed to help him. In payment for their services they would be fed at his table until the work was finished. Sometimes on the last evening, when the job was completed, a special banquet would be provided for them, at which a huge pumpkin pie would supplement the usual roast potatoes and potato-cakes.

Naturally the 'hands' were quicker to answer the call of a neighbour who saw to it that they were well fed in his employ. Work on Paddy's house proceeded slowly: Chrissy's roof was soon finished. At first the sheaves and the newly cut sods of turf with which the ridge at the top was sealed had a raw, green appearance among the silvery thatch of the neighbouring cottages; but a few weeks of sunshine bleached them to the uniform drab shade. Paddy's house, on the other hand, still looked like a sheep-pen without a gate when, with the rest of the community, he was required to take part in the main annual event, the potato harvest.

At this important time it was usual for the men to spend the whole day at the Potato Patches. They would vie with one another in rising at an absurdly early hour, many sleeping in their clothes so that they were ready at the first thinning of darkness to get up, saddle their waiting donkeys, and arrive at the scene of the day's activity well before daylight. There they would have to wait an hour or more in the chilly dawn, sitting on boulders, smoking their pipes on empty stomachs, until it was light enough for them to start work. The islander who did not arrive at the Patches until daybreak was loudly chaffed as a lie-abed and asked if he had found one of 'them young gals' to sleep with.

Even the women laid aside their knitting to join in the great
task of lifting the potatoes. About midday they could be seen going along the road to the Patches, some riding donkeys, on which they perched side-saddle with babies in their arms, tins of baked potatoes and pots of tea slung across the animals' necks. A long train of children and dogs walked behind. In our off-watch periods we could not refrain from following.

The road was a rocky one that dipped steeply down into two gulches and wound round many large boulders on its way to the end of the plateau, where the Patches were situated. At the far side of the second gulch—known, but without known reason, as Knock Folly Gulch—the road was barred by two walls of stone supporting a gate made from crooked branches of 'island tree.' This flimsy barricade, helped by the natural barrier of the gulch, kept the islanders' cattle and sheep either 'blocked out' or 'blocked home,' as the wish might be.

Beyond the gate the road passed through a high, green pass between the mountainside and two outlying cones called Hill-piece and Burnt Hill. This pass was known as the Valley—or, in local parlance, the 'Walley.' Here grazed the 'tame' cattle and the bullocks and donkeys not in service. The 'wild' cattle were kept on another part of the island. The road was littered with dung, and in the warm hours the heady smell of cattle's breath hung in the air. The sheep kept to the higher slopes, terraced with their narrow foot-tracks: their cries carried plainly from the distance.

The Valley gave access to a plain, about half a mile wide and a mile long, lying between the mountain and the sea. It was really just an extension of the grassy ledge on which the settlement stood. Here the island men cultivated their potatoes in small 'patches' or fields, each of which was private property and marked out as such by a low wall of stones. Even some adjacent patches had their separate walls, with a two-foot lane of grass between, to avoid the troublesome issue of party walls. Grazing land was held in common, but when any man enclosed a portion it became his so long as he cultivated it and kept the wall in repair. If it was allowed to fall into disuse or disrepair it
reverted to the community. About property rights the islanders were almost fierce; and a family that neglected to till and tend its patches would be allowed to starve in consequence or made to pay a high price in material possessions for the potatoes it needed from its neighbours.

The crop was never a really good one, since the men never changed the seed and rarely changed the ground. At one time they had been in the habit of using seaweed as manure, but had found that its constant use hardened the soil; now they used guano and sheep dung which they obtained by the simple, callous practice of penning the sheep for days on end in the tiny paddocks or kraals about the village.

During the harvest season the Patches became a scene of much animation. As soon as the women arrived there, they would prepare a midday meal—most of the men having had no breakfast—and then remain for the rest of the day to help with the gathering of the potatoes that had been dug. To a visitor arriving on the scene in the afternoon it appeared that the whole population, men, women, children, dogs, and donkeys, had migrated to this plain.

At one's approach a mongrel sheep-dog would leap up on to a wall, ears erect and body quivering with alertness, to bark ferociously; with equal suddenness it would lose interest and jump down to continue snuffling in the field corners, thrusting its nose into the interstices of the stones and snorting impotently at the huge rats that unconcernedly kept house within the loose-piled walls.

In a grass lane between two patches an ox-cart rested, as if in ironic comment on so much activity of men and dogs, its single long shaft like a crutch for its old bones, its solid, rough-hewn wheels buried to the axle in grass, looking as if it had found its last resting-place, where decay would come to it slowly with the passage of the seasons. Yet, at the end of the day, the cart, laden with the harvest, would be lurching homeward.

Near by, a pair of oxen, unhitched from the cart but still imprisoned by the heavy wooden yoke to prevent them from
straying, stood patiently, occasionally lowering their heads together, in their creaking collar, to munch the grass.

The men dug and the women and children collected and stored in bags until evening. The light was fading before the family processions began to make their way, like caravans of tired pilgrims, back along the road to the village. Where there was only one donkey to a family, it was ridden by the man, sitting well back on the animal’s haunches in a clumsy saddle made of wood, straw, and canvas, his long legs dangling on either side, his feet in the dust, so that sometimes he appeared to be walking.

The slow-stepping bullocks, guided from in front by boys with long whips, drew the carts. Where the road dipped down into the gulch they would tense their forelegs, lowering their hind quarters for a half-slithering descent, restrained by the long-drawn cries of the teamsters—‘Yo-ho-ho-o-oh, now!’ Then, as the whip cut cruelly across their noses, they would throw their massive shoulders forward in the yoke, heads lowered, straining up the other side of the gulch.

Strung out behind were the women and children, carrying tools and utensils and accompanied by the inevitable train of dogs.

This harvest lasted several weeks and was the climax of the year’s work. While we were on the island the Village Council reported that the year’s crop had been about four thousand five hundred bushels. Even while the last potatoes were being dug, many of the men were busy ‘cleaning grass’ from their patches to prepare them for next year’s sowing. But before the summer ended there was to be another and very different harvest.
CHAPTER NINETEEN

Love in the Shade

Once a year, in March, took place an event that was a kind of holiday outing for the people of Tristan: this was the trip to Sandy Point, on the south-eastern side of the island, to pick the apples in the orchards there. It was the only regular occasion on which the women and girls accompanied the men in the boats. This year they were accompanied too by most of the naval party.

The journey was about twelve miles by sea. I occupied my now customary place in the Wild Rose. Robert Lavarello was again at the tiller and David Hagan pulling the bow oar. Emily crouched in the stern-sheets, among a cluster of other girls with men’s coats thrown over their heads and shoulders to shield them from the spray. The whole party was in a holiday mood. We steered close in and I had my first view at close quarters of the rugged mountain walls of the east coast, which had been our first glimpse of the island six months previously. As we rounded Big Point, where the settlement plateau came to an end, the rollers roared hoarsely as they were ripped apart by the rocks.
High above the surf was visible the appropriately named Ugly Road, by which the island men sometimes made their way on foot, when the wind permitted, round the Point to the eastern beaches for drift-wood. On this day a dog which had followed us from the village passed carefully along the narrow ledge, looking like an insect crawling on the face of the wall. Making its way down to the beach, it ran barking joyfully at the boats, sometimes driven into the surf by the bulging rock-face behind the beach. High up on the cliffs we could see the white 'mollies' sitting in green niches.

The wind was head-on to us and the men had a hard pull. For a part of the journey I relieved John the Baptist at his oar; before long my hands were bleeding on the handle. Just before we reached Sandy Point, Chief called a halt and the boats were tied up to a kelp-reef while the men entered into a long consultation across the water about the prospects of a landing. The general opinion was that the surf would be too heavy to allow the boats to be run ashore in safety unless the women were landed at some earlier point. So, at a place where the narrow black beach opened out into a great gash in the mountainside, known as Big Gulch, all the women and girls were set ashore. They had not far to travel. The boats were pulled slowly ahead and the women scrambled over the rocks, some carrying children. It was then that we heard a deep, growling rumble from the mountain and looked up to see massive boulders bounding down the slope directly above the women. The oarsmen stopped pulling, all the men stood up in the boats and began shouting conflicting advice: 'Run back!' 'Run forward!' Their panic was oddly like excitement, as if they were urging on contestants in a race. For what seemed an interminable pause the women crouched still in fear and uncertainty. At last they stumbled back on their tracks just as the boulders thundered to the beach; only the little dog which had run barking all the way from the settlement was killed. The men resumed their seats quietly and took up rowing again. With the dispassionateness of a guide giving information David Hagan leaned over my shoulder and observed that such
'falls' were common at the end of summer, when the early rains loosened the soil on the mountainside. With my hands still trembling on the oar handle, I hated David for several minutes.

As soon as the boats grounded on the pebbles at Sandy Point, the men leapt out and ran back along the beach to meet the women and children—not to express their concern, but to congratulate them on their performance in dodging the rocks. The whole party returned like a triumphal procession to the landing-place. For several minutes everyone talked at once and there was a great deal of excited, high-pitched laughter. As the various family groups split up to prepare their separate lunches, the voices of the women, especially the older ones, could be heard retelling again and again how they had felt and how they had acted as soon as they heard the 'fall.' The story would be repeated many times, with proud embellishments, at hearth-sides during the coming winter.

After lunch, when the excitement had subsided, Chief led the way by a steep path that zigzagged up the cliff-face to a low plateau, about a hundred and fifty feet above the sea. Here lay the 'orchards'—a jungle of low, spreading trees, almost unrecognizable as apple-trees. Their branches formed a wild tangle amid the long tussock-grass, both on the level plateau and in the hollow of a shallow gulch. There were also a few peach-trees that had been planted by the early settlers, but the peaches were not ripe; and one wall of the gulch was completely covered by a roving mass of grape-vine—but there were no grapes.

Among the trees it was impossible for the groups to remain intact. Each person took a small box, bag, or other receptacle and struck out on his own into the jungle. The trees had been planted close together and kept low by the winds with the result that their branches had become so densely intertwined that it was impossible to see a person picking in the tree next to one's own. There was no need for ladders and very little climbing was necessary. Soon the whole party was scattered over the plain, invisible among the trees but perceptible by occasional rustlings among the leaves and voices calling. At rare intervals, moving
from tree to tree, one came on little family groups of harvesters. The girls were putting the apples they gathered into the bosoms of their dresses, returning only occasionally to the nearest box or hamper to disgorge them. They looked grotesque, even gross figures, with great sagging bosoms.

Under the trees the long tussock-grass formed a dim, green-lit undergrowth, in which the children rustled joyously. Carrying my half-filled box from one part of the jungle to another, I came upon Emily Hagan, the skirt of her outer dress held out in front of her and overflowing with apples, for which she was in search of a receptacle. There were just enough to fill the box I was carrying. She smiled gratefully as I set it down before her; but she released the apples too quickly from her dress, so that more tumbled in the grass than into the box. This did not seem to trouble her. She stooped quickly and picked up two from near her feet, then stood idly by while, on my knees, I set about retrieving the others. She showed none of the agitation that had embarrassed her on the occasion when I interrupted her spinning in the yard or on subsequent evenings at her home. Perhaps it was because there was no one near to observe us: we seemed to be alone in this part of the orchard. Looking up, I asked:

'Why don't you carry the apples the way the other girls do?'

She fixed me with her dark-eyed stare, but said nothing. I wondered if, after all, she was still timid. She looked away, and one hand plucked at the leaves on a branch. My attention had returned to the apples on the ground and I thought she did not mean to reply, when—as if in answer—she asked a counter-question:

'Is you want me to make myself look hugly like 'at?'

After a moment of surprise, I assured her that I wished no such thing and could never imagine her looking so. She regarded me again with that solemn stare which was at once bold and shy. She appeared to be weighing the import of this last remark. I believe she did not understand compliments. But after a while she seemed to reach the conclusion that some acknowledgment was required. As I rose from arranging the last of the spilt
apples at the top of the box, her hand darted among the leaves above her and she asked:

'Is you wan' a happle to eat? This one is sweet.'

She held it out to me on her palm. With just such a gesture—and perhaps the same shy half-smile—had Eve occasioned the fall of Man.

I took the hand which held the apple and led its owner away among the trees. She accepted the action placidly, with no attempt to draw back. There was no sound of any other harvester near us: we might have been isolated, two dream-figures in a strange underworld of grass-clumps and tree-trunks. Emily's body was softer, her lips were sweeter than the ripest apple.

By late afternoon the harvest was complete. Singly and in groups the apple-pickers emerged from the tangle of trees, laden with boxes and bags of fruit. On the beach computations were made of the amount picked. All the islanders were in a lively mood, as if at the end of a picnic-outing. There was much banter as the boats were loaded. I had been unable to find again the box of apples I had left among the trees; Emily was accused of having loitered all the afternoon, without doing any work. No one was inclined to spoil a scandalous joke by going back to look for the box.

The sea was calmer as we pulled away from Sandy Point. The wind was with us, and after rowing for a short distance we stopped to hoist sail. The steady knock of oars in the rowlocks and the rhythmic sluicing of blades through the water gave place to a silence broken only by a gentle lapping, while the long-boat rocked, uncontrolled. Then, as the sail filled, there was a pregnant poise and a glide forward. Instead of the regular lift and drive of the boat, there was a new onward-surging movement. The regular chock of oars had been succeeded by the slow thump of the boom across the gunwale and the gentle creak of the mast. To this soothing accompaniment we returned home.
I promised myself that before I left Tristan I would visit every home in the village and know every family. My express purpose was to compile a complete record of the names of adults and children in each household. In time I completed the census, adding even the names of many of the dogs and of the only three donkeys which seemed to have names: Charlotte's 'Nancy'; George Glass's 'Black Farr,' and Emily's 'Black Tippy'—a name to which she indignantly objected, suspecting that it alluded as much to her own dark mane as to the donkey's.

By the time my list was complete, I had sat at every hearthside, drunk a cup of 'strong drink,' and been greeted familiarly in every cottage on the island. I had even mastered the problem of differentiating by name all the islanders. This was not easy. Since there were only seven family names, and since the number of Christian names was also restricted, it was not unusual for two people to have the same combination of names. The villagers solved this problem by prefixing the title 'Big' or 'Little' to the name of each. This title indicated seniority, not size.
met Big Sam Swain, who because of his exceptional seniority was often dignified with the more venerable prefix 'Old'; and we had learnt to distinguish him from Little Sam Swain, a mere stripling of sixty-eight. In the same way we had come to know Big Gordon Glass—a slender, sensitive-looking man of middle height and middle age—from Little Gordon Glass—a rumbling-voiced giant, well over six feet of muscle but many years junior to his 'big' namesake. We likewise distinguished Big Mabel from Little Mabel and Big Maggie from Little Maggie. Surnames, especially in reference to the women—always with the exception of Mrs Repetto—were hardly ever used.

Another method of distinction was to couple the names of husband and wife: thus we heard allusions to Margaret’s Johnny (Johnny Repetto), Sophie’s Johnny (Johnny Green), and 'Ria’s Johnny (John Baptiste Lavarello—whose wife’s full name was 'Maria,’ always pronounced with a long, anglicized ‘i’); and conversely, there were Willy’s Violet (Lavarello), Chrissy’s Violet (Swain), Robert’s Mabel (Lavarello), and Little Gordon’s Mabel (Glass).

It had taken us many months to fit the correct name to each face—the faces seeming sometimes to be as much alike as the names. Even now we occasionally met people, women in particular, whom we were sure of having never seen before. It was as if the settlement carried a mysterious second population of stowaways who were gradually coming to light. If I had not made a point of introducing myself into every cottage, I am sure there would have been inmates of that tiny village whom I should never have met, however long our stay there.

One fact I learned from these visits was the marked difference between the best homes and the poorest. Some of the cottages, the oldest ones, were of well-trimmed stones, complete with lofts and lined throughout with wood. These had been built when the skill in stone-masonry of the first settlers and good supplies of drift-wood and timber from wrecked sailing ships were available. The later ones—built since wrecks had become few and drift-wood scarce—had no lofts and very little woodwork.
The rafters and thatch were visible inside; and when a strong wind tore the tussock loose the occupants were exposed to the weather. Some cottages had bare earthen floors; the walls were unpanelled or only half-panelled—with packing-case wood. In most, however, there had been some attempt at making the interior home-like: shelves and mantelpieces were lined with paper cut into ornamental shapes; and bare stone walls were pasted over with old newspaper—of which the islanders always spoke grandly as 'wall-paper,' as if that had been its primary purpose.

Some families were very 'poor'—that is, they possessed few cattle, sheep, or oxen, sometimes none. In one or two instances this poverty was due to laziness and improvidence. There were some men who would never plant enough potatoes to supply their families through the winter and who were reduced to selling such live-stock as they had not slaughtered and even bartering the boards from their houses for potatoes, until their possessions had all passed to their neighbours. In these homes the children had to be fed almost entirely on fish: they were pale, thin, and undersized beside the other children.

In such a small, self-contained society we might have expected some system of communal sharing and assistance. There was no such practice; and Mrs Repetto, whose influence in all matters of village 'policy' was preponderant, hotly denounced any tendency of this kind. She declared that it only encouraged greater laziness among the already idle. The islanders were essentially individualists, with a strong sense of property rights and no feeling of responsibility for the weaker members of the community or for the neglected children. In this matter the doctor brought authority to bear. At his instructions, some of the under-nourished children were 'boarded out' and the families which fed them received credit chits to spend at the store. He had also organized the island men into work-parties and paid them, by chit, to do various jobs of construction and improvement at the station. Now that this work was finished, the work-parties were employed on useful tasks in the village—such as the
installation in all cottages of an improved style of septic lavatory, designed by the doctor, in place of the insanitary board-and-bucket system, with which the islanders had been accustomed to pollute the 'watrons' from which they drew their own drinking and washing water. The men were also working together in preparing material for the building of a new schoolhouse and village hall. For all such employment they still expected to be paid 'by the doctor,' on the grounds that they were not working 'for themselves.' The notion of working for the community was beyond them.

If neighbourly feeling, however, was lacking, public opinion certainly was not. Concern for what the neighbours would say dominated every islander's conduct. That anxiety was the police force which had prevented any serious crime in the whole history of the settlement. Gossip was rife: it was the chief activity of the women; but so pervasive was the desire for respectability that scandal rarely had a chance. In morality and in religion the islanders placed all their emphasis on behaviour. The word of God was the word of the padre, and too often that was beyond their comprehension. Consequently the ritual took precedence over the meaning; church-going was more important than belief. Although not subtle enough to be hypocrites, the villagers were shrewd in their morality: they rated discretion as the highest virtue; and in a hamlet where almost all conduct was 'public,' discretion was always needed. As Emily often complained, 'nobody can't look at anybody without somebody knows.' She might show herself a creature of warm impulse inside her father's house; but she would not openly walk five yards in my company outside, and was reluctant even to stop and speak if I met her in the village: 'somebody' would see, she said, then 'everybody' would talk.

Tristan society was by no means the single unit that we had at first assumed it to be. The villagers were definitely class conscious; certain families were considered superior to others. There was one snobbery that was pronounced. The islanders were sensitive about the coloured stock that had been included
among the original settlers, and they viewed with distaste any surviving evidence of this strain. Consequently those born with fair hair and blue eyes looked down on those with dark hair and brown eyes, and regarded with contempt certain people whose skin showed a definite swarthiness. The same contempt did not extend to those who were illegitimate—and there were two or three such. Loose behaviour was tabooed, but the occasional introduction of new blood by visitors to the settlement, especially fair-haired ones, had in the past been tacitly overlooked—provided always that the external proprieties of conduct had been preserved. Discretion, as always, was the touchstone.

In general outlook the people of Tristan were materialists, and there was little room in their lives for the spiritual or the imaginative. But they had one or two beliefs of a fanciful nature. Several islanders, for instance, were credited with the power of seeing 'visions' of incidents, usually disastrous ones, before they happened. Unfortunately, during our stay, we never received report of any such experience in time to test it by events: we were told of the vision only after its fulfilment. Young Louie Swain, our canteen assistant, was said to hear voices in the air and thunder in the earth beneath his feet when some unusual happening was imminent; sometimes too he dreamed about dogs on the church roof and this was a particularly dire omen. The islanders were also inclined to attach some psychic significance to the fainting fits common among the adolescent girls.

There were many minor superstitions among the villagers. We often heard allusions to Jack o' Lantern, the spirit once commonly believed in by sailors. He was said to be responsible for mysterious, moving lights seen at night on the mountainside or the cliff-top; and many of the people, even men, were afraid of going out in the dark. The most superstitious person in the village—if also one of the most shrewdly commonsensical—was Irish-born Agnes Rogers. It was she who told us how Ben Swain came to be deformed, having short, unjointed arms that ended in little hands where the elbows should have been. Agnes related—and her voice took on for the occasion more of an Irish lilt
than it had at other times—how Ben’s mother, just before his birth, had been frightened one winter evening near the graveyard by a tiny figure that ran out from among the graves waving short arms and screaming at her; afterwards the islanders pretended that it was a penguin, but Agnes still clung to a half-belief in the ‘little folk’ of her native mythology. Whatever the explanation, Ben had certainly been born with deformed arms that startlingly resembled a penguin’s flippers.

On the whole there was a disappointing lack of local lore among the villagers. There were very few home cures for illness and no home-made poetry or legends. The islanders were fond of singing and knew a number of ‘airs’; but all of them were imported and many of recent origin. The gramophone and collection of records given to the island by King George V had ousted the older songs. A few interesting survivals were sea-songs, generally incomplete and incomprehensible. Emily would sometimes sing a verse about—

‘A wheel, a wheel,
A spinning-wheel,
A wheel without a rim . . .’

which seemed to contain a sly reference to the incident early in our own acquaintance. It ended with a boisterously irrelevant chorus:

‘We’ll all go down to Johnstown
And drink a tot of rum.’

Others she was fond of were ‘Pull for the Shore, Sailors’ and ‘Throw out the Life-line.’ Charlotte was alone in knowing the words of a long, gory ballad of a girl murdered in a barn. She sang it for us on her birthday: the story was bewildering, the words often unintelligible, and the tune—as rendered by her harsh, cracked voice—was anything but musical.

There were some indigenous customs, e.g. those connected with birthdays. In every person’s history three birthdays were thought more significant than the others. They were the first, the twenty-first, and the fortieth—these being considered
the important stepping-stones in life. Dances and parties were held on these occasions, with special feasts of beef or mutton. Each guest, on arriving, greeted the holder of the birthday with a kiss and a slap—a kiss for love and a slap for the hard knocks of life. The normal practice of giving presents was reversed: it was the person celebrating the birthday who was expected to provide a present for every visitor. These gifts varied from a specially knitted garment to a pot of potatoes or a freshly caught crayfish. Of 'barfdays' we saw a number while on the island and attended the dance-parties; we also witnessed christenings, at several of which one of our number was invited to 'stand' as 'fardee,' or godfather; but we never saw a wedding. It seemed that all the young couples were waiting for us to leave the island before they would face the public embarrassment of that ordeal.

A recent innovation which gave greater publicity to such events as these was our own newspaper, the Tristan Times. This was produced at the station, edited, typed, and duplicated by the meteorological sergeant. It appeared weekly and its price was three cigarettes or two potatoes. Most of the villagers bought it. Even those who could not read liked to sit in their cottage doorways ostentatiously poring over the latest issue. It was really another form of gossip. The interest lay in seeing whose name was mentioned this week: there was the same mingled fame and notoriety as anywhere else in having one's name in print.

The paper contained news of the outside world, gleaned from radio broadcasts, side by side with news of island affairs. In one column appeared such items as:

Home-based bombers have made heavy attacks on Milan, Turin, and a German R.D.F. station on the Baltic coast . . .

while the next column announced:

The first sea-elephant of the season was discovered by D'Arcy Green at the Hardies. He killed it and will collect its oil to-morrow. . . . One dinghy went to Stony Beach for beef on Wednesday. . . . Alice and Freddie Green are to have their baby daughter christened as soon as the boats have been to Nightingale. . . .
ALL HANDS HELP TO HAUL A BOAT UP THE BEACH

WIFE GREETS HUSBAND WHEN THE BOATS RETURN
EDINBURGH SETTLEMENT
Named after the Victorian Duke of Edinburgh, who visited Tristan during his royal cruise in 1867.

THE DUKE OF EDINBURGH GOING ASHORE
His Royal Highness in a long-boat going ashore from the royal yacht at Tristan in January 1957
As this news-sheet proved popular a magazine supplement was added, first as a separate publication, edited by the padre, then as a section of the newspaper. This contained a few items of a general or humorous nature and articles about the island and the islanders. It was an ironic commentary on our changed attitude to the scene of our exile that, while the more literate islanders read with interest the 'Overseas' news, most of us read the items about the island. Our interests had moved from the station to the village: they focused on the topics that were discussed at the firesides that we now regularly visited.
CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The Cold Grip

In the last week of March hands were called by Chief to man all eight island boats for a trip to Nightingale. The object of the trip was to collect petrel fat for use in cooking and in the little lamps that would light the cottages during the winter evenings. The trip was to be a short one, lasting two or three days. A week later the boats had not returned.

The first day of April brought a foretaste of winter. Overnight the wind had howled around the little hut on Herald Point and the rain had rattled on its roof. The day dawned bleak and cold and windy. Even when the rain stopped and the sun crept wanly out, the wind remained brisk and there was a sharp chill in its breath. The sea was running heavier than it had since before Christmas.

It was unusual for any of our party to be walking in the village in the morning, but on this occasion I visited the home of Widow Charlotte with some clothes to be washed. She was sitting on a low stone abutment at the eastern end of her cottage, a favourite seat of hers, where she was sheltered from the westerly wind. Past the end of her cottage a stream gurgled. On its other bank stood the house where blind William Rogers kept his day-long
listening watch in an upright chair opposite the door. From that
doorway now came his wife Agnes and daughter Marie. They
both carried armfuls of clothes for washing in the stream. The
greeting which Agnes called out did not seem as cheerful as usual,
and Marie, though her smile was as blithe as ever, did not sing as
she banged the wet garments on a boulder to loosen the dirt from
them. There seemed to be a tension in the air of the whole
village. It was rather like the effect of a frost. But this effect
had been building up for the past six days; the drop in temperature
had occurred only the night before.

After a couple of minutes Charlotte called out in her blunt
way:

‘Haggie! When you think they be back?’

‘How I know when they be back?’ Agnes emphasized the
disgust of her retort by plunging an armful of clothes energetically
into the watron. ‘Guess they is waiting till the wind haul out.’

‘The win’ is done haul out. The win’ is in the sou’-west,’
Charlotte announced with dry finality.

‘Then, reckon they is waiting till the swell die down.’

‘They ain’t never had to wait this long ’fore.’

Agnes apparently did not think this demanded a reply and there
was a break in the conversation, while Marie flayed the boulder
with a sodden shirt. Then Charlotte’s voice continued in a
mutter that could not have been audible on the other side of the
stream and was not really addressed to me. ‘Reckon they mus’
be done tryin’ out ’at petrel fat ’fore now! . . . ’mus be! . . .’

After an interval of gloomy rumination she called out again to
Agnes.

‘Haggie! You know what Mis’ Repetto say?’

‘What Missis Repetto say?’

‘She say it like when she was a little gal, all the men go out in
the boat, for chase a ship, an’ didn’t never come back.’

‘What Missis Repetto wanna say ’at fa’?’

‘Mis’ Repetto ’member time once ’fore when there ain’t
bare four old men left on Tristan an’ all the young ones daid in
the sea.’
'What you wanna say 'at fa', Shawlutt? Is you wanna skeer folks?'

Agnes gathered up the clothes in an accession of anger and carried them dripping to the cottage. Marie threw a grin at me across the stream as she jumped up to follow her mother. Charlotte said no more, but remained seated, a heavy figure of foreboding, with the shade of her widowhood like a black cloak around her. She was thinking of her only son Wilson, away with the other men.

There I left her and walked back through the village. In the absence of most of the menfolk, it had a desolate air. I sensed the horror of isolation that must have engulfed those wives of the early settlers—severed at that time completely from the rest of the world—when their men were lost. The memory of that disaster, handed down through the recitals of Old Sam Swain and Mrs Repetto, still haunted the imaginations of the women.

The tension of frost in the air relaxed a little and the sea became quieter. But the atmosphere in the village was held in a grip colder than that of frost: it was the stillness of tightly held breath.

Eight days now and the boats had not returned! Yet the wind was from the south-west, the desired direction for the return passage from Nightingale.

On the afternoon of the eighth day I walked, as several had done each day of that week, along the road to the Potato Patches at the western end of the shelf, from which the boats, if returning, would be seen. I did not expect to sight them before other, sharper eyes. I walked to get away from the apprehension that gripped the settlement and was even invading our quarters.

The road was a deeply rutted cart-track, created as much by custom as intention. Soon it dipped down into one of those gulches by which, presumably, molten lava had once streamed down from the crater of Tristan. This gulch had been named Hottentot by the original garrison from the Cape; few of the present islanders knew what the name meant. The road descended by a deep cutting to a floor littered with boulders and
devoid of vegetation. Above me rose the walls of the gulch. Pausing there, with my range of vision bounded by arid rock and empty sky, I was overcome by a sense of desolation. The village and the sea were out of sight. All the way up to the still, void upper reaches of the gulch, carved in the massy wall of the mountain, not a weed stirred. I felt the strange stillness that hung like an invisible presence deep down among the lifeless rock—the stillness of utter negation.

Usually on Tristan two sounds were audible, the voices of wind and sea. Since there were scarcely any trees there were no birdsongs; even the sea-birds that screamed occasionally above the beach nested on the other islands. Consequently, down here in the gulch, below the wind, beyond hearing of the sea, the silence was absolute and unnerving. It spoke of a solitude that would be unbearable.

With a feeling of relief, as if returning to the known world, I climbed out at the other side of the gulch. Just beyond there I left the road and climbed a jutting wedge of mountainside called the Goat Ridge. The steep turf-slants among the rocks were terraced with tiny foot-tracks. Seen from up here among the sheep-haunts the village and its shelf and the sea changed proportions alarmingly. The horizon, now farther away, seemed tipped upwards. The shelf seemed to shrink under my feet as I sat on the springy turf of the ridge. The sea looked calm enough from this height, almost glassy, a blue-grey reflection of the sky. I could hear the surf again now, but it sounded only as a faint persistent rustle. Far below me, around Herald Point, curled long white ripples—as they seemed—like froth on the sea's lips. There was nothing else in sight on the ocean.

How small, from up here, seemed the troubles of the islanders—yet pathetic rather than insignificant! The vastness of that world of water, the solitariness of that single upthrust of rock, and the impersonality of both sea and stone seemed to annihilate all struggle and achievement.

At Easter there was to be a holiday and a dance for the villagers. All the young people would be there. The girls would wear
their best dresses. Already they were thinking about it; and more than once Emily had looked at the new frock she had made and pressed the wide red sash of which she was so proud. For one night the little hall would contain for these people all the entertainment of the world; and while they gave themselves up to it, so earnestly, there in that one room full of noise and vibrant with thudding feet, their cottages would stand empty of all but a few old people and sleeping children.

Late in the evening the merrymakers would come home, with flickering torches and clear voices in the night—the husbands and wives, the young men and the girls—each to a dark doorway. For a few hours they would have forgotten the wind that prowled through the village in their absence, peering into cottages, nosing round corners, snuffling under doors, slinking away among the flax gardens. They thought that life was what throbbed there in that little pleasure-hall, but it was nothing to the relentless forces of life that stirred outside. There was something pitiable in the intentness of their enjoyment as they circled like moths about that single hub of light and noise. The windows of the hall on these occasions radiated into the night a feeble glare of light, a rumble of feet, a hum of voices; but these were lost in the immensity of the sea and of the darkness that lay like a great weight on those half-sunken cottages under the wall of the mountain.
CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The Echoing Cry

'SAIL HO!' The cry echoed among the darkened cottages under the mountainside. 'Sa-a-il ho!' It seemed to issue from the immense obscurity beyond the cliff-tops. 'Sa-a-il ho-o-oh!' A third time it rang in the night, like a great voice from off the sea.

Lights appeared in the village. Cottage doors opened. In the house where I sat the click of Emily's knitting-needles was stilled, and the room seemed to hold its breath in a silence broken only by the distant thudding, like anxious heart-beats, of the surf below the cliffs. Beside the hearth the girl's mother, tensed from her usual apathy, listened for the repetition of that strained, discordant cry. When it came she sprang up with the first show of animation I had seen in her and cried: 'The boats iss back!' The tension broke in a bustle of domestic activity. Emily's knitting was flung aside as she jumped from her seat on the bed. Wood was thrown on the almost dead embers of the fire, water splashed into a large pot in readiness at the hearthside. The two little boys asleep on the couch stirred among their dark blankets
and, amid the general clatter, Piers’s sleepy-thin voice was heard asking: ‘What it is, Momma?’

His mother was too busy blowing up the cold ashes to answer him. But his sister, as she lifted the pot on to the grill in the fire-place, sang out: ‘It’s you’ poppa! The boats iss back!’ She clapped her hands and repeated like a chant, as she ran to the outer door and threw back the top half with a rattle against the wall: ‘The boats iss back! The boats iss back!’ In a moment her shyness had been thrown aside as easily as her knitting. When I joined her at the door she turned to me in excitement, her black eyes shining and her lips parted in an unconscious smile. Close together we leaned over the lower door hatch, straining our eyes to pierce the darkness towards the sea. Women were running between the cottages, borrowing crocks, calling out to one another the news that the boats were home from Nightingale.

Soon torches were bobbing down the road towards the beach. Emily ran back into the house to put a kerchief over her head and to slip her arms into the sleeves of her father’s spare coat. She could be heard repeating to her young sister Angela, who was awake in the bedroom, the news: ‘Daddy’s back!’ I opened the door and descended the steps into the yard, trying to accustom my eyes to the darkness. Emily’s mother appeared at the top of the steps with a steaming teapot in her hands and a cup threaded by its handle on her little finger. She was calling back into the house to Angela: ‘Hangel, you best stay ’n moind the boys.’ Donald’s voice protested wilfully: ‘I’se coming down the beach.’ ‘You ain’t no coming down no beach,’ his mother contradicted. ‘You gotta stay wid buddy and tiddy.’ Piers’s peremptory treble took up the formula with conclusive assurance: ‘Yes, you gotta stay, Dondil.’

Then Emily rushed out, almost pushing her mother down the steps and calling out to me ‘Iss you coming down the beach?’ as she ran on into the darkness, knotting the kerchief under her chin. I set off warily in the same direction: this ground, littered with rocks, was not familiar to me at night-time. Somewhere in the gloom her mother’s voice called plaintively: ‘Hemly,
waffa’ you don’t carry this cup for me?’ But it was impossible to recognize any among the hurrying figures around me. Some of them carried torches, smoky brands that blinded those who had none and made the way seem blacker.

The crashing of the surf came to meet us and, as we crested the slope down to Little Beach, the glimmer of the sea illumined the scene. Then panic broke out. The voice of one of the early arrivals cried that there was ‘bare one boat.’ Women ran stumblingly down the steep bank and across the shingle towards the dim hulk of that boat just above the surf. Emily’s mother went slithering past me on the pebbles, spilling half the tea from her pot, mumbling ‘David! David!’ Then the foremost torches lit up grinning faces of men clustered about the boat and Arthur Repetto’s great laugh was heard above the surf and the rattle of dislodged pebbles.

Only one boat had returned. But the others were still safe at Nightingale. It had been the idea of headstrong Arthur or ‘Panny’ Repetto to make the return voyage alone, when the opinion of his brother, Chief, had convinced the other boats’ crews that the sea was too rough. Arthur’s docile crew had acquiesced in his escapade. Old Gaeta, coming up to them on the beach, said they ‘musta be crazy to skeera the women lika that.’ Arthur threw back his head to laugh the louder, his face convulsed in the torchlight.

The boat had not been sighted earlier in the day because it had not cleared the Bluff until after dusk. The wind had been high and the men had been rowing continuously since seven o’clock in the morning. They were glad of extra hands on the beach to haul the boat high and dry and of the hot black tea that the women brought. They had all stood up in the boat to join in the loud hail that had startled the village, but now some of the younger ones were too tired to share any further in Arthur’s rollicking enjoyment.

David Hagan was not in the crew of Arthur Repetto’s boat. I was perhaps a little glad. I even hoped that Chief’s caution
would withhold the remainder of the expedition another day or two on Nightingale.

But on the very next day the wind dropped, the sun shone, and the other boats sailed home in sedate formation behind the Canton. They were sighted from the Patches in the morning and in the afternoon were visible from Herald Point. It seemed that every ‘lad’ of the ‘willage’ had saddled his donkey and ridden out to the Point to watch the boats returning. Throughout the afternoon watch the boys galloped maddeningly round and round the hut until it should be time to ‘pynte’ for the beach and help with the unloading.

Going off duty at four o’clock in the afternoon, I left the hut and walked to the edge of the cliff to get a better view of the miniature regatta. The sun gilded the water, but in patches the breeze ruffled it black. I stood watching the triangular sails, like scraps of white paper, gliding across a dark patch of sea. Suddenly I could see them no more. I searched the ocean, looking for the white flashes, until one of the boys, Edwin or ‘Cabby’ Glass, reined in his donkey beside me and pointed laughingly at some black specks on a stretch of gleaming silver. ‘White sails on the black water, black sails on the white water,’ he chanted, jeering at my ignorance, and wheeled his sure-footed mount within perilous inches of the cliff-edge.

Before sundown the men were sipping their tea on the beach and the boys were stringing cans of petrel fat across the backs of their donkeys. The party had brought home well over two hundred gallons of fat from Nightingale. Little Beach seemed as populated as the sea front of a small English coast resort and the bright kerchiefs and dresses of the women contributed to a holiday effect, enhanced for English minds by the presence of the donkeys. Reunions on the beach after an expedition of several days always evoked high spirits, and on this occasion the men had been absent nine days. Island manners forbade the demonstration of private affections, but shouting and laughing relieved the feelings which had congested during the days of waiting.

In the general mêlée of unloading and carrying, the donkeys
came in for many gratuitous thwackings, and the bullocks carting away the heavier loads were persuaded to make the necessary effort up the steep cliff road by a thonged whip laid cruelly across their noses by the shouting teamsters, who ran backwards up the slope ahead of them. Dogs added to the commotion by darting eagerly among the people and occasionally falling into snarling combats. George Glass's huge mongrel, Darby, engaged in a fierce encounter with another dog, but George, stepping between them grabbed Darby by two handfuls of his shaggy coat and lifting him bodily above his head hurled him fifty feet out into the surf. Darby rose and shook the water from his eyes with a gesture of mild surprise, then splashed back to the beach, his spirits effectively damped, while George turned placidly to receive the cup of tea his wife had been holding for him.

'Sail ho!' was the cry with which the islanders heralded not only the home-coming of their own boats but the appearance of any vessel off Tristan. In earlier times ships had been frequent callers. Sometimes, as the older men recalled, several whalers would put in there during a day, or a small fleet would remain for several days in the vicinity while the factory-ship anchored near the beach. Some whaling captains had even established temporary homes at the settlement while they remained in the South Atlantic. With the passing of sail and the suspension of whaling in those waters, the island had long been left unvisited: but during our stay we received calls at long intervals from a mail and supply ship from the Cape, and these visits caused among the islanders almost as great a stir as had been provoked by our own arrival.

As a topic of conversation the appearance of the next ship supplanted even the weather. We were usually notified by radio when the event was due and the villagers accepted as quite normal our foreknowledge of it. Sometimes they would glance up knowingly at the aerials, imagining that the wires could be seen shaking when a signal was coming in. But in general they found it easier to credit all 'outsiders' with omniscience than to
try to understand how they came by any particular piece of information.

Our supply ship was generally a little tramp steamer diverted from her course to South America. She arrived, as a rule, late in the afternoon, flashing her signal-lamp from afar off. On many such occasions the sea ran as high as our excitement and the islanders doubted the possibility of launching a boat. Slowly the ship steamed past the settlement, plunging head-down into great, grey swells, her masts looking as slender as threads, her low hull almost invisible among the waves. Considerately, the captain signalled: 'Mail aboard. Do you wish to bring ashore to-night?' Inconsiderately, we flashed back 'YES.' The steamer anchored, a single island boat put off from Little Beach and there was a long, hard pull out to the ship. Seen from close quarters, her grey-painted hull was mottled with rust and red lead.

The arrival of a ship caused an upheaval of routine, both for us and for the villagers. As soon as she anchored there was a concourse to the beach. The boats were launched, and once our stores had been brought ashore the island men, with the captain’s permission, went aboard with their calfskin trade-bags. These contained local curios and home-made articles—sheepskin mats, knitted garments, pouches made of penguin ‘tossels,’ oxhide moccasins, model island boats, bullocks’ horns polished and mounted on wood—all of which the owners hoped to barter with the seamen for bags of flour, old boots, or clothes. For us the occasion meant a chance of hearing some first-hand news of the ‘outside world,’ of mingling for a brief period with new company, of seeing a few fresh faces. It was an opportunity we never missed. Often the crew were Lascars, speaking little English, but the officers were English or American, the engineers invariably Scots. And in the wireless cabin we could talk shop with the operators.

In the week following the ship’s departure, a sickness afflicted the island. In the case of the villagers it was a physical distress, a sort of influenza which they call ‘tissock.’ It affected especially the women and children; and the odd thing was that only ships
coming from the Cape caused it. The vessels which occasionally called on their way from South America brought no 'tissock.' On us the visit had a different effect. It was in the weeks following, with our company reduced again to the maddeningly familiar circle of faces around the mess-table, that life on Tristan seemed most barren. Our sickness then was mental.

Occasionally the cry of 'Sail ho!' announced the arrival of an unexpected visitor. One evening, after dusk, an islander tapped diffidently at the door of our quarters to tell us that a ship was 'signalizing.' The operator at the station had not seen her. She proved to be an American merchantman that had rounded the Cape without putting in to port and was now in desperate need of supplies. Two island boats were launched. The sea was making up rough, but three of our party decided to accompany the islanders. The ship signalled that she had lost one anchor in a storm off the Cape and the captain refused to let go the other for fear of losing it; so she was continually drifting away from the island.

Rowing out to her was hard work. At times the boat I was in seemed to stand on end. A squall of rain helped the spray to drench us thoroughly. When eventually we got alongside, she was rolling heavily and the islanders were afraid that she would roll over on the boat. As it was now dark, the captain shone a searchlight on us. We managed to pull to the ladder. One moment it plunged in the sea beside us, next moment it was swinging madly above our heads. By luck as much as agility we at last climbed on board, bringing the Americans enough food to last seventy men ten days. We were given a warm welcome.

By the time we climbed back over the side of the ship, she had drifted nearly five miles from the island. The captain wanted us to pull to windward of him so that he could tow us nearer inshore. The islanders protested that the boat was too light and would be swamped. They hurriedly pulled away into the darkness. But the American captain was not to be outdone: he was determined to tow us. From his bridge he was evidently searching the gloom for our boat. When we had been rowing for about an hour we
suddenly found the ship bearing down on us in the darkness. She seemed to be coming fast and looked incredibly huge. We shouted, but could not be heard; we threw lighted matches frantically in the air to show our position, so that she would not ride us down. The oarsmen had to row furiously round the ship's stern as she went by; a few moments later she reversed her engines and began coming astern. Again we had to pull tremendously on the oars in fear of being drawn in by the suction of her screws. It was unnerving yet laughable—being chased by a ship in the middle of the ocean in complete darkness.

She went by so close that we could hear the skipper's voice, apparently far above us, 'goddamning' through his megaphone. In disgust he had given up the chase. It took us two and a half hours to pull back to the shore. Just before midnight we stepped out on the beach, sodden and chilled to the bone.

Another unexpected visitor was a large passenger liner, the *Rangitata*. She carried no passengers on this trip; but she had not, like most of her class, been converted into a troopship. We sat in her lounge in soft arm-chairs on a deep-piled carpet, being served with drinks by a white-coated steward. For an hour of make-believe we became tourists glancing through the port-holes at a strange island and a primitive settlement.

A more mysterious visitor was sighted one morning in April far away to the eastward. The islanders at once declared that she was a sailing ship. We dismissed the idea. Later, as she came nearer, by the aid of binoculars, 'Doc' was able to make out a three-masted, square-rigged vessel, proceeding in a south-westerly direction. She had apparently no intention of standing in to the island. Radio calls brought no reply and she was too far away to read our signal-lamp. She passed out of sight to the south, in the direction of Cape Horn, and we heard nothing about her; a report to Simonstown failed to elicit her identity.

The anachronism of her appearance near Tristan seemed to confirm our sense of isolation during those months when the island was left alone, as if forgotten, in the glittering or grey-hazed immensity of the sea.
CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Open Hearth

It was disconcerting to have to do one’s love-making in the presence of the family. True Emily’s mother usually retired to bed as soon as she had brewed my evening tea, but her father always stayed up until my departure. His motive was a sense not so much of propriety as of the requirements of hospitality; but there was something in the undeviating gaze of his dark eyes and in the relentless affability of his smile that imposed a kind of formality, almost a deference. I had already learnt something of David Hagan during our stay on Inaccessible Island. It was David’s function in life to sit in the corner and smoke his pipe. He did it in the living-room of his cottage, as he had done it under the inverted boat on the beach at Inaccessible. Yet it was surprising how potent an influence he could exert by the mere presence of his lean, brown face at the corner of the hearth and even a little, it really seemed, through the pipe-stem for ever clenched between his dark jaws.

When he had been away on Nightingale and only his wife had
crouched at the fireside, tending the pot, and Emily had perched aloof in her own aura on the edge of the bed, her dark head lowered over her knitting, the room had seemed without character—a bare-walled compartment, to the corners of which the feeble radiance of the bird-oil lamp never penetrated. The individual components of the room: its walls and furniture; the long sofa; the dark-blanketed bed, at the end of which Emily’s two little brothers lay asleep in their clothes; the sorry-looking table, where a cup and a teapot stood beside the tiny home-made lamp; the painted name-board of the wrecked Mabel Clark, inserted in the wall above the wide fire-place—all these features had made separate little impacts on the mind. The people sitting about the room had been distinct yet unrelated entities. David’s return had been like that of a familiar household object to the exact light patch on the wall that had marked its old position. Immediately the room had developed a harmony. It was impossible to be unconscious of his looming, yet often soundless, presence at the hearthside. Even the furniture seemed to align itself into a definite relation to the shadowy corner in which he chose to sit: it was as if by a change of position he could draw the very walls into a different shape.

There was in the room another silent presence, which had at first encounter disturbed me—that of Wilson Glass, Emily’s persistent but unsuccessful suitor. For months he had been coming to the house in the evenings and for hours sitting in a changeless attitude on the long, wooden sofa, so that it had come to be known as Wilson’s sofa. It had never, so far as I had seen, been shared by the girl herself. The first time that I had entered the room and found Wilson sitting there, with his long, stocking-clad legs out-thrust as if to impede my passage, I was nonplussed. But since neither the girl nor her family seemed to pay any attention at all to his presence, I soon learned to disregard it. He remained a vague, undefined figure, always there in the background. There was even a certain comfort to be derived from him, as from a shadow that confirmed one’s own substantiality.

When I came to the house early in the evening, while David
was still out in the dinghy fishing, Wilson had already assumed his nightly position on the wooden bench. As I clumped heavily up the steps in sea-boots, to announce my approach, and pushed open the outer door, I heard Emily’s clear voice break off in the middle of some boisterously inappropriate sea chorus. There followed the excited shouts of the two little boys as they rushed to meet me in the doorway. As I entered the girl’s dark eyes flared a greeting across the room. The time came when she did not even interrupt her singing, but smiled at me through the words and eventually became so ‘forward’ as to twirl her billowing skirts in a few impromptu dance steps about the room to express her high spirits until her mother cried out to her to sit down and ‘moind’ her ‘manners.’ It was the mother’s continual dread that Emily’s vivacity would betray her into some dreadful effrontery.

Often I was greeted by the clatter of utensils being hurriedly cleared out of sight. The islanders were always irregular about their meal-times. No matter when I timed my visit, I would arrive, in all likelihood, to find Donald and Piers being served with a late tea or an early supper, consisting usually of the yolks of two or three eggs boiled in milk to form ‘skouse.’ As I appeared they would snatch up their dishes and spoons and with much laughter scamper away on bare feet into the other part of the cottage, occupied by their grandmother. The villagers were bashful about eating in the presence of a ‘stranger,’ however familiar he had become.

At sundown David returned from fishing. As soon as the dinghy was seen to be making for the shore, the elder boy, Donald, would rush away to the beach to help his father bring home the catch. Together they would re-enter the house, Donald dragging a bag, from which he would tip out on to the floor a dozen live crayfish. The lobster-like creatures began at once to crawl about in all directions very slowly, their stiff-jointed legs clicking faintly on the boards. Excitedly Donald would snatch them up one at a time by the foreleg and pop them into a large pot of water that stood in readiness on the fire. From the window-seat his brother Piers would watch with the
contempt of his inferior years but superior wisdom. A lid was placed on the pot to keep the crayfish down, and as the water became hotter they could be heard stirring about inside. Later in the evening, when the boys were already curled up asleep at the end of the bed, the pot would emit a throaty, bubbling sound.

It was accepted as only proper that I should have the seat of honour, on the tousled bed, where I was always afraid of sitting on the sleeping children, and that Emily should sit beside me, where I might place a discreet arm around her waist as I questioned David politely about his fishing or the recent potato harvest. Only Wilson’s outstretched legs crossed and recrossed themselves uneasily.

The effect of the bird-oil lamp on the girl’s face was flattering. As she leaned near it to examine the stitches of her knitting, its yellow glow lent a richness to her rounded cheeks and a soft duskiness to the shadows of her eyes. Against the dimly lit room her face hovered like a bright flower. At times she was gentle and placid. Then, as she lifted her head in sudden laughter, letting her knitting fall idle in her lap, her eyes would sparkle with a bright darkness, sweeping up the discountenanced Wilson in a careless glance, much as she would sweep up a fallen scrap of dried fish with the whisk of brushwood which served as a broom and stood in the corner near the door.

She held attention like a skein of wool carelessly in her hands, which might at any moment let it fall. Her vivacity might prompt her suddenly to bound from the bed where she sat and throw open the lid of the chest which acted as a window-seat. In this she kept her dresses and private treasures, which she would produce for my inspection. On one occasion she brought out a wide, blood-red ribbon, which she planned to show off at the next dance. Sitting on the chest, she let down her hair, so that it fell in a dark cascade over her shoulders. Then she bound it loosely back with the ribbon, which shone among the black tresses like a red carnation. With a smile of pleased coquetry she posed for admiration.

While such diversions were being offered, David sat on a box
at the corner of the hearth, leaning forward over his widely spaced knees, gazing into the flames under the crayfish-pot. Shadows ran in the hollows of his cheeks as he sucked at his pipe; dull red high lights glinted on his cheek-bones. After a while he removed his moccasins and leaned back, with his shoulders braced against the wall, stretching out his stockinged feet and watching the exchanges of his daughter and his guest with the kind of interest that one bestows on playful kittens. Occasionally he would insert a quiet remark or his teeth would flash in a shy, friendly smile. But there always seemed to lurk in his eyes a flicker of ironic amusement, which could more effectively check the display of ardour than any fatherly interdiction. Not that David was disposed to interfere. Quite the contrary. On one occasion, when intimacy had created momentarily its own illusion of privacy, I looked up to find on his face a smile of ineffable benevolence. But the effect of that smile was wholly deflating.

Conversation with Emily was largely a programme of teasing and being teased. Her only range of interest was in gossip about the other personnel at the station and trifling scandal about the other girls of the village. About the past or the future or about the world beyond Tristan she had no curiosity. The present time and place were to her sufficiently engrossing and she lived in them vigorously, immune from the civilized disease of boredom. When she had nothing better to do she would sometimes find delight in a playful spite towards those she disliked—and even more often towards those she liked. The only attention she ever paid to Wilson was to turn on him with pretended amazement at his presence and inquire maliciously:

'What you iss sitting 'yah for, Wilson? Iss you trying to wear out the seat of you' trousers?'

Wilson acknowledged with a sheepish smile his gratitude for this much notice.

When Emily felt tired she went to sleep—promptly and without regard for the place or company that she was in. Regularly, before the evening was old, her dark, curly head would fall against my shoulder and rest there in a benumbing position.
Then David felt called on to pick up the slender skein of conversation that his daughter had dropped. Emerging from his habitual taciturnity, he talked graphically and well. He spoke about the ships which had visited the island—the Cachalot, the Cap Pilar, the Joseph Conrad, Shackleton's Quest—and those which had been wrecked there, including the schooner Emily, after which his daughter had been named, and the Mabel Clark, of which one of the name-boards formed a part of his house. He told me about his cousin, John Hagan, who had left the island years ago and still wrote letters occasionally from Cape Town. He recalled the various whaling captains, most of whom had been popular with the islanders, and the various missionaries, several of whom had been unpopular.

Sometimes he would ask about the outer world. 'What sort of beach is you-all got in England? Is it as big as Big Beach?' I answered that we had a great number of beaches, some of them miles long. He smiled with polite incredulity. He was curious about snow. The islanders saw a thin coating of it sometimes on the peak but never on the lower ground. I told David that some countries had snow all the year and that it could lie in drifts as deep as the cliffs above Little Beach. His imagination failed before such an idea. And when he read in the Tristan Times the numbers of 'Garmans' killed or captured, he refused to accept them. 'Sure, there ain't 'at many people in the whole warl',' he declared.

For long periods, as if in retaliation for my stories of other countries, David would talk about Nightingale Island, which he assured me was a 'rale fancy' place, quite unlike Tristan: the birds there covered the ground so thickly, he alleged, that they had no room to fly off, but used to climb to the top of a tall rock to take flight. Sometimes that pinnacle was so 'chock' with them that it looked like a 'rock o' buds.' On the subject of Nightingale and its birds David spoke, as did most of the men, with something approaching enthusiasm. His voice was low but resonant, and his eyes glowed with a sombre fire.

When I rose to say 'Good night,' the girl slipped without
waking from my shoulder to a recumbent position on the bed, where she would remain until the morning. She never knew at what time I left the house. From his place on the sofa Wilson did not stir. For all I knew, he might spend the whole night there in silent vigil, while David continued to gaze into the embers of the fire. All the way out to the hut on Herald Point, where I had to keep my own solitary night watch, listening to the tremulous piping of morse signals from invisible ships unknown leagues away, I carried a vision of those two silent men watching over the sleeping girl, like mourners beside a cherished corpse.
CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Wild Pursuit

The summer, which had on the whole been much better than we had expected, was ending. Already the mornings were intensely cold. Sometimes the sun would reappear, surprisingly warm, but most days were squally. The wind, as always on the island, was our worst enemy and the sea was often rough. All night long we could hear it talking on the beach, foreboding the wild months ahead.

Soon all the larger boats would be hauled up, by means of the salvaged capstan of the Italia on the cliff-top, to the Boat Place, out of reach of the surf; only the fishing-dinghies would remain on the beach for use through the winter months. Before this was done, however, there was one last outing to be made. Gordon Glass and several other hands were to take one of the big boats round to Stony Beach on the southern coast of the island. They were going to kill a young steer in the herd of wild cattle kept there. The occasion for the killing was the twenty-first birthday-party of Gordon’s son, Clement. In a society as isolated and self-enclosed as that of Tristan it was natural that birthdays should be events of importance to the whole community. They were celebrated by dances and parties, at which special feasts of beef or mutton were provided for the guests.

So the killing of Clement’s birthday steer was not an event concerning only his family. The British Trader was the boat
chosen for the outing and hands from several different families composed the crew: Gordon Glass and, of course, his son Clement; George and Godfrey Glass; Teddy Swain; Johnny Repetto; and Douglas Green. Three of them—Godfrey, Johnny, and Douglas—had guns, Douglas's being a German model that had been presented to him by one of the missionaries and of which he was extremely proud. He had practised with it so often that he was acknowledged, somewhat on trust, to be the island's marksman.

A suitable day occurred about the middle of April, during one of those intervals of beautiful calm when the sky and the sea appeared poignantly blue after weeks of greyness. It was a day on which I was able to join the party. We assembled at six-thirty in the morning outside Gordon's house and by seven o'clock we had put out from Little Beach in the Trader. The weather being so calm and the wind in the right direction, we were able to hoist sail as soon as we rounded Big Point, at the end of the settlement plateau. Stony Beach lay four miles beyond Sandy Point, where the apple harvest had been gathered, so the first part of the journey was already familiar to me. Gordon Glass, a slender, soft-spoken, sensitive-faced fellow, sat at the tiller, and as we sailed smoothly through bubbling water past the various gulch-ends and headlands of the coast, he entertained me with their names. Some of the names were self-explanatory; of others even the islanders had forgotten the origin. Farmost Point; Shirtail Gutter; Jews' Point, where a ship carrying Jewish emigrants from Europe to South Africa had been wrecked; Softrock; Down-where-the-minister-landed-his-things; Halfway Beach; Blacksand Beach; Noisy Beach; Ridge-where-the-goat-jump-off; Blineye. Finally came Stony Beach itself, which appeared to deserve its name.

It was no more than a steep strip of shingle, with large boulders half buried in the surf. The landing looked difficult. As we approached, Gordon pointed out a disturbance in the sea where an outlying pinnacle of rock, which he called a 'sleeper,' rose to just below the surface, so that only a ridge of white foam
betrayed its presence. He steered carefully between it and the shore. As we drew nearer to the landing-place the sail was lowered. The men took off their moccasins and stockings, already wet with water in the bottom-boards, and stowed them in disconsolate little piles under the gunwale of the boat. Then they pulled to within a few yards of the beach, where George and Godfrey, with trousers rolled up above their knees, jumped out and waded ashore. The boat was held off by the oarsmen, while the two on the beach gathered pebbles and threw them down into the crannies between the great rocks at the water's edge, to make a sort of slipway for hauling up the boat. For long minutes we had to wait, rocking in the surf, gazing at an unprepossessing shore.

Behind the beach the land fell away brokenly from the mountainside, forming a shelf not unlike that on the northern coast, where the village was built. But this scene was more rugged. Over it lay the strange, inimical silence that confronted one everywhere on the island away from the actual settlement. Clouds drifted low over the slopes; the soft lapping and splashing of the surf seemed only to intensify the wakeful hush. As we stared at the shore it seemed to stare back at us, malignantly. The pebbles cast down by the two men on the beach made a hollow 'clop,' almost wooden, as they settled into the crevices, looking white among the wet rocks until the next rush of surf washed them dark. The irregular sound of their falling echoed so loudly that I glanced involuntarily ashore, to see if some strange thing had been awakened there.

When the jagged teeth of the land had been levelled in this way, the rowers took two mighty strokes on the crest of a wave, boated their oars and leapt out, running the boat up the slipway of pebbles, where the rest of us jumped out to help them. The gear was unloaded, the oarsmen put their socks and moccasins on again and we sat for a while in the long, moist grass that grew just above the beach, eating our breakfast of cold roast potatoes. Behind us stood—or rather sagged—the remnants of two little huts that the islanders had built there years before. Like the hut
on Inaccessible Island they had yielded to the repeated assaults of wild nature: only four lurching door-posts, an unnatural piling of stones, which had once been walls, and some crumbling rafters, from which bunches of dead grasses hung, showed where man's hand had tried to mould nature.

Shouldering the guns, our party began to make its way up through the long, coarse grass to the rocky ground above. The landscape was wild, much wilder than that near the settlement. A faintly marked path twisted steeply among scraggy brushwood. The day had become gloomy, with rain-logged clouds swinging low about the mountain. There was very little breeze, and soon the hilly nature of the country shut away the only sound that disturbed the air—the rustle of the surf along the beach. The islanders climbed in single file, quickly and silently on moccasined feet, at a slack-kneed pace that left me breathless. They seemed to have become strangers to me, to have taken on something of the alien, untouched wildness of the place itself. I felt that if I spoke now they would round on me with a dark, incognizant stare—even hostile.

Around us, as we climbed, rose the gaunt stumps and boughs of trees, devoid of foliage and bearing only a few twigs. They had a stark, blackened appearance, as if charred by fire, but their condition was due to the furious south and south-east winds which had whipped them bare and stunted their growth. At length we came to a pocket of level ground, with the mountainside sheer above us and a group of low and curiously conical hills shutting out sight and sound of the sea on the other side. In this pocket even the air seemed to pause. Directly ahead of us the ground rose to a sharp ridge. The islanders approached it warily, and I gathered that the cattle were near. Fortunately the wind was against us. We climbed the slope to the ridge and lay flat just below the crest. Then I peeped over and gasped with surprise.

Immediately below us the land fell away steeply to a wide plain that must have been one of the largest tracts of level ground on the island. Along its edge the sea curled and frothed. At its
Far end the land rose ruggedly again to meet the wall of the mountain which marched out to sea, closing the shelf. Over this plain were scattered cattle, a great herd, larger than I had expected. Most of them were lying down, many of the cows accompanied by calves. The bulls were standing on the outskirts, and the whole herd had an air of alertness not to be found in the few domestic cattle that were kept at the settlement. One black bull on the near edge of the herd was looking at the ridge where we lay with a fixity that seemed to show suspicion of our presence. Yet it was impossible that he should have got wind of us.

The islanders were peering through the grass, lying flat on their stomachs, examining the cattle. The distance was too great to reveal any brands or other distinguishing marks. Half in jest I asked Clement:

'Well, have you spotted the one we're after?'

With calm seriousness he replied:

'That young black one with the white nose, way obber the far soyde.'

I was sure there were at least as many black steers as red ones in the herd, and they all seemed to have white noses.

In spite of the black bull's suspicious scrutiny of the ridge, the rest of the herd still lay scattered, unaware of our presence. The nearest animal was about half a mile away. Yet the instant that Godfrey Glass, rifle in hand and with hardly any movement of his feet, quietly raised his lanky form, every beast in the herd was on its feet; the black bull had retreated a few rapid paces, then wheeled again to join his belligerent stare to a multitude of others all fixed unerringly on the ridge, where a group of figures now stood up.

Quickly and quietly Godfrey led the way down the steep slope to the plain, where the cattle were beginning to mill, the bulls on the outside, the cows and calves in the centre. There was no lowing or bellowing, only a deep rumble that grew more and more fearsome as we approached. Hundreds of hooves were stamping, hundreds of horns were tossing with agitation which
might have been fear, but to me signified ferocity. Faster and more noisily they circled as we drew near; then, to my unvoiced relief, the black leader broke the mill-wheel and headed the herd away in a lumbering stampede towards the far side of the plain.

The men followed at an unhurried lope over the uneven ground, trying to keep their eyes on the young steer that was their target. They seemed to be in no hurry to come to close quarters, and every time that they approached within shooting range the herd went high-tailing away in a fresh direction after its leader. At first this direction was always away from us, but soon anger overcame fear and our black opponent changed his tactics, bearing down straight upon us at the head of a thundering charge. Then there was a frantic scramble and flounder to get out of their path as the cattle thudded past, spittle flying from their mouths.

The islanders cheered and shouted, and two Glass brothers roared with laughter as lumbering George Glass lost his footing and rolled himself furiously over and over to get clear of the pounding hooves. This sport, it seemed, offered most entertainment to the cattle or to a detached observer; and since I could not be of the former party I decided to become the latter. Retiring from the chase, I climbed the smooth, pyramidal side of one of the cone-shaped hills that I had noticed earlier. From the top, like the spectator at Sir Roger’s beagle-hunt, I could command a grandstand view.

The village people said that these hill-cones contained bottomless holes. At the vertex of the cone I had climbed was the mouth of a hole, almost completely overgrown with bushes. Whether the hole was ‘bottomless’ could not be ascertained; but a large stone thrown down the opening, after ricocheting from the sides, sent back no audible thud from the depths. I concluded that these holes were originally blowholes of the volcano of which the island consisted: the symmetrical cones of earth had presumably been thrown up ages before by the same volcanic action.

From the hill-top the whole plain was visible. For an hour men chased cattle and cattle chased men from one end of it to the
other. Only three shots were heard, and it was the third which brought down the young steer. The rest of the herd rumbled away to the other end of the level ground, where they formed a long and motionless rank: not one pair of horns tossed nor one pair of eyes dropped its relentless stare, as they watched the little group of men in the middle of the plain skin the fallen beast and cut the meat into portions small enough to carry back to the boat. When at length the party began to move back towards the ridge I joined them. They were in high spirits, their hands smeared with the blood of the beef they were carrying. Only Douglas, the celebrated marksman, looked crestfallen.

‘Who shot the steer?’ I asked.

‘Jawhnnie!’ was the chorus, and Johnny Repetto, the Chief’s youngest brother, a freckle-faced giant, grinned with embarrassed pride.

The cattle, as we topped the ridge on our way back to the beach, were still ranged in an implacable phalanx, bitter but unyielding. It was mid afternoon when we pushed the boat off again. As the wind was against us and rather stronger now than it had been in the morning, the men had to row back. Once round Sandy Point, we ran head-on into the wind and a rough sea. For an hour the boat seemed hardly to move, while the hands strained at the oars. The men encouraged one another with gasped phrases: ‘Lawng strocks!’—‘Fishermen’s strocks!’ The wind battered us, water flew about us, darkness came. At last the boat rounded Big Point and came into the calm lee water. We were nearly home and it was late in the evening. The men became jovial, as they always did when nearing the home beach. They began to sing and laugh as they rowed. Gordon at the tiller smiled happily. Moonlight was gleaming on the oar blades as they leapt like flying-fish above the water after each stroke; bursts of phosphorescence ran like silver fire on the black surface. It was a good home-coming.

Off Little Beach we stood up in the boat and gave tongue together in the long-drawn hail: ‘Sail ho-o-oh!’ Lights appeared in the village and began to bob through the darkness
towards the beach. The scene reminded me of the night when Arthur Repetto had returned unexpectedly from the Nightingale trip, but this time I saw it from the opposite point of view. As we came in through the kelp-reef, the women were already waiting with pots of hot tea and boys were waving smoky torches to guide us in.
CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Season of Spite

EARLY in May the island was assaulted by an easterly gale. The surf roared right up under the cliffs and lashed itself into a fine frenzy, smashing one of the boats and snatching away the lower portion of Little Beach Road. Seen from the cliff-top, the sea was a mass of churning white that drove in headlong stampede to the shore, thundering at the rock-face until it vibrated under one's feet. Flecks of salty spume, like foam from gaping jaws, were hurled high by the breakers. White froth seethed and jostled about the black rocks that stood impregnably in the surf, and the sea flung about them its stinging spray, only to be blown back like smoke by the wind.

The gale lasted for four days. At night the island seemed to quiver and groan like a ship in a storm. The fifth day dawned a tremulous gold, the air washed clean, the contours of rock and headland scoured by the wind. A rainbow trembled into existence and alighted tiptoe on the sea. Water drained in several cascades from the rim of the mountain; 'watrons' bubbled brimful to the cliff-edge; the big fall arched its swelling neck,
the crest of it blown back upwards in a mane of spray. 'Did you never see water fly uphill?' laughed the islanders, happy like stormy petrels when the wind blew.

Before midday Arthur Repetto reported large quantities of wood washed ashore in the region of Pigbite. Five dinghies made journeys to the beaches beyond Big Point and the men discovered that wood lay all along the 'east'ard.' They brought word, too, that some thousands of tons of earth had slipped into the sea near Sandy Point where the slight fall in March had almost brought disaster to the apple outing.

Normally an islander finding drift-wood claimed it as his own. If he was unable to carry it home at once, he would 'put it up,' that is, build it into a neat stack beyond the reach of the surf. Another islander finding it would know from the stack that the wood had been claimed. But on this occasion there was so much wood and the surf was still so menacing that Chief named a day for all able men to go round to the eastern beaches and 'put up' the wood lying there, so that it would not be washed away. It was then to be shared equally.

In the week following the storm, four little American 'liberty' ships, all eastward bound, put in to the island one after another. They had suffered damage to their cargoes and radio equipment. Unfortunately the sea was too heavy for the islanders to gain much trade from the unexpected visitors. Two days after the last one left a small party of us stood in the evening and watched a ship's rescue raft float in from the sea on to the beach at Flat-rocks, where the island men secured it. The rations were gone, but the fresh-water tank was still half full.

For some weeks the wind remained in a turbulent mood. The air was thick with dust and litter blown from the thatch of the cottage roofs. Walking was difficult and children were kept indoors. It was dangerous to approach the cliff-top except in human chains of three or four, holding on to one another's hands. The wind did not blow steadily, but in bursts and salvoes, and the villagers advised us: 'When you hear a puff comin', stand or duck till it's past—then go on quickly.'
On Herald Point the operator huddled over his instruments, listening to the walls battered by relentless gusts, feeling the floor tremble and the whole hut shake, watching his aerials whirled around like skipping-ropes. After four hours the relief operator, in flapping oilskins, came scudding before the wind, like a full-rigged schooner—or a mud-spattered goose with her plumes buffeted awry. Flying past, he caught at the fence outside the hut and hung there bedraggled for a moment before lurching forward, his outstretched hands pawing for the door. Once inside he peeled off his dripping oilskins, climbed out of his sea-boots, and collapsed in the chair. The relieved operator laced his sou'wester under his chin and launched himself out into the turmoil. Regaining his feet and bent almost double, he began to battle his way back towards the quarters, stopping every few inches in his progress to turn and lean on the wind while he regained his breath. Sometimes, giving up the attempt, he came flying back like a wet rag blown against the fence.

There were nights when the wind dropped. In its place there was snow on the mountain peak, and the air was gripped in the iron chill of the pack-ice creeping slowly northward from the Antarctic. Other nights were so black that the middle watchman on his way out to the hut at midnight would stumble right past it en route for the cliff-edge, where only the rumble of the surf, suddenly louder, would pull him up sharply, with one foot exploring tentatively the empty darkness in front of him; or his glimmering torch would unexpectedly reveal beneath his very toes the black yawn of Hottentot Gulch. Then the anxious operator on duty in the hut would open the door and peer out, only to see a wavering light coming from the wrong direction and, remembering the island tales of Jack-o’-lantern, would hurriedly slam the door.

Towards the end of May the weather improved a little. There were intervals of sunshine poignantly bright, and the air held a tinge of melancholy, colouring the scene which, soon now, we should be leaving. The land sloped away from the Goat Ridge on the far side of Hottentot Gulch in a way that had long
TOM SWAIN HOLDING FRESHLY CAUGHT CRAYFISH

TWO ISLAND FAMILIES

1. Reg (Bunty) Rogers, his wife Dorothy, and children.
A Tristan child of to-day. She is wearing shoes bought from the store.

2. Johnny Repetto, his wife Margaret, and children. The boy's sailor-suit, the shoes worn by Johnny and his wife, and the slightly shorter feminine dresses reveal post-war fashions.
become familiar through the windows of the wireless hut. And those cottages, so low, so grey, so earth-born under their steeps of bleached thatch! Their identity was lost among the bolder outlines of nature. Through the haze of sun-shot mist the village became almost invisible, a confusion of irregularities among the rocks and gullies, a crumble of dust at the mountain foot. It was impossible to believe that there really were homes there.

At close quarters nothing could have been more desolate than the cottage gardens, now that even the few geraniums and dwarf sunflowers had died. If the islanders had all died too, or disappeared, like the goats and the seals, it would have taken the wind and the rain and the sun only a year or two to obliterate all traces of their lives there. Stone walls would have tumbled among the boulders; thatch and rafters would have caved in, becoming again mere hay and sticks; the grass would have sprouted through the floors and around the doorsteps. Nature, which had already devoured the huts on Stony Beach and Inaccessible Island, was always waiting just round the corner of the mountain.

At Whitsun came an annual event in which all the men and boys—and dogs—of the settlement took part. This was the great Rat Hunt at the Potato Patches.

The ‘hunt’ occupied a whole day. It was a cold day, but keen, clear, and fine, with a spring in the turf and a tingle in the air. During the morning most of our party found an opportunity of joining the outing. The men were divided into gangs, under leaders, and the hunt took the form of a competition. They were armed with ‘spears’ made from sticks with large fish-hooks, hammered out straight, fastened to the ends. The real hunting was done by the dogs, half a dozen or so attached to each team: they located the nests among the walls of the enclosures; they announced their finds with barks and eager yelps, then stood by, as the nests were uncovered, to pounce upon the rats. The men and boys assisted by stabbing with their spears among the loose-piled stones or lunging at the rats as they broke cover. As each rat was killed one of the boys would pick it up, nip the base of its
tail between his thumb and forefinger and, with a sharp, deft movement, remove the outer skin, leaving a blood-stained stem. These tail-skins were kept as a record of the number of rats killed. At the end of the day achievements would be compared and the team holding most tails would be the winners. There was no prize, but the element of competition stimulated the hunters.

The dogs needed no stimulation. As the men pulled aside the stones where a nest had been found, Watch and Bruno and the others stood waiting, their jowls drooling and every limb quivering with eagerness for the kill. Their fever spread to the men. There was tension in waiting to see which way the rats would jump; there was savage enthusiasm in stabbing frantically at the would-be escapers; there was fierce triumph in hearing the squeal of a skewered victim. Grey bodies, with pale, exposed bellies and red, raw tail-stems strewed the grass. Blood smeared the hands that nipped off the tails; blood dyed the spikes of the miniature 'spears'; blood raced in the veins of the hunters, colouring cheeks that tingled in the frosty air.

There was little talking. The only sounds were the excited barking of the dogs as they found a nest, their agonized whining as they waited for it to be uncovered, the squeaking panic of the rats in the wall before they darted out, the panting of the men as they jumped and stabbed, and—most animal-like of all—the occasional yell of human triumph as spike pierced flesh.

At midday the women appeared, bringing the men's lunches in sheepskin bags. Even Widow Charlotte came, balancing her great, unwieldy body on the back of her diminutive donkey, Nancy. Meals were prepared and eaten in a little stone hut, where a fire had been lit. On a day that was ideal for the enjoyment of food in the open air it seemed to us ridiculous to crowd into a dark interior, dense with wood-smoke and steam from boiling potatoes; but the islanders would have thought it barbaric to eat out of doors in the presence of women and 'outsiders.' They filled the hut, the men standing or squatting on the earthen floor, the older women sitting on boxes and bags of potatoes, while the younger ones jostled for places at the fire. Even the dogs
squeezed inside, sniffing and snarling at one another in the sharpened rivalry of the chase.

The islanders had no conception of organizing such gatherings on a communal basis. As in all other aspects of island life, it was every family for itself, and there were shouts of anger and scorn for the housewife who failed her men-folk by losing—to a more thrusting neighbour—a chance of getting her pot on the fire.

After lunch the hunt continued until the wintry sunset stained the sea and the mountain-face with the same blood colour as daubed the hands of the hunters. The air became thick and murky, as if glutted with bloodshed. The dogs tired of yelping and the gangs of men converged with slow, satisfied steps on the road, where the women waited with the donkeys. Bloody trophies were counted and recounted, amid argument and contradiction. Johnny Repetto’s team was finally acknowledged the winner, with 133 tails. Johnny flourished them aloft in a crimson hand and declared that he would hang them in triumph above his mantelpiece. Margaret, his wife, with sharp, handsome features and snapped black eyes, threatened instead to feed them to him in soup for his supper.

In all, 620 rats were killed that day at the Patches; but there would be hundreds more to gnaw the potatoes before the spring came.
CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The Sea’s Bounty

August, as old Gaeta remarked, was a ‘rusty’ month—the last, raw edge of winter, grating like a rusted file. The breeze was still a cold blade, cutting the sea into sharp ridges. Snow was seen on the peak by the men out in their fishing-dinghies: for there were intervals of fine, if bleak, weather, during which fishing was the main activity.

When the lee was ‘up’—that is, when the wind was from the south or south-east and the sea immediately off the settlement was in the shelter of the mountain—many dinghies might be seen bobbing on the relatively calm water. There would be good catches, at this time of the year, of snoek, blue-fish, red soldier-fish, cod, mackerel, ‘five-finger’ and, nearer inshore, crawfish or crayfish. Small cuttle-fish or, as the islanders called them, ‘catfish’ were used as bait, the men and the boys tearing pieces from the jelly-like tentacles with their teeth to fix to the hooks. The village folk liked the snoek and the blue-fish. Often the men would row out two or three miles in search of the larger blue-fish and were very disgruntled when they brought inboard by mistake a great steambras, which they could not eat. We preferred the flavour of the small soldier-fish and five-finger.

Whales were a constant nuisance to the fishermen. Schools
of them were now back in the vicinity of the settlement, often close in to the shore. Throughout the day and more especially at night they could be heard blowing—regularly sounding off the watches, it seemed, on their weird, watery trumpets. They always followed the calm water, and so, when conditions were most suitable for the island fishermen, the whales would be basking and playing in the lee just off the beaches. They did not, of course, attack the boats, being generally placid and not unamiable creatures: seen at close quarters from the boats, as they stood upright on their tails looking like immense bottles floating upside-down in the water, the expression of their faces—shaggy with barnacles, like long whiskers—was almost benign. But they had a habit of rising directly underneath boats or so close alongside that they made rowing impossible. One whale, breaking water close to a dinghy, canted it over so suddenly that Sidney Glass was thrown overboard and landed on the whale's back. The whale submerged, carrying Sidney with it, but, instead of sounding, surfaced again a few yards farther off, still bestridden by the sodden, breathless islander. The rest of the boat's crew cheered and shouted with laughter. When Sidney had forsaken his mount and swum back, he was helped into the boat by his brother Godfrey, with no greater harm than a cut in his leg from the hard, sharp edge of the whale's fin.

Sharks also swam in these waters. Sometimes the islanders killed one, but rarely troubled to bring it ashore. I did see one that had been killed and brought to the beach by Johnny Baptist Lavarello. Its great, grinning mouth, about a foot across, was armed with a double row of teeth. The jaws had to be levered open with a strong stick and when released they slammed shut like a steel trap. When Johnny removed some of the shark's skin, the flesh appeared remarkably white and looked edible. The islanders had never tried eating it, though they sometimes boiled down the liver, from which they obtained a very clear oil for burning in their lamps.

More frequently they made oil from the blubber of sea-elephants. These monsters were about the strangest of the
creatures that formed the islanders' harvest from the waters around them. They belonged to the same family as the seal and sea-lion, but were much bigger, the longest being as much as twenty feet, with stiff whiskers and two long, down-curving tusks or fangs. The islanders spoke of sea-leopards with spotted coats, but I never saw one of these. I had seen three sea-elephants on Tristan, and the fourth was shot by the Rogers twins, 'Bunty' and Rudolph, on Big Beach one morning in August.

When I went down to see it the creature was still alive, although it had been shot through the left eye. Its eyeball had emerged tri-parially out of the socket, rather like a section of a telescope. The other eye was half closed, but showed by its brightness that life still painfully existed. The great body was smeared with blood intermingled with fine grains of black sand that were almost indistinguishable from the hundreds of flies that had settled on the animal's head. The flies crawled into the half-bunged eye and out on to the parapet of the blinded one. They wallowed in the thick, bubbling blood that oozed from the nostrils. The elephant was bleeding internally and every attempt at breathing was choked by the blood flowing into throat and nostrils. The creature retched, with convulsive heavings of its huge fat carcass. The convulsions sent rippling movements along its flabby sides and forced the blood, mingled with bile and water, to gush out of the gaping mouth and to spurt from the nostrils in two streams, of which the arc gradually diminished as the retching stopped, until there was merely a treacly dribble.

I asked Bunty to kill the elephant at once. He said that he couldn't spare another bullet, but he poked a stick into the flabby belly and rocked the body a few times on its side. All the muscles tightened spasmodically in one last, gigantic retch that sent the blood washing out of the yawning, straining mouth in such a flood that even the flies rose in a cloud from the animal's face and settled again only as its head fell back in the purpled sand, finally exhausted. The one unmutilated eye was almost closed, and over it was spreading a glassy film. A few subsiding swells undulated the soft belly and the sea-elephant was dead.
The twins left it on the beach and returned to the settlement to fetch their donkeys to carry the blubber. They were going to skin the elephant in the afternoon.

It was a fine but sombre day, with the wind from the south-east, so that five dinghies were off fishing in the lee-water north of the settlement. At about two o'clock in the afternoon I walked along the Upper Road with little Bernard Dominic Repetto and three unsaddled donkeys, halter-led. ‘Barnett,’ as he was called, an intelligent boy of about twelve, pointed knowingly to the distant white caps east of the settlement and observed that the ‘heas’erly breeze’ was ‘working out.’ By late afternoon, he prophesied, the wind would have moved right round to the east and the sea would be choppy off the beach.

The twins had already been busy for some time on Big Beach, skinning the elephant. When we arrived I was startled to see a naked, red carcass that had a horrifyingly human aspect as it lay on its back in the sand. With blood-dripping fingers Bunty was holding up one of the flippers while he cut away the last patch of skin from under the arm-pit. The bone of the flipper stuck out alarmingly like a human elbow. The thick, grey skin had now been completely removed from the body as far up as a line round the neck and under the chin. Below that line the body was raw meat: above, the grey face preserved a look of absurd geniality, with its long, stiff whiskers standing out like those of some martial old gentleman lying on his back in the sedate, pot-bellied nudity of his bath.

Bunty and Rudolph began cutting away the thick layer of fat from beneath the skin for blubber. They were ‘assisted’ by a number of boys, aged from six upwards, who had assembled on the scene. Donald Hagan, I noticed, was—inevitably—among them: he would not have missed any adventure on the beach. Satisfied with having got their hands and arms smeared with blood, the boys ran off into the surf which was already making up heavily on the beach. They splashed about, trying to rescue a small cask that had drifted in but was carried away from them by the receding surf at every attempt to salvage it. ‘Barnett,’
considering himself at twelve years old one of the men of the party, remained with Bunty and 'Twin' and remarked with contempt on the behaviour of 'those boys.'

When the work of stripping was finished and the lengths of skin and blubber had been laid across the backs of the three sad-eyed, acquiescent donkeys, the boys eagerly rolled the carcass of the sea-elephant down to the edge of the water, where the surf reached out and snatched it back. For a while the red body was rocked up and down, as if affectionately, by the waves. It seemed even to come to life again, curling and rolling in the water, still with that shocking resemblance to a human body. A couple of sea-hens, having waited their opportunity, wheeled low and settled on the floating corpse, pecking at its eyes. The boys waited long enough to 'fire' stones at the birds before following the men and the slow-stepping donkeys up the road from the beach. The sun was already mellowing the sky in the west; and, as 'Barnett' had foretold, the breeze had 'backed' so considerably that the choppiness of the sea off the settlement was making the fishing-dinghies 'pynte' one after another for the shore.
IN A GUST of energy and of almost predatory goodwill, I had been painting the interior of David’s house, using paint smuggled from our own stores. The supply had been sufficient for only one thin coat, but for the present the boarded insides of the cottage shone sleekly in two shades of battleship-grey, and the name-board of the Mabel Clark above the fire-place gleamed a dark green, with proud black lettering. For the duration of my surreptitious activity the living-room had been vacated and the family had moved into the ‘east side’—the smaller room occupied by David’s mother. So, when I came to the house in the evening, after sneaking a glance of stolen pride into the long, glossy-walled state-room, which now looked like the dim after-cabin of a timbered ship, I had to scrape open the badly hung door of the inner partition and join the company in the less resplendent apartment of the ‘heas’ soyde.’

It was a square room, with a particularly solid-looking fireplace and well-trimmed, flush stone walls, which had not been—like the walls in David’s part of the house—lined with wood.
Old Susan had tried to improve their appearance with cuttings from ancient magazines that had been left by one of the ministers. That she had not understood many of the crudely coloured illustrations was clear from the fact that she had pasted them on the wall upside-down. However, this made little difference now, since most of them had peeled loose and hung down in tattered fringes, casting odd shadows in the lamplight. If the room had been submitted to the hard, revealing brilliance of electric light, it would have appeared bare and shabby; but the friendly glow of a bird-oil lamp awoke restless shadows in the corners, made a fantastic map of the cracks and depressions in the wall surface and evoked the inherent mystery of household objects.

On the table against the wall, beside the teapot standing in readiness for my visit and the container of petrel fat in which the lamp-wick burned, lay a little pile of sheep’s wool, picked, washed, and oiled ready for carding. And beside the hearth, in easy reach of the wool on the table, Old Susan, seated on an up-ended cask, plied the two wooden ‘cards’ on her knee. She did not raise her eyes as I entered, but her low, cracked voice called a greeting across the room and invited me to sit down, while her hands continued without interruption their rhythmical scratching of one card on the other. From a lean, dark face at the other side of the hearth came a flash of splendid white teeth as David gave me his warm, shy smile of welcome. ‘Good evenings’ over, I found a seat near Emily on the long, blanket-covered couch which evidently served as Susan’s bed.

David relapsed into the pose that was his customary relaxation after a day’s fishing or ‘puttin’ in.’ Perched on a box, his feet set firmly apart, his elbows on his knees, back rounded, he gazed into the flames and sucked in the hollows of his bronze cheeks as he drew at his pipe. A forelock of black hair was brushed across the upper part of his brow, where the skin, screened from the weather by the peak of his cap, was surprisingly pale. He leaned forward to blow up the embers under the pot in which water was boiling for my ‘drink,’ then turned on his seat and taking his pipe from his mouth asked: ‘Iss you-all comin’ along of
the hoighlanders to Noightingale this month for pinnamin heggs?'
I told him that it was unlikely that I should be able to join this
trip. He seemed distressed: to David it was a prospect for
regret that I should leave Tristan without visiting Nightingale
Island.

Against the third wall, on a bench, sprawled Wilson, Emily's
unregarded suitor, his chin sunk on his sullen chest, his long legs
in white woollen stockings stretched out in self-assertive non-
chalance. He was trying to ignore the fact that he was ignored.
But a malicious croak from old Susan—‘What you iss sitting there
fa’, Wilson? Ain’t you got no talk?’—repeatedly shattered his
precarious composure. The old woman sat upright on her little
keg, her feet close together, head slightly lowered, her billowing
skirts almost hiding the seat. Her lower lip was thrust out, her
old eyes half closed amid wrinkling skin, her wispy eyebrows
shot up in a myopic stare at the work in which her hands but not
her mind were absorbed. A faded green kerchief was knotted
about her head, with a roll of grey hair and fine silver threads
showing in front. A grotesque shadow wavered on the wall
alongside her like the silhouette of a witch engaged in some
sinister ritual.

Emily's mother and her young sister Angela and the two boys,
Donald and Piers, were already asleep in the 'west side,'
breathing the smell of fresh paint—which had kept the children's
curiosity alive for days.

Among the flickering lights and the dark, still figures in their
sombre poses, the centre of life and colour in Susan’s room was
Emily herself. Even while she sat quietly at my side on the bed,
she seemed full of vitality. Leaning my shoulders back against
the frail partition wall, I could watch the poise of her head with
its gleaming black hair gathered at the nape of the neck, the
glowing curve of her cheek, like the side of a dusky peach, the
mobile play of her rounded features as she turned her vivacious
attentions from one person to another. She sat erect on the edge
of the couch, wearing a bright, yellow-patterned dress—'Yalla'
for jalous!' she always said—and a red sash. Ostensibly she was
knitting, as the island women invariably were, but at every teasing remark that babbled from her lips, her hands holding the needles fell still in her lap. Her mother usually had to finish in haste the knitting of any garment that Emily had promised.

By now her shyness had completely given place to buoyant energy. Springing suddenly from the bed, she bounced towards the hearth on her moccasins, with a rustle and sweep of many petticoats, to see for herself why the water was taking so long to boil. Her movement in that dark room with its motionless figures was like the bustling of a noisy bird of gay plumage—a bird that was plump enough to make the floor-boards vibrate under its feet.

‘What’s got into ’at owd pawt?’ she inquired of the chimney, and gave the pot a thrust farther into the red crumbling sticks.

Crouching on her heels before the hearth, her skirts outspread on the floor, she looked back mockingly over her shoulder, her cheeks curving and her fathomless dark eyes dancing like the fire-light.

‘Waffa’ you didn’t bring me no sweets from you’ canteen to-noight?’ she demanded. Then, relapsing into the third person and addressing the room at large, as was a habit of hers, she exclaimed in a lilting drawl: ‘Moind you, ’at man iss a mean fella!’

Her father muttered rebukingly down his pipe-stem, and the old woman, without looking up from her scraping cards, screeched in a thin, quavering voice:

‘Boye de Good Massy, ’at Hemly iss a higorant gal!’

Emily’s lips parted in a smile of delight at having so impudently outraged the island code of hospitality. With her brown fingers she tore a morsel to eat from one of the freshly caught fish that hung to dry, belly-opened, from hooks in the wide chimney-place. As soon as the pot boiled she snatched it from the fire and proceeded to make a brew of that anonymous ‘drink’ which was the token of welcome. ‘Teeming out’ a cupful, she advanced on me with careful, mincing steps, balancing in one hand the cup and saucer and in the other a bowl of ‘sweetening.’
This evening ritual was always an occasion of exaggerated politeness and barely constrained mirth.

While I sipped the hot, black liquid and David smoked and Emily chattered, the brushing of old Susan's wool-cards continued with unremitting monotony. It paused only when she stopped to remove a roll of wool from the lower card and drop it on the growing pile of such rolls on the seat of a chair that she had turned around to face her; the chair stood waiting in the middle of the lamp-lit room, patiently, like an absorbed child listening to a story at its nurse's knee. The old woman took a fresh handful of wool from the table, flicked it on to the upper card and subsided again into the slow rhythm of her relentless wrist action. The same performance was repeated over and over again.

David threw some more sticks on the fire. Little flames shot up at once, flickering on the various cooking-pots, lighting up the cobwebs at the back of the chimney, and chasing tiny shadows among the lumps of soot that caked the sloping firestone—a distinguishing feature of the Hagan cottage. The wood was fairly green and sizzled when it was first thrown on. Sap oozed from it in a whitish froth, and David observed that the men sometimes used this as a shaving-soap. They also used wood-ash as soap for washing, when nothing better was available.

Eventually Emily teased herself into tiredness and impulsively curled up on the bed like a cat, at my back, her face buried in the pillow. My left hand was underneath her side, tightly clutched in her own. It was pleasant to grasp a hand that was young and gentle, yet strong and used to hard work, the knuckles roughened but the palm soft and warm and before long a little moist. She was drowsy, yet still half awake. When some turn in the desultory talk amused her, a subdued gurgle emerged from the pillow and my wrist beneath her side felt the ripple of her stomach. I wondered whether David understood that while I replied solemnly to his remarks about potatoes and boat trips, his daughter and his guest were indulging in the only physical intimacy that was possible in the presence of the family.

I felt completely at my ease in that room. David's voice was
low and very slow, and there were long, unstrained pauses in which I heard above the scrape of the wool-cards the rising wind in the chimney, the crackle of wood collapsing on the red hearth, and interminably the distant boom of the surf. The tender flame of the lamp had become smaller and was haloed in a faint, golden mist: the wick needed pricking up with a pin. But no one made the effort. Presently Emily began to snore in a most unfeminine key and her hand relaxed its grip on mine, which had become very hot and almost numb. The evening had arrived at that point when David took off his moccasins and changed his position on the box, leaning back against the wall, stretching out his legs, crossing one over the other and bringing one forearm across his body to cup the elbow of the other, which still held his pipe to his mouth. By now, however, both our pipes were smoked out; we merely sucked on them and clicked the stems between our teeth as occasionally we talked.

So, after the laughter and the teasing, the evening petered out quite naturally, like a sputtering candle or a sinking fire, until the visitor rose and left with a quiet ‘Good night’—leaving behind the disgruntled but ever-tenacious Wilson—the latch of the outer door rattling jaggedly in the still night.
CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Time to Go

Inside the hut the only sound was the buzzing of flies, that announced the return of spring. Outside the sunshine was warm, but a breeze ruffled the sea. A few clouds drifted—oh, so slowly!—round the rim of the mountain. From the south window were visible some cottages at the western end of the village, where the road emerged through a deep cutting behind an outlying house (Willy Lavarello’s, wasn’t it?) and wound its way out towards the Potato Patches. Occasional figures passed along that road, some of them men, some of them donkeys. Thatch and grass were bleached, cottages and rocks were the same sad grey, barely distinguishable one from the other. Those black holes were doorways and windows. On one of the garden walls gleamed a white speck—washed stockings, perhaps. And round the gable-end of a cottage a splodge of green—was it a bush?—seemed to be creeping furtively. Behind, the slope of loose red stone and rubble, darkening in places to purple, lay steep against the wall of the mountain, as if swept there by a giant broom.

It was all so familiar—and tinged lately with a faint nostalgia. The end of our exile was near. November was our fourteenth month on the island. Every day now, since a message had come from the Cape, we looked out to sea with mingled hope and dread, expecting our relief ship.
The seasons had come full circle and we were back in spring. Through the open door of the hut appeared the sea, broken only by the black spot of a fishing-dinghy and at intervals the white plume of a spouting whale. In my ear-phones was the faint, insistent note of morse, a voice from across the ocean, from a world thousands of miles away. It seemed incredible that those tiny sounds could concern us, that listening to them mattered as much as watching the man in the fishing-dinghy or the boy riding a donkey along the road—or even the whale white-watering on the horizon.

Our outlook had veered round to that of the islanders. From being 'outsiders' we had become participants in the local life—guilty at times, perhaps, of interfering. Our intimacy with the villagers carried, especially for them, a penalty. It could not be kind of us to inspire their affections. We could never really share their life: we were in danger of intruding into it. The moment we began to feel the attraction of staying, we knew it was time for us to go.

We had seen a peaceful community living without crime, policed only by public opinion; a people surviving on a monotonous, soft diet, yet with excellent teeth and rugged, healthy bodies; a people with almost no variety of amusement, yet contented, even happy. At first they had seemed sombre, a little forbidding. But the Tristan islanders have been conditioned by their isolation. Experience has not taught them how to relax with strangers, to smile with the ready warmth of islanders in the Pacific or the Caribbean. Too often their shyness makes them appear grave and aloof. To us they were unfailingly polite, but there was nothing servile about their readiness to say 'Sir'; even among themselves they often used a formality that seemed surprising in a society where all were familiar neighbours. If at times they fell into the habit of begging from us, it was without whining or insistence; and the habit sprang from years of privation. Coupled with it were traditions of hospitality and generosity; if the cottage contained little food, that little must be given to the visitor and no mention made of the shortage.
In spite of the inevitable gossip of a tiny settlement, there were few open quarrels. The only fights we saw were friendly tussles—such as were a part of the local courting customs. Fathers were strict and sometimes harsh with their children; but this no more indicated cruelty than the beating of dogs and donkeys. Such treatment was in accord with the hard way of life. The men were equally capable of showing a rough affection and the family atmospheres were happy. Laughter was much commoner than we had at first thought. When unselfconscious the islanders showed a humour that was quick and gay, sometimes with a keen edge. They had a sharp eye for absurdities, a sense of the grotesque, in themselves and others; and they often found the vivid turn of speech to express it.

Above all, they were optimists—for all their dour countenances. Faced with a howling gale, they called it 'a good blow'; caught in a downpour of rain, they described the weather as 'showery.' This language spoke their contentment; and that contentment was their greatest danger. Living in isolation they knew no competition. Everything on the island belonged to them; they had no neighbouring community to challenge them—and therefore no motive for aiming at higher standards. Conservatism had become the island disease. The agriculture was more primitive than it need have been. This was not due entirely to ignorance and lack of tools. The island men knew that by varying their crops they could have improved the soil, but they did not like to make the change—just as the women did not like to change from the old, hand-turned spinning-wheels to the treadle-operated ones that had been sent to them.

The contentment of the islanders led to improvidence. Only a small portion of the arable land near the settlement was cultivated and the men rarely planted enough potatoes to meet the possibility of a bad season. The cattle were left to forage for themselves through the winter and many of them died because there was not enough grass. The islanders expected this to happen, but they trusted that enough animals would survive and that the spring would bring fresh grass to fatten them. The men had
killed off all the birds on the main island, so that the grubs had no enemies and feasted securely on the potatoes. Now the islanders had to cross to Nightingale and Inaccessible to fetch eggs, guano, and oil for cooking; yet with the same rashness they were destroying the bird-life on those islands.

Many of the hardships faced by the village were due to this lack of concern about the future. The people were fatalists, hoping for the best but inured to the worst. They greeted all adversities with the saying: 'We's used to it.' They were used to finding their crops spoilt by grubs and rats; they were used to living on fish when there were no potatoes left—and on nothing when the sea was too rough for the fishing-boats; they were used to washing themselves and their clothes in the cold streams and rubbing their teeth clean with a rag dipped in brine; they were used to a fly plague in the summer and a flea plague all the year; they were used to long periods when the world forgot their existence. All these conditions were tolerable because they were familiar: the only thing hard to bear was change.

Custom was the ultimate court of appeal. There were no laws, either written or orally transmitted; but there were standards. These—perhaps because an offender knew that he would face not merely the sentence of a single judge but the opprobrium of a whole society—were more rigid than a formulated code. In a sense many of the islanders were amoral, but their behaviour accorded with the highest morality. Honesty was the common policy because deception was hard to conceal. Promiscuity was rare for the same reason. There was no vice and no perversion. Venereal disease was as unknown as measles and scarlet fever. In questions of conduct the individual succumbed to general opinion. Yet in all practical matters the islanders were individualists, incapable of corporate action. The settlement was a republic of the simplest kind, bound by accepted practice enforced by common consent. It was based on the family, but lacked one essential feature—the authority of the head. The Chief was merely a spokesman: he might command respect, but not obedience. This was not a personal failing, but
a limitation imposed on his office. There was no reason, to the minds of his fellow colonists, for acknowledging in an elected one of their own number a wisdom or power transcending theirs. This insistence on equality often created an impasse when public action was required. When no one would take the lead or make the crucial decision the result was inertia.

The islanders were not exactly lazy. They could work hard enough when they appreciated the need; they would strain for hours at an oar or heave great stones when building a house: but they would rarely combine voluntarily in any communal undertaking. Once by co-operative effort they had built the church, but only under the direction of a minister, Father Rogers. During our stay they had worked in gangs under appointed leaders and even for regular hours. Most of the work had been for the benefit of the village as much as the station, but only the authority of the doctor as commanding officer had made it possible. The result was plain for the islanders to see: they could achieve far more by such organized activity than by their unco-ordinated individual efforts. This was one lesson they had learnt from the Navy.

The settlement owed much in the character and human dignity of its inhabitants to its traditions of equality and individualism; but only from regulated labour could it expect better living conditions—or even survival. If the colony was to continue it must change. The islanders needed to develop a communal sense and to embody that in a form of administration acceptable to them all. Some authority would have to be found after the war to replace that which the Navy had temporarily provided. In the past there had been missionaries, to whom the people had paid a deference denied to the Chief. There would probably be other missionaries in the future. But it was in secular and practical matters that guidance and control were most needed. The example of the station had revealed possibilities to the islanders—improvements which they themselves could make to their houses, their sanitation, their farming and social organization, if only they could co-ordinate their energies.
The Admiralty had its own motives for maintaining a signal station on Tristan da Cunha, and the welfare of the islanders, though it might be considered incidentally, was not among them. Now that our draft was due to leave, we liked to think that our presence had conferred some benefit. Other drafts would take our place, but ours had made the first impact on the island life. After the end of the war, when the station would be dismantled, the islanders would never again feel quite so satisfied with their world. In some ways that dissatisfaction was the best legacy we could leave them.
CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Day of Departure

With all the unexpectedness of an impact that has been too long awaited, she arrived one morning—the ship that was to bring our exile to a close, to carry us back to the world of motor-cars, cinemas, sophistication, and war. Out of the dawn mist of the first day in December she came upon us, a little tramp steamer named East Gate, bound from Cape Town to Montevideo. As soon as she signalled that she carried reliefs for the operators ashore, we knew that our immediate future was settled. Our quarters would not accommodate twelve new arrivals and ourselves, so there could be no question of waiting for a ship from the west to take us to the Cape: 'Doc' had no alternative but to request a passage for us aboard the East Gate to South America, from which we might make our own way back to the naval base in South Africa or perhaps even directly to England.

The forenoon of that last day was spent by most of our party in going the round of the village, saying good-bye to the old people, who could not be on the beach in the afternoon to see us depart.
We paid our farewell visits to Mrs Repetto, Old Sam Swain, Andrew the fiddler who had enlivened our dances, and others of the village elders, then we retired each to the cottage he knew best, to spend the last moments with the islanders who had been his special friends. Most of the village men were busy all the morning bringing the stores ashore from the ship. The children were all down on the cliff-top watching the traffic to and from the beach. Only the women and the old men remained in the cottages.

I had always wanted to leave Tristan in sunshine; and on this day the sun shone brighter and stronger than on any previous day of our stay on the island. As I walked through the village, from the Chief’s house up to Old Sam Swain’s, I seemed to be seeing it all for the first time. In the curiously rarefied sunlight everything had an extra sharpness, a tension of outline which made it appear more immediate, closer, and yet unreal, like a painted set on a stage. For fourteen months, the grass, the houses, the streams, the mountainside had been familiar sights. Now I was perceiving them with a vision that was intense, earnestly so, yet objective, even detached—in something like that state of brightly coloured awareness which comes at the end of a dream, when daylight is already seeping beneath one’s eyelids and a tiny flicker of consciousness is stirring in a corner of one’s brain.

As I stood on the slope below Sam’s cottage, in the higher part of the village, the sea glittered below, as if in a great, burnished bowl. The little steamer appeared absurdly big and close and far below me, although I was not really high up, and the blue bowl of the sea seemed tipped upwards at the horizon. Every effect added to the sense of being an observer, interested but unconcerned in the scene. Reason said that in a few hours I should be on board that ship, bound for another land, but my feet were still on familiar turf, my stomach felt no unaccustomed motions and the rest of my body had as yet no evidence of change.

There was merely a further period of waiting, an extension of that which had gone on for several weeks. The sea looked bluer and the grass looked greener than ever before. There was a
poignancy in their brightness that day. The air had a strange
clearness and emptiness, and the rattle of the ship’s winch filled
the whole of the world with its noise.

The women were more affected by our coming departure than
the men. Most of the girls were in tears and many of their
mothers on the verge of them. Charlotte’s coarse features were
red and puffy. I had lunch at David Hagan’s house and contrived
to be alone with his daughter for a few futile moments of farewell.
I was given a knitted ‘ganzey’ that had been hurriedly finished in
time for the occasion and which, after its final washing, had been
lying out to dry on the wall of the house enclosure all the
morning.

Shortly after midday the relief-party, which seemed in no
hurry to set foot on Tristan, came ashore and made our acquain-
tance. Their first impressions of the island seemed to depress
them. During the afternoon took place the general migration to
Big Beach to watch our departure. Little Joseph Glass and his
brother Conrad carried my kit down to the beach. All the
women and children were assembled there. There was another
period of waiting. Gaeta’s wife said it was the hottest day she
could remember on Tristan. The sand scorched the feet of the
dogs so that they yelped in pain and ran back up the cliff road to
the grass. It burned even through our shoes and must have been
almost intolerable to the islanders in their thin moccasins. Some
of the men were still making journeys to the ship in their boats,
others stood on the beach, waiting. The women formed them-
• selves into orderly ranks and sat, in utter silence, waiting, on the
hot, black sand. They all wore their best dresses, and the little
girls had on their coloured sashes and white ‘kappies.’

Since we were leaving the sooner we got aboard the ship
the better. Yet, for some unformulated reason, we too were
waiting. At length, when we considered that most of the stores
were ashore and after all of our heavier kit had gone out to the
ship, we began the ordeal of leave-taking. The women stood up,
still in their brightly coloured rows. Passing among them, we
received a kiss and a hand-shake from each and said good-bye.
All tears were suppressed now and only an occasional sob distorted a farewell smile. Conscientiously, but a little hurriedly, we moved from one bright dress to another, like bees passing along rows of sweet-peas. Faces went by like blossoms, some dark, some pale, hardly distinguishable one from another. Sometimes the wrong name was attached to one: I said ‘Goodbye, Lily’ to Violet, forgetting that I had already kissed her sister’s face. Somewhere among them I found Emily’s lips, but they were gone before I realized it and others imprinted in their place. Then we shook hands with the men on the beach and scrambled into one of the waiting boats, suddenly intent on getting ourselves and our personal belongings safely and quickly on board the ship. The actual departure was completed in a few bewildering minutes. Was that Joe Repetto pushing the boat out? There was Gaeta on the beach now! Wave to Gaeta! Joe leaping into the boat as we rode clear of the shingle. Afloat. Too late! Should not set foot on that beach again. Too deep already even to jump out and wade ashore, if I wanted to. We had departed.

But having done that we still took a long time to get away from the island. Slowly the boat was brought round, just beyond the surf, and Joe rigged the rudder and tiller, taking his time while we rocked among the kelp. We all watched him intently, not looking back at the beach. Then the chuck of oars started and we moved into the middle of the kelp-reef. I had to look back now, but it wasn’t possible to see properly so long as a thick, golden mist kept quivering before my eyes. Rapid blinking seemed to clear the mist. The watchers on the beach were all very still, the women sitting again in their gaily dressed rows, as if waiting primly to be photographed. None of them waved or cheered. They just sat watching. All looked very much alike, young and old. But there was one at the end of a row, in a white dress with a red kerchief, bright red, over smooth, dark hair. She sat perfectly still, staring back until she became a white blur. Then her head went down, and the woman behind her—a large one in widow’s black—put a hand on her shoulder.
I sat near Joe Repetto in the stern, and he turned to me and said: ‘You-all got a foine day for to leave the hoighland!’ I swallowed something that seemed the size of a petrel’s egg before replying. From now on we all looked steadily ahead at the ship we were approaching. The island men were never very talkative in the boats.

It was about three-thirty in the afternoon when we climbed the ship’s ladder. We had expected her to be getting under way almost at once. What we had not counted on was being on board, within half a mile of the beach until well after dusk, with nothing to look at but the island and with the island boats still coming off to carry stores to the beach. We went below, we stored our belongings, we made tea, we came up on deck again. The island was still there. Slowly the sun sank on the clearest, warmest day we had known there. Across the dark void in the mountain rim at the top of Hottentot Gulch a white bird sailed gracefully. It reminded me of the white dress that I had seen months earlier, fluttering among the rocks high up on the slope. That dress! I had caught up with it, but where was it now? If anything moved at all on the island, it was no longer visible to us.

As the sun set by Inaccessible, it stained the sea red, and the whole rugged face of Tristan seemed splashed with a crimson dye. Gradually the colour darkened and the tiny houses faded into the black shape of the mountain, looming upwards in the dusk. Several of us stood at the rail of the ship, staring for a long time to see a light from the cottages. David’s house, being white and in the foreground, remained visible after the others, then slowly faded, as if passing out of existence. We kept on staring. From the station, where the newcomers were settling in, lights occasionally pierced the black-out. From the village not a glimmer! Perhaps, however, from behind those dark windows, eyes watched as the ship at last stole away into the night.

A strange night it was for us, alternating between periods of wild hilarity, down in our new mess, with the prospect of shore leave in South America, of our return to the blessed debauch of civilization, and periods of heavy silence, during which figures
climbed the companion-way from the lighted mess and stood or paced in the warm darkness on deck, with the cooling breeze in their faces and the sea rushing under the guard-rail. At such moments, standing alone, I was conscious of a dull pressure that seemed to be located on the left front of my blue jersey. I recognized it as the impress of a dark head that generally rested there at this time in the evening. The feeling was definitely a pressure, not an ache—but a pressure of emptiness, rather like a dent that remains when the weight that caused it has gone. I almost believed that when I went below and removed the jersey, the dent might be straightened out and the pressure would be felt no more.

We were organized into watches, with the ship's company, and after a few restless hours in a strange bunk, I found myself keeping the morning look-out in the port after gun-pit. It was breezy up there. We were steaming almost due west, and as the grey eye of dawn peered bleakly over the horizon astern, it threw startlingly into relief the peak of Tristan, still visible in our wake. It looked small and incredibly alone. A rock in the sea. Did people really live on that rock? It seemed as remote from us, from myself, as from the rest of the world. And then I saw myself stepping among familiar boulders, through an opening in a stone wall, and up the worn steps to a cottage door; I saw myself sitting beside a wide hearth where a pot of water was boiling over a wood-fire; I saw a girl standing beside a table, taking a large safety-pin from her sash to prick up the wick of a little bird-oil lamp, so that its light glowed on her face; I saw her move to the fire, crouching on her heels, and I felt her hand rest on my knee while she leaned forward to blow up the smoking sticks beneath the pot. As she turned her face upwards and smiled, the light danced in her dark eyes. The smoke swirled in front of her face, hiding it, filling the whole room, causing my eyes to smart. Then the breeze, up there in the gun-pit, blew the smoke away, and when I looked again the peak was fading from view as the sun rose above it. That was at about five o'clock in the morning—the last time I saw the rock.
CHAPTER THIRTY

Past and Present

We left Tristan da Cunha on 1st December 1943. Nothing could have been more final than our departure. At first a few letters, inadequately addressed in large, child-like handwriting, followed us about the world, miraculously surviving the hazards of war to catch up with members of our party in distant places. But it was impossible for us to keep in touch, either with one another or with the islanders. Other countries and other experiences enveloped us; other drafts took our place on Tristan, absorbing the interests of the inhabitants.

After the war changes came to the island, at first retrogression and then progress. The naval outpost was vacated, though the main group of buildings was left standing. The weather station remained, staffed by meteorologists from South Africa. As in earlier days, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel sent out a missionary; but he now lived in the wooden house that had been occupied by the naval chaplain, instead of in the old missionary’s cottage, long derelict. What had been our mess and recreation room became the social hall and the school, supervised by the missionary and his wife. For a while conditions were almost the same as before the war. The men fished and grew potatoes, the women carded, spun, and knitted. Local affairs revolved around the church and the ‘ministah.’ But because the
meteorological station had to maintain wireless communication with the Cape the island did not resume the complete isolation it had once known.

In 1947 the Soviet Antarctic Whaling Fleet put in there and exchanged stores for cattle, fish, and sheep. Bartering from whale-ships had been the old practice; but just as the present was settling into a likeness of the past the settlement discovered a new future. In 1948 an organization was formed in South Africa called the Tristan da Cunha Development Company. Marine biologists have declared that the main breeding-grounds of what the islanders call ‘crawfish’ are in the waters about Tristan and Gough Island; and there is a demand for frozen and canned crawfish—the commodity is called rock lobster—in France and the U.S.A. The new company set up a canning shed or ‘factory’ on Tristan. A little refrigerated ship, Tristania, began to ply regularly between the island and the Cape. Now there are two ships. They spend the southern summer fishing near Tristan. The island men assist, some working with the crews of the ships, others operating from the shore, still using their canvas-covered boats. The women do the canning in the shed on Big Beach.

The company has now come under the control of the Colonial Development Corporation, which keeps a small staff continuously on the island and maintains a non-profit store, at which the islanders spend their wages; for currency has been introduced. This last innovation is bound to have mixed results. It enables the people to buy clothing and hardware and to vary their fish and potato diet with potted food-stuffs; it may also widen the gulfs between families, making sharper divisions between rich and poor. Already the change of diet has introduced decay to the islanders’ teeth, once almost perfect.

As during our stay, the station has its own little community separate from the settlement but closely associated with it. In the cluster of wooden houses, distinct from the cottages, now live an administrator, appointed by the Colonial Service, the fish company staff, the missionary, a doctor, a nursing sister, an agriculturist—and, of course, wives and sometimes children.
The administrator presides over most matters of island organization, but under his direction the Village Council—now regularly elected—continues to meet, and the headman, still Willy Repetto, acts as spokesman of local opinion. There is still no need for a policeman or a jailhouse.

The school, named St Mary's after the church, has been placed in the charge of a professional schoolmaster and his wife. The standard of education among the young people—on which the future of the settlement largely depends—has risen. The school staff even includes as pupil teacher Miss Trena Glass, known to us during the war as a little, fair-haired child, Sidney's daughter.

Having learnt the lesson of working in teams for the community, the island men have made improvements in the settlement. They have prepared a site for the erection of a new village hall, prefabricated in England. They have extended the church to accommodate the growing congregation. Cement pillars now support a roof joining the original part to the new section. The building has been redecorated and has a new altar cloth, pews, and kneelers, supplied from England. Many of the people have bought hymn and prayer books through the store.

The parish has been transferred from the diocese of St Helena to that of Cape Town, and last year the Archbishop of Cape Town was taken by H.M.S. Magpie to visit the island. He conducted a confirmation service in the village church. The total population, which presumably still includes the rival congregation of Agnes Rogers, now numbers just over 250.

Since 1953 the British Government has maintained a doctor, a nurse, and an agriculturist on Tristan. Among improvements being made under their influence are a small hospital, a piped water supply to the cottages, a drainage system, and sanitary installations at St Mary's School. A small reafforestation scheme has been started at Sandy Point. A young pure-bred Hereford bull, a ram, and two sheep-dogs have been introduced to improve the local strains. In addition to his other work, the agriculturist deals with the increasing amount of postal business. A series of stamps ranging from a halfpenny in value to ten shillings has been
printed. They show pictures of island scenes: St Mary's Church, the Potato Patches, Nightingale, Inaccessible, the little flightless rail to be found only on the latter island, Tristan itself, a group of mollymawks—and the new fish-canning factory on Big Beach.

In 1955 a group of young scientists, the Cambridge University Expedition to Gough Island, called at Tristan and stayed six weeks, surveying and making recordings of local songs and the voices of some of the islanders. The information they have brought back shows that in spite of the new establishments the island way of life has changed very little. The men still find time, between spells of fishing for the company, to cultivate their patches, haul stone in their bullock carts, build their rough-hewn cottages and thatch them with flax. The women still card and spin and knit. The old persists beside the new. Housewives buy new material, which they make up into old-style dresses, only slightly shorter; they still wear head scarves, since hats would be useless in the high winds. Shoes for men and women are sold in the store. For climbing and beach work the men still wear moccasins. But on Sundays they attend church in a rustic Victorian formality of dark suits, caps, and black shoes.

Most of the cottages have been equipped with new beds and many have small cooking-stoves, but the open hearth remains the source of warmth and the centre of domestic comfort. Wood for fuel is as hard to find as ever—though as recently as 1953 a ship, the yacht Coimbra, joined the long tally of vessels wrecked on Tristan. Peat is nowadays used occasionally for fuel. Bird-oil lamps survive but are often replaced by candles bought at the store. The station is lit, for a short period of the evening only, by electricity, supplied from a dynamo as when the Navy was in occupation. The greatest incongruity described by the visiting scientists is the sight of a wireless loud-speaker in the living-room of every cottage. The wonder of radio, which we took to Tristan, has ceased to be a marvel. But it is apparently used as much for listening to local radio-telephony conversations as for hearing broadcasts from 'outside.' The centre of the islanders' world is still the island itself. The strength of that interest has
still to be tested against the influences that may arrive with the newly purchased film-projector to be installed in the village hall.

About the individual islanders known to us during the war a few scraps of gossip have floated across the years. Widowhood proved a deceptive blessing to Mrs Repetto and Charlotte Glass: both are dead. The former is commemorated in the name of the second ship bought by the Development Company, the *Frances Repetto*. The present headwoman is Martha Rogers, a daughter of Mrs Repetto. To us Martha never seemed a separate person so much as a part of the husband and wife unit always referred to as ‘Arfa ’n Marfa’; but that combination, though childless, was one of the most respected in the village.

Old Sam Swain failed in his ambition of equaling the long life of his grandfather: he died at a mere ninety-two. The oldest inhabitant is now Tom Rogers, aged eighty-four. In 1955 Big John Glass, the last surviving grandson of the original founder of the settlement, died in his eighties. Henry Green, Gaeta, and the other ‘old hands’ have all gone. But the young people prosper and multiply. Wilson received the just reward for his tolerance of a rival and his submission to scorn: he lost the girl. Kenneth Rogers, with more certainty of what he wanted and more determination to secure it, stepped in and married Emily. Each was for the other the best partner the island could offer. Among the recordings made by the Gough Expedition and included in a B.B.C. broadcast was the cheerful voice of a young woman ‘with a nice face’—Mrs Emily Rogers.

As consolation prize Wilson gained Kenneth’s sister, Marie. He is now a respected member of the Village Council. Once a loosely tied cardboard box, which had pursued me to more places than I had visited, found its way to my home in England. It contained a model island boat made by Wilson as a reminder of the ‘good times’ we had together in the evenings at David’s. Along with the ‘ganzey’ that Emily finished on our last day there; and a pair of mocassins that Kenneth sent before his marriage, telling me that they were almost as ‘fancy’ as the pair he was making for
Emily; and a set of rather undersized tusks from the sea-elephant killed by Bunty and 'Twin,' it forms my collection of curios. As evidence they are no more convincing than the objects I saw long ago in the museum at Cape Town. The island, with its handful of exiles, seems as unreal now as it did then. Its very existence is an anachronism.

When, in January 1957, the royal yacht Britannia took a second Duke of Edinburgh to visit the settlement named after his predecessor, the world was jogged in its memory. Newspapers showed scenes and even a face or two half recognized by a few people in England. For a moment of history Tristan da Cunha emerged from the mist, then faded again—an island out of time, a rock in the sea, a mere spot on the map.
dition, without doctor or dentist but without toothache or disease, makes fascinating reading.

The story is told by a young English schoolmaster with a Dutch name who spent fourteen months on the island as one of a group of Naval telegraphers manning a signal station during World War II.

Those who really "want-to-get-away-from-it-all" should consider the possibilities of this Rock of Exile; those who prefer their travel in an armchair will find this book a rewarding experience.

*With 15 pages of photographs, a map and line drawings.*