

The Fourth Man

By John Russell

The raft might have been taken for a swath of cut sedge or a drifting tangle of roots as it slid out of the shadowy river mouth at dawn and dipped into the first ground swell. But while the sky brightened and the breeze came fresh off shore it picked a way among shoals and swampy islets with purpose and direction, and when at last the sun leaped up and cleared his bright eye of the morning mist it had passed the wide entrance to the bay and stood to open sea.

It was a curious craft for such a venture, of a type that survives here and there in the obscure corners of the world. The coracle-maker would have scorned it. The first navigating pithecanthrope built nearly as well with his log and bush. A mat of pandanus leaves served for its sail and a pad of niaouli wood for its helm. But it had a single point of real seaworthiness. Its twin floats, paired as a catamaran, were woven of reed bundles and bamboo sticks upon triple rows of bladders. It was light as a bladder itself, elastic, fit to ride any weather. One other quality this raft possessed which recommended it beyond all comfort and all safety to its present crew. It was very nearly invisible. They had only to unstep its mast and lie flat in the cup of its soggy platform and they could not be spied half a mile away.

Four men occupied the raft. Three of them were white. Their bodies had been scored with brambles and blackened with dried blood, and on wrist and ankle they bore the dark and wrinkled stain of the gyves. The hair upon them was long and matted. They wore only the rags of blue canvas uniforms. But they were whites, members of the superior race—members of a highly superior race, according to those philosophers who rate the criminal aberration as a form of genius.

The fourth man was the man who had built the raft and was now sailing it. There was nothing superior about him. His skin was a layer of soot. His prognathous jaw carried out the angle of a low forehead. No line of beauty redeemed his lean limbs and knobby joints. Nature had set upon him her plainest stamp of inferiority, and his only attempts to relieve it were the twist of bark about his middle and the prong of pig ivory through the cartilage of his nose. Altogether a very ordinary specimen of one of the lowest branches of the human family—the Canaques of New Caledonia.

The three whites sat together well forward, and so they had sat in silence for hours. But at sunrise, as if some spell had been raised by the clang of that great copper gong in the east they stirred and breathed deep of the salt air and looked at one another with hope in their haggard faces, and then back towards the land which was now no more than a grey-green smudge behind them... 'Friends,' said the eldest, whose temples were bound with a scrap of crimson scarf, 'Friends—the thing is done.'

With a gesture like conjuring he produced from the breast of his tattered blouse three cigarettes, fresh and round, and offered them round.

'Nippers!' cried the one at his right. 'True nippers—name of a little good man! And here! Doctor, I always said you were a marvel. See if they be not new from the box!'

Dr Dubose smiled. Those who had known him in very different circumstances about the boulevards, the lobbies, the clubs, would have known him again and in spite of all disfigurement by that smile. And here, at the bottom of the earth, it had set him still apart in the prisons, the

cobalt mines, the chain-gangs of a community not much given to mirth. Many a crowded lecture-hall at Montpellier had seen him touch some intellectual firework with just such a twinkle behind his bristly grey brows, with just such a thin curl of lip.

‘By way of celebration,’ he explained. ‘Consider. There are seventy-five evasions from Nouméa every six months, of which not more than one succeeds. I had the figures myself from Dr Pierre at the infirmary. He is not much of a physician, but a very honest fellow. Could anybody win on that percentage without dissipating? I ask you.’

‘Therefore you prepared for this?’

‘It is now three weeks since I bribed the night-guard to get these same nippers.’

The other regarded him with admiration. Sentiment came readily upon his beardless face, tender and languid, but overdrawn, with eyes too large and soft and oval too long. It was one of these faces familiar enough to the police which might serve as model for an angel were it not associated with some revolting piece of devilry. Fenayrou himself had been condemned ‘to perpetuity’ as an Incurable.

‘Is not our doctor a wonder?’ he inquired as he handed a cigarette along to the third white man. ‘He thinks of everything. You should be ashamed to grumble. See—we are free, after all. Free!’

The third was a gross, pock-marked man with hairless lids known sometimes as Niniche, Trois Huit, Le Tordeur, but chiefly among companions as Perroquet—a name derived perhaps from his beaked nose, or from some perception of his jail—bird character. He was a garrotter by profession, accustomed to rely upon his fists only for the exchange of amenities. Dubose might indulge a fancy and Fenayrou seek to carry it as a pose, but The Parrot remained a gentleman of strictly serious turn. There is perhaps a tribute to the practical spirit of penal administration in the fact that while Dubose was the most dangerous of these three and Fenayrou the most depraved Perroquet was the one with the official reputation, whose escape would be signalled first among the ‘Wanted’. He accepted the cigarette because he was glad to get it, but he said nothing until Dubose passed a tin box of matches and the first gulp of picadura filled his lungs . . .

‘Wait till you’ve got your two feet on a *pavé*, my boy. That will be the time to talk of freedom. What? Suppose there came a storm.’

‘It is not the season of storms,’ observed Dubose.

But The Parrot’s word had given them a check. Such spirits as these, to whom the land had been a horror, would be slow to feel the terror of the sea. Back there they had left the festering limbo of a convict colony, oblivion. Out here they had reached the rosy threshold of the big round world again. They were men raised from the dead, charged with all the furious appetites of lost years, with the savour of life strong and sweet on their lips. And yet they paused and looked about in quickened perception, with the clutch at the throat that takes the landsman on big waters. The spaces were so wide and empty. The voices in their ears were so strange and murmurous. There was a threat in each wave that came from the depths, a sinister vibration. None of them knew the sea. None knew its ways, what tricks it might play, what traps it might spread—more deadly than those of the jungle.

The raft was running now before a brisk chop with alternate spring and wallow, while the froth bubbled in over the prow and ran down among them as they sat. ‘Where is that cursed ship that was to meet us here?’ demanded Fenayrou.

‘It will meet us right enough.’ Dubose spoke carelessly, though behind the blown wisp of his cigarette he had been searching the outer horizon with keen glance. ‘This is the day as agreed. We will be picked up from the mouth of the river.’

‘You say,’ growled Perroquet. ‘But where is any river now? Or any mouth? Sacred name, this wind will blow us to China if we keep on.’

‘We dare not lie in any closer. There is a Government launch at Torrien. Also the traders go armed hereabouts, ready for chaps like us. And don’t imagine that the native trackers have given us up. They are likely to be following still in their proas.’

‘So far?’

Fenayrou laughed, for The Parrot’s dread of their savage enemies had a morbid tinge.

‘Take care, Perroquet. They will eat you yet.’

‘Is it true?’ demanded the other, appealing to Dubose. ‘I have heard it is even permitted these devils to keep all runaways they can capture—name of God!—to fatten on.’

‘An idle tale,’ smiled Dubose. ‘They prefer the reward. But one hears of convicts being badly mauled. There was a forester who made a break from Baie du Sud and came back lacking an arm. Certainly these people have not lost the habit of cannibalism.’

‘Piecemeal,’ chuckled Fenayrou. ‘They will only sample you, Perroquet. Let them make a stew of your brains. You would miss nothing.’

But The Parrot swore.

‘Name of a name—what brutes!’ he said, and by a gesture recalled the presence of that fourth man who was of their party and yet so completely separated from them that they had almost forgotten him.

The Canaque was steering the raft. He sat crouched at the stern, his body glistening like varnished ebony with spray. He held the steering paddle, immobile as an image, his eyes fixed upon the course ahead. There was no trace of expression on his face, no hint of what he thought or felt or whether he thought or felt anything. He seemed not even aware of their regard, and each one of them experienced somehow that twinge of uneasiness with which the white confronts his brother of colour—this enigma brown or yellow or black he is fated never wholly to understand or to fathom .

‘It occurs to me,’ said Fenayrou, in a pause, ‘that our friend here who looks like a shiny boot is able to steer us God knows where. Perhaps to claim the reward.’

‘Reassure yourself,’ answered Dubose. ‘He steers by my order. Besides, it is a simple creature—an infant, truly, incapable of any but the most primitive reasoning.’

‘Is he incapable of treachery?’

‘Of any that would deceive us. Also, he is bound by his duty. I made a bargain with his chief up the river, and this one is sent to deliver us on board our ship. It is the only interest he has in us.’

‘And he will do it?’

‘He will do it. Such is the nature of the native.’

‘I am glad you feel so,’ returned Fenayrou, adjusting himself indolently among the drier reeds and nursing the last of his cigarette. ‘For my part I wouldn’t trust a figurehead like that for two sous. Mazette! What a monkey face!’

‘Brute!’ repeated Perroquet, and this man, sprung from some vile riverfront slum of Argenteuil, whose home had been the dock pilings, the grog shop, and the jail, even this man viewed the black Canaque from an immeasurable distance with the look of hatred and contempt .

Under the heat of the day the two younger convicts lapsed presently into dozing. But Dubose did not doze. His tormented soul peered out behind its mask as he stood to sweep the skyline again under shaded hand. His theory had been so precise, the fact was so different. He had counted absolutely on meeting the ship—some small schooner, one of those flitting, half—

piratical traders of the copra islands that can be hired like cabs in a dark street for any questionable enterprise. Now there was no ship, and here was no cross-roads where one might sit and wait. Such a craft as the catamaran could not be made to lie to.

The doctor foresaw ugly complications for which he had not prepared and whereof he must bear the burden. The escape had been his own conception, directed by him from the start. He had picked his companions deliberately from the whole forced labour squad, Perroquet for his great strength, Fenayrou as a ready echo. He had made it plain since their first dash from the mine, during their skirmish with the military guards, their subsequent wanderings in the brush with bloodhounds and trackers on their trail—through every crisis—that he alone should be the leader.

For the others, they had understood well enough which of their number was the chief beneficiary. Those mysterious friends on the outside that were reaching half around the world to further their release had never heard of such individuals as Fenayrou and The Parrot. Dubose was the man who had pulled the wires: that brilliant physician whose conviction for murder had followed so sensationally, so scandalously, upon his sweep of academic and social honours. There would be clacking tongues in many a Parisian salon, and white faces in some, when news should come of his escape. Ah, yes, for example, they knew the highflyer of the band, and they submitted—so long as he led them to victory. They submitted, while reserving a depth of jealousy, the inevitable remnant of caste persisting still in this democracy of stripes and shame.

By the middle of the afternoon the doctor had taken certain necessary measures.

‘Ho!’ said Fenayrou sleepily. ‘Behold our colours at the masthead. What is that for, comrade?’

The sail had been lowered and in its place streamed the scrap of crimson scarf that had served Dubose as a turban.

‘To help them sight us when the ship comes.’

‘What wisdom!’ cried Fenayrou. ‘Always he thinks of everything, our doctor, everything—’

He stopped with the phrase on his lips, and his hand outstretched towards the centre of the platform. Here, in a damp depression among the reeds, had lain the wicker-covered bottle of green glass in which they carried their water. It was gone.

‘Where is that flask?’ he demanded. ‘The sun has grilled me like a bone.’

‘You will have to grill some more,’ said Dubose grimly. ‘This crew is put on rations.’

Fenayrou stared at him wide-eyed, and from the shadow of a folded mat The Parrot thrust his purpled face. ‘What do you sing me there? Where is that water?’

‘I have it,’ said Dubose.

They saw, in fact, that he held the flask between his knees, along with their single packet of food in its wrapping of coconut husk.

‘I want a drink,’ challenged Perroquet.

‘Reflect a little. We must guard our supplies like reasonable men. One does not know how long we may be floating here . . .’

Fell a silence among them, heavy and strained, in which they heard only the squeaking of frail basketwork as their raft laboured in the wash. Slow as was their progress, they were being pushed steadily outward and onward, and the last cliffs of New Caledonia were no longer even a smudge in the west, but only a hazy line. And still they had seen no moving thing upon the great round breast of the sea that gleamed in its corselet of brass plates under a brazen sun. ‘So that is the way you talk now?’ began The Parrot, half choking. ‘You do not know how long? But you were sure enough when we started.’

'I am still sure,' returned Dubose. 'The ship will come. Only she cannot stay for us in one spot. She will be cruising to and fro until she intercepts us. We must wait.'

'Ah, good! We must wait. And in the meantime, what? Fry here in the sacred heat with our tongues hanging out while you deal us drop by drop—hein?'

'Perhaps.'

'But no!' The garrotter clenched his hands. 'Blood of God, there is no man big enough to feed me with a spoon!'

Fenayrou's chuckle came pat, as it had more than once, and Dubose shrugged.

'You laugh!' cried Perroquet, turning in fury. 'But how about this lascar of a captain that lets us put to sea unprovided? What? He thinks of everything, does he? He thinks of everything! . . . Sacred farceur—let me hear you laugh again!'

Somehow Fenayrou was not so minded.

'And now he bids us be reasonable,' concluded the Parrot. 'Tell that to the devils in hell. You and your cigarettes, too. Bah—comedian!'

'It is true,' muttered Fenayrou, frowning. 'A bad piece of work for a captain of runaways.'

But the doctor faced mutiny with his thin smile.

'All this alters nothing. Unless we would die very speedily, we must guard our water.'

'By whose fault?'

'Mine,' acknowledged the doctor. 'I admit it. What then? We can't turn back. Here we are. Here we must stay. We can only do our best with what we have.'

'I want a drink,' repeated The Parrot, whose throat was afire since he had been denied.

'You can claim your share, of course. But take warning of one thing. After it is gone do not think to sponge on us—on Fenayrou and me.'

'He would be capable of it, the pig!' exclaimed Fenayrou, to whom this thrust had been directed. 'I know him. See here, my old, the doctor is right. Fair for one, fair for all.'

'I want a drink.'

Dubose removed the wooden plug from the flask.

'Very well,' he said quietly.

With the delicacy that lent something of legerdemain to all his gestures, he took out a small canvas wallet, the crude equivalent of the professional black bag, from which he drew a thimble. Meticulously he poured a brimming measure, and Fenayrou gave a shout at the grumbler's fallenjaw as he accepted that tiny cup between his big fingers. Dubose served Fenayrou and himself with the same amount before he recorked the bottle.

'In this manner we should have enough to last us three days—maybe more—with equal shares among the three of us . . .'

Such was his summing of the demonstration, and it passed without comment, as a matter of course in the premises, that he should count as he did—ignoring that other who sat alone at the stern of the raft, the black Canaque, the fourth man.

Perroquet had been out-manoeuvred, but he listened sullenly while for the hundredth time Dubose recited his easy and definite plan for their rescue, as arranged with his secret correspondents.

'That sounds very well,' observed The Parrot, at last. 'But what if these jokers only mock themselves of you? What if they have counted it good riddance to let you rot here? And us? Sacred name, that would be a famous jest! To let us wait for a ship and they have no ship!'

'Perhaps the doctor knows better than we how sure a source he counts upon,' suggested Fenayrou slyly.

‘That is so,’ said Dubose, with great good humour. ‘My faith, it would not be well for them to fail me. Figure to yourselves that there is a safety vault in Paris full of papers to be opened at my death. Certain friends of mine could hardly afford to have some little confessions published that would be found there . . . Such a tale as this, for instance—And to amuse them he told an indecent anecdote of high life, true or

fictitious, it mattered nothing, so he could make Fenayrou’s eyes glitter and The Parrot growl in wonder. Therein lay his means of ascendancy over such men, the knack of eloquence and vision. Harried, worn, oppressed by fears that he could sense so much more sharply than ever, he must expend himself now in vulgar marvels to distract these ruder minds. He succeeded so far that when the wind fell at sunset they were almost cheerful, ready to believe that the morning would bring relief. They dined on dry biscuit and another thimbleful of water apiece and took watch by amiable agreement. And through that long, clear night of stars whenever the one of the three who kept awake between his comrades chanced to look aft, he could see the vague blot of another figure—the naked Canaque, who slumbered there apart.

It was an evil dawning. Fenayrou, on the morning trick, was aroused by a foot as hard as a hoof, and started up at Perroquet’s wrathful face, with the doctor’s graver glance behind.

‘Idler! Good-for-nothing! Will you wake at least before I smash your ribs? Name of God, here is a way to stand watch!’

‘Keep off!’ cried Fenayrou wildly. ‘Keep off. Don’t touch me.’

‘Eh, and why not, fool? Do you know that the ship could have missed us? A ship could have passed us a dozen times while you slept?’

‘Bourrique!’

‘Vache!’

They spat the insults of the prison while Perroquet knotted his great fist over the other, who crouched away cat-like, his mobile mouth twisted to a snarl. Dubose stood aside in watchful calculation until against the angry red sunrise in which they floated there flashed the naked red gleam of steel. Then he stepped between.

‘Enough. Fenayrou, put up that knife.’

‘The dog kicked me!’

‘You were at fault,’ said Dubose sternly. ‘Perroquet!’

‘Are we all to die that he may sleep?’ stormed The Parrot.

‘The harm is done. Listen now, both of you. Things are bad enough already. We may need all our energies. Look about.’

They looked and saw the far, round horizon and the empty desert of the sea and their own long shadows that slipped slowly before them over its smooth, slow heaving, and nothing else. The land had sunk away from them in the night—some one of the chance currents that sweep among the islands had drawn them none could say where or how far. The trap had been sprung. ‘Good God, how lonely it is!’ breathed Fenayrou in a hush.

No more was said. They dropped their quarrel. Silently they shared their rations as before, made shift to eat something with their few drops of water, and sat down to pit themselves one against another in the vital struggle that each could feel was coming—a sort of tacit test of endurance.

A calm had fallen, as it does between trades in this flawed belt, an absolute calm. The air hung weighted. The sea showed no faintest crinkle, only the maddening, unresting heave and fall in polished undulations on which the lances of the sun broke and drove in under their eyelids as

white, hot splinters; a savage sun that kindled upon them with the power of a burning glass, that sucked the moisture from poor human bits of jelly and sent them crawling to the shelter of their mats and brought them out again, gasping, to shrivel anew. The water, the world of water, seemed sleek and thick as oil. They came to loathe it and the rotting smell of it, and when the doctor made them dip themselves overside they found little comfort. It was warm, sluggish, slimed. But a curious thing resulted . . .

While they clung along the edge of the raft they all faced inboard, and there sat the black Canaque. He did not join them. He did not glance at them. He sat hunkered on his heels in the way of the native, with arms hugging his knees. He stayed in his place at the stern, motionless under that shattering sun, gazing out into vacancy. Whenever they raised their eyes they saw him. He was the only thing to see.

‘Here is one who appears to enjoy himself quite well,’ remarked Dubose.

‘I was thinking so myself,’ said Fenayrou.

‘The animal!’ rumbled Perroquet.

They observed him, and for the first time with direct interest, with thought of him as a fellow-being—with the beginning of envy.

‘He does not seem to suffer.’

‘What is going on in his brain? What does he dream of there? One would say he despises us.’

‘The beast!’

‘Perhaps he is waiting for us to die,’ suggested Fenayrou with a harsh chuckle. ‘Perhaps he is waiting for the reward. He would not starve on the way home, at least. And he could deliver us—piecemeal.’

They studied him.

‘How does he do it, doctor? Has he no feeling?’

‘I have been wondering,’ said Dubose. ‘It may be that his fibres are tougher—his nerves.’

‘Yes, we have had water and he none.’

‘But look at his skin, fresh and moist.’

‘And his belly, fat as a football!’

The Parrot hauled himself aboard.

‘Don’t tell me this black beast knows thirst!’ he cried with a strange excitement. ‘Is there any way he could steal our supplies?’

‘Certainly not.’

‘Then, name of a dog, what if he has supplies of his own hidden about?’ The same monstrous notion struck them all, and the others swarmed to help. They knocked the black aside. They searched the platform where he had sat, burrowing among the rushes, seeking some secret cache, another bottle or a gourd. They found nothing.

‘We are mistaken,’ said Dubose.

But Perroquet had a different expression for disappointment. He turned on the Canaque and caught him by the kinky mop of hair and proceeded to give him what is known as gruel in the cobalt mines. This was a little speciality of The Parrot’s. He paused only when he himself was breathless and exhausted and threw the limp, unresisting body from him.

‘There, lump of dirt! That will teach you. Maybe you’re not so chipper now, my boy—hem? Not quite so satisfied with your luck. Pig! That will make you feel. . .’

It was a ludicrous, a wanton, a witless thing. But the others said nothing. The learned Dubose made no protest. Fenayrou had none of his usual jests at the garrotter’s stupidity. They looked on as at the satisfaction of a common grudge. The white trampled the black with or without cause,

and that was natural. And the black crept away into his place with his hurts and his wrongs and made no sign and struck no blow. And that was natural, too.

The sun declined into a blazing furnace whereof the gates stood wide, and they prayed to hasten it and cursed because it hung enchanted. But when it was gone their blistered bodies still held the heat like things incandescent. The night closed down over them like a purple bow, glazed and impermeable. They would have divided the watches again, though none of them thought of sleep, but Fenayrou made a discovery.

‘Idiots!’ he rasped. ‘Why should we look and look? A whole navy of ships cannot help us now. If we are becalmed, why so are they!’

The Parrot was singularly put out.

‘Is this true?’ he asked Dubose.

‘Yes, we must hope for a breeze first.’

‘Then, name of God, why didn’t you tell us so? Why did you keep on playing out the farce? You are wise, eh? You are very wise. You know things we do not and you keep them to yourself.’ He leaned forward to peer into the doctor’s face. ‘Very good. But if you think you’re going to use that cursed smartness to get the best of us in any way—see here, my zig, I pull your gullet out like the string of an orange. . . Like that. What?’

Fenayrou gave a nervous giggle and Dubose shrugged, but it was perhaps about this time that he began to regret his intervention in the knife play.

For there was no breeze and there was no ship.

By the third morning each had sunk within himself, away from the rest. The doctor was lost in a profound depression. Perroquet in dark suspicion, and Fenayrou in bodily suffering which he supported ill. Only two effective ties still bound their confederacy. One was the flask which Dubose had slung at his side by a strip of the wickerwork. Every move he made with it, every drop he poured, was followed by burning eyes. And he knew, and he had no advantage of them in knowing, that the will to live was working its relentless formula aboard that raft. Under his careful saving there still remained nearly half of their original store.

The other bond, as it had come to be by strange mutation, was the presence of the black Canaque.

There was no forgetting the fourth man now, no overlooking of him. He loomed upon their consciousness, more formidable, more mysterious, more exasperating with every hour. Their own powers were ebbing. The naked savage had yet to give the slightest sign of complaint or weakness.

During the night he had stretched himself out on the platform as before, and after a time he had slept. Through the hours of darkness and silence while each of the whites wrestled with despair, this black man had slept as placidly as a child, with easy, regular breathing. Since then he had resumed his place aft. And so he remained, unchanged, a fixed fact and a growing wonder.

The brutal rage of Perroquet, in which he had vented his distorted hate of the native, had been followed by superstitious doubts.

‘Doctor,’ he said at last, in awed huskiness, ‘is this a man or a fiend?’

‘It is a man.’

‘A miracle,’ put in Fenayrou.

But the doctor lifted a finger in a way his pupils would have remembered:

‘It is a man,’ he repeated, ‘and a very poor and wretched example of a man. You will find no lower type anywhere. Observe his cranial angle, the high ears, the heavy bones of his skull. He is scarcely above the ape. There are educated apes more intelligent.’

‘Ah! Then what?’

‘He has a secret,’ said the doctor.

That was a word to transfix them.

‘A secret! But we see him—every move he makes, every instant. What a chance for a secret?’

The doctor rather forgot his audience, betrayed by chagrin and bitterness.

‘How pitiful!’ he mused. ‘Here are we three—children of the century, products of civilization—I fancy none would deny that, at least. And here is this man who belongs before the Stone Age. In a set trial of fitness, of wits, or resource, is he to win! Pitiful!’

‘What kind of secret!’ demanded Perroquet, fuming.

‘I cannot say,’ admitted Dubose, with a baffled gesture. ‘Possibly some method of breathing, some peculiar posture that operates to cheat the sensations of the body. Such things are known among primitive peoples—known and carefully guarded—like the properties of certain drugs, the uses of hypnotism and complex natural laws. Then, again, it may be psychologic—a mental attitude persistently held. Who knows?’

‘To ask him? Useless. He will not tell. Why should he? We scorn him. We give him no share with us. We abuse him. He simply remains inscrutable—as he has always been and will always be. He never tells those innermost secrets. They are the means by which he has survived from the depth of time, by which he may yet survive when all our wisdom is dust.’

‘I know several very excellent ways of learning secrets,’ said Fenayrou as he passed his dry tongue over his lips. ‘Shall I begin?’

Dubose came back with a start and looked at him.

‘It would be useless. He could stand any torture you could invent. No, that is not the way.’

‘Listen to mine,’ said Perroquet, with sudden violence. ‘Me, I am wearied of the gab. You say he is a man? Very well. If he is a man, he must have blood in his veins. That would be, anyway, good to drink.’

‘No,’ returned Dubose. ‘It would be hot. Also it would be salt. For food—perhaps. But we do not need food.’

‘Kill the animal, then, and throw him over!’

‘We gain nothing.’

‘Well, sacred name, what do you want?’

‘To beat him!’ cried the doctor, curiously agitated. ‘To beat him at the game—that’s what I want! For our own sakes, for our racial pride, we must, we must. To outlast him, to prove ourselves his masters. By better brain, by better organization and control. Watch him, watch him, friends—that we may ensnare him, that we may detect and defeat him in the end!’

But the doctor was miles beyond them.

‘Watch?’ growled The Parrot. ‘I believe you, old windbag. It is all one watch. I sleep no more and leave any man alone with that bottle.’

To this the issue finally sharpened. Such craving among such men could not be stayed much longer by driblets. They watched. They watched the Canaque. They watched each other. And they watched the falling level in their flask—until the tension gave.

Another dawn upon the same dead calm, rising like a conflagration through the puddled air, cloudless, hopeless! Another day of blinding, slow-drawn agony to meet. And Dubose announced that their allowance must be cut to half a thimbleful.

There remained perhaps a quarter of a litre—a miserable reprieve of bare life among the three of them, but one good swallow for a yearning throat.

At sight of the bottle, at the tinkle of its limpid contents, so cool and silvery green inside the glass, Fenayrou's nerve snapped . . .

'More!' he begged, with pleading hands. 'I die. More!'

When the doctor refused him he grovelled among the reeds, then rose suddenly to his knees and tossed his arms abroad with a hoarse cry:

'A ship! A ship!'

The others spun about. They saw the thin unbroken ring of this greater and more terrible prison to which they had exchanged: and that was all they saw, though they stared and stared. They turned back to Fenayrou and found him in the act of tilting the bottle. A cunning slash of his knife had loosed it from its sling at the doctor's side . . . Even now he was sucking at the mouth, spilling the precious liquid—With the one sweep Perroquet caught up their paddle and flattened him, crushing him.

Springing across the prostrate man, Dubose snatched the flask upright and put the width of the raft between himself and the big garrotter who stood wide-legged, his bloodshot eyes alight, rumbling in his chest.

'There is no ship,' said The Parrot. 'There will be no ship. We are done. Because of you and your rotten promises that brought us here—doctor, liar, ass!'

Dubose stood firm.

'Come a step nearer and I break bottle and all over your head.'

They stood regarding each other, and Perroquet's brows gathered in a slow effort of thought.

'Consider,' urged Dubose with his quaint touch of pedantry. 'Why should you and I fight? We are rational men. We can see this trouble through and win yet. Such weather cannot last for ever. Besides, here are only two of us to divide the water now.'

'That is true,' nodded The Parrot. 'That is true, isn't it? Fenayrou kindly leaves us his share. An inheritance—what? A famous idea. I'll take mine now.'

Dubose probed him keenly.

'My share, at once, if you please,' insisted Perroquet, with heavy docility. 'Afterward, we shall see. Afterward.'

The doctor smiled his grim and wan little smile.

'So be it.'

Without relinquishing the flask he brought out his canvas wallet once more—the wallet which replaced the professional black bag—and rolled out the thimble by some swift sleight of his flexible fingers while he held Perroquet's glance with his own.

'I will measure it for you.'

He poured the thimbleful and handed it over quickly, and when Perroquet had tossed it off he filled again and again.

'Four—five,' he counted. 'That is enough.'

But The Parrot's big grip closed quietly around his wrist at the last offering and pinioned him and held him helpless.

'No, it is not enough. Now I will take the rest. Ha, wise man! Have I fooled you at last?'

There was no chance to struggle, and Dubose did not try, only stayed smiling up at him, waiting.

Perroquet took the bottle.

'The best man wins,' he remarked. 'Eh, my zig? A bright notion—of yours. The—best—'

His lips moved, but no sound issued. A look of the most intense surprise spread upon his round face. He stood swaying a moment, and collapsed like a huge hinged toy when the string is cut.

Dubose stooped and caught the bottle again, looking down at his big adversary, who sprawled in brief convulsion and lay still, a bluish scum oozing between his teeth...

'Yes, the best man wins,' repeated the doctor, and laughed as he in turn raised the flask for a draft.

'The best wins!' echoed a voice in his ear.

Fenayrou, writhing up and striking like a wounded snake, drove the knife home between his shoulders.

The bottle fell and rolled to the middle of the platform, and there, while each strove vainly to reach it, it poured out its treasure in a tiny stream that trickled away and was lost.

It may have been minutes or hours later—for time has no count in emptiness—when next a sound proceeded from that frail slip of a raft, hung like a mote between sea and sky. It was a phrase of song, a wandering strain in half tones and fluted accidentals, not unmelodious. The black Canaque was singing. He sang without emotion or effort, quite casually and softly to himself. So he might sing by his forest hut to ease some hour of idleness. Claspings his knees and gazing out into space, untroubled, unmoved, enigmatic to the end, he sang—he sang.

And after all, the ship came.

She came in a manner befitting the sauciest little tops'1 schooner between Nukahiva and the Pelews—as her owner often averred and none but the envious denied—in a manner worthy, too, of that able Captain Jean Guibert, the merriest little scamp that ever cleaned a pearl bank or snapped a cargo of labour from a scowling coast. Before the first whiff out of the west came the *Petite Susanne*, curtsying and skipping along with a flash of white frill by her forefoot, and brought up startled and stood shaking her skirts and keeping herself quite daintily to windward.

'And 'ere they are sure enough, by dam'!' said the polyglot Captain Jean in the language of commerce and profanity. 'Zose passengers for us, hey? They been here all the time, not ten mile off—I bet you, Marteau. Ain't it 'ell? What you zink, my gar?'

The second, a tall and excessively bony individual of gloomy outlook, handed back the glasses.

'More bad luck. I never approved of this job. And now—see!—we have had our voyage for nothing. What misfortune!'

'Marteau, if that good Saint Pierre gives you some day a gold 'arp still you would holler bad luck—bad job!' retorted Captain Jean. 'Do I 'ire you to stand zere and cry about ze luck? Get a boat over, and quicker zan zat!'

M. Marteau aroused himself sufficiently to take command of the boat's crew that presently dropped away to investigate .

'It is even as I thought,' he called up from the quarter when he returned with his report. 'I told you how it would be, Captain Jean.

'Hey?' cried the captain, bouncing at the rail. 'Have you got zose passengers yet, *enfant de salaud?*'

'I have not,' said Marteau in the tone of lugubrious triumph. There was nothing in the world that could have pleased him quite so much as this chance to prove Captain Jean the loser on a venture. 'We are too late. Bad luck, bad luck—that calm. What misfortune! They are all dead!'

'Will you mind your business?' shouted the skipper.

'But still, the gentlemen are dead—'

'What is zat to me? All ze better, they will cost nozing to feed.'

‘But how—’

‘Hogsheads, my gar,’ said Captain Jean paternally. ‘Zose hogsheads in the afterhold. Fill them nicely with brine, and zere we are!’ And, having drawn all possible satisfaction from the other’s amazement, he sprang the nub of his joke with a grin. ‘Ze gentlemen’s passage is all paid, Marteau. Before we left Sydney, Marteau. I contrac’ to bring back three escape convicts, and so by ’ell I do—in pickle! And now if you’ll kindly get zose passengers aboard like I said an’ bozzer less about ze goddam luck, I be much oblige’. Also, zere is no green on my eye, Marteau, and you can dam’ well smoke it!’

Marteau recovered himself with difficulty in time to recall another trifling detail. ‘There is a fourth man on board that raft, Captain Jean. He is a Canaque—still alive. What shall we do with him?’

‘A Canaque?’ snapped Captain Jean. ‘A Canaque! I have no word in my contrac’ about any Canaque . . . Leave him zere . . . He is only a dam nigger. He’ll do well enough where he is.’

And Captain Jean was right, perfectly right, for while the *Petite Susanne* was taking aboard her grisly cargo the wind freshened from the west, and just about the time she was shaping away for Australia the ‘dam’ nigger’ spread his own sail of pandanus leaves and twirled his own helm of niaouli wood and headed the catamaran eastward, back towards New Caledonia.

Feeling somewhat dry after his exertion, he plucked at random from the platform a hollow reed with a sharp end, and, stretching himself at full length in his accustomed place, at the stern, he thrust the reed down into one of the bladders underneath and drank his fill of sweet water . . .

He had a dozen such storage bladders remaining, built into the floats at intervals above the water line—quite enough to last him safely home again.