THREE WISE MEN

by Arthur Train

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"HELLO!" called Dr. Ashley, taking up the receiver of the telephone to which he had been hurried by his butler from the luncheon table. "Yes, hello!"

"That you, Ashley?" rasped a broken voice, some 50 miles distant down the Maine coast, over the buzzing wire. "It's me—Tom Alexander. My boy's got appendicitis. No one to operate. You're the only decent surgeon within reach. Doctor Freemont—local man—says if we can't get you it's all over. Hear me?"

"Yes," replied the doctor, his youthful face hardening into that of the surgeon of 60, "of course, I'll come. But, man, you're on an island 20 miles from the nearest town on the main land. It'll take me a day to drive and the trains are just as bad. How shall I get to you?"

"That's all right," came back his friend's voice. "The Cormorant is here with steam up, ready to start—I'll send her for you. It's 3 o'clock now—and Freemont says if you operate by 9 tonight you may be able to save the boy's life. You'd just about make it."

"Hold on a minute!"

Ashley's mind flashed quickly down the coast. If the Cormorant could be brought to the other side of Mount Desert he could drive across the island while she was on her way, meet her, and save nearly 15 miles by sea. He knew the value of a minute in cases like this.

"Hello! Get this right!" he snapped into the receiver. "Send the yacht across to Pretty Marsh harbor—that's between Mount Desert and Bartlett's island. Your captain will know. There's no dock there, but I can drop off the rocks into your launch, somehow. She ought to be there by 6 o'clock at the outside. You'll save over an hour in that way. I'll drive over and meet her. Understand?"

"Yes."

There was a thrill of hope in the voice at the other end of the wire. "God bless you, Jim. She'll be there."

"Keep up your nerve, old man. We'll pull you out, yet," chirped Ashley, throwing into his tones a professional confidence of which he had an abundant reserve.

Then he hung up the receiver and stood looking out through the half turned leaves of the Japanese garden to where his guests were lingering over their coffee and cigars. Forty years of the severest sort of surgical training had left his heart as tender as that of a child. The tears came into his gray eyes and blurred the treetops as he thought of Tom Alexander sitting at the bedside of his only son, a boy of 12, in the summer palace he had built on Eagle island. What good were Tom's 20 millions that bright afternoon? What use the farm and gardens made with artificial soil on that corrugated ledge of rock? What use the deer in their 1,000 acre park? The swimming pool, the tennis courts, the bowling alleys, the yachts and motor boats—without the boy? Ashley had never had a child of his own, and he groaned aloud as he thought of little Tom Alexander writhing on his cot beside the sunlit sea. Of course, he'd go—go a thousand miles to save the boy, or any boy for that matter, if only there was a way to do so. It was a lucky thing the Cormorant, Alexander's new 220 foot steam yacht, had been finished in time to go into commission that spring. Without her—Ashley bit his lips; well, with her he'd be down at Eagle island in time to operate—by artificial light.

There was little enongh time as it was. Already the October sun was nearing the pine-ribbed crests of the nearer hills, for twilight falls early on the Maine coast in autumn, and the doctor must summon his assistants from the hospital, get fresh ether, and order the team to take him across the island. He did not return to his guests, but sent a message by the butler to his wife that he was suddenly called away, and set about making his preparations.

Forty-five minutes later a buckboard drawn by a strong pair of horses drove up to the door, and Ashley and Wakefield, his native assistant, who was one of the most skillful men with anesthetics in the state, climbed in.

"Put the valise under the seat," he cautioned the butler; "I'll hold the instruments. Yes, my heavy coat, please. Back tomorrow or next day. I'm on the telephone, if you want me for anything."

It was already 4 o'clock. The boy on Eagle island had exhausted one of the six hours allowed him before receiving surgical relief. Ashley knew that his pulse was probably just a few beats faster, his burning forehead a fraction of a degree nearer 105. Across his own brow blew the keen afternoon wind of autumn, bearing odors of sunburned forests mingled with the salt smell of ocean. For 20 years he had spent his late summers and early falls on the island and this was the time of year he loved it most. For now the autumn rains had laid the dust and washed the roads clean of the summer's grist, leaving them hard and furrowed by tiny gullies. Here and there clear, shallow pools lay in the track of the wheels, reflecting the azure of the sky, the high floating puffs of clouds, the yellow gold of the birches and the scarlet of the sumacs.

The horses' shoes cut clean and threw up soft, moist lumps of occasional brown mud. A few small birds flickered among the alders, and now and again a rabbit first hesitated and then jumped regretfully across the road before them, but as a whole, nature was resting. Broad awake in the lazy afternoon sunlight she was luxuriating after her summer, and drowsily lying without even drawing breath. The air had that warmth and yet that freshness that at once sends a glow to the heart and thrills the senses. The leaves had not yet fallen. On the mountain sides the background of the evergreens was mottled with irregular patches of brown, of purplish red, of rose—picked out here and there with one golden gleam of a single tree or one drop of scarlet blood. A few ochre leaves lay strewn across the road, imbedded in the mud or gilding the bottoms of the pools.

They climbed a ridge and saw behind them the blue waters of Frenchman's bay, dotted with spruce covered islands. The hills lay all around them, their tumbled outlines fixed in a wrinkled smile. To the west lay 60 miles of coast, island outlying island, with dim distant shapes of islands still beyond, bounded by the misty ghosts of vague hills to the northward and the still, even line of the horizon to the south. Along this hung little dots—the markers of ocean traffic along the great highway from Cape Sable to Pollock Rip.

The sun sank lower as they descended the other side of the ridge. Somewhere along the western shore of Mount Desert the Cormorant should be nosing her way, leaving a creaming wake to mark her course among the islands. But the doctor, straining his eye, could not see her anywhere. Perhaps some shoulder of mountain or dorsal of island concealed her. What if there were something the matter with her engine! He knew nothing of such things. Suppose she had not even started! Tom Alexander's only son might die! He looked about him at the glory of the hillsides and a little lump swelled his throat. There was no note of death in this radiance of the visible world; it was blush of health, not the iridescence of decay—the leap of sap at the first touch of the frost. Even as he looked a white speck flashed in the rays of the sun and moved slowly out from behind a distant cape. There she was! Twenty miles away, but coming steadily, her great engines beating like a human heart in response to a father's need!

From this point their way plunged into valleys where the twilight had already gathered. The young doctor said nothing, for he came of the taciturn race of that rocky coast that rarely speaks for pleasure. Ashley himself had no desire to talk, for his thoughts were all with the sick boy on Eagle island. They turned into a narrow road that led along the shore, but separated from it by a heavy growth of young trees. Here the mist was settling in the hollows and the sun had disappeared. Steep declivities and abrupt hills made the horses steam as they threw themselves into the collars or struggled, without breechings, to hold back the load that forced them on. The young doctor put on his coat and asked if there would be any objection to his lighting a pipe. Ashley shook his head. He wished occasionally that he could smoke, himself, were it not for the stern requirements of his craft. At last they emerged from the woods and rattled across a small bridge over a tidal stream. A dank smell of sea weed, of salt grass, of oozy flats, floated up from the marshes. The sky had darkened and a thin bank of cloud had pushed itself up from the west and had covered half the sky with a dark pall. At its edge a star or two twinkled faintly. They could no longer see the shapes of the mountains, and up the road the lights were already gleaming in the windows of a farm house.

"Goin' to be a devlish dark night," volunteered the driver, speaking for the first time.

"I'm afraid so," answered Ashley with a slight feeling of dread. "We are almost there, are we not?"

"Couple o' miles—that's all," answered the native shortly.

Daylight died to a fine yellow line over the western islands. Objects along the road became indistinguishable. Ashley knew that it was much later than 6 o'clock, for it had been necessary to go slowly the last part of the way. Presently they saw a cluster of houses and a glint of white fence. The driver made a quick turn and the wheels rolled over soft grass. Below them at what seemed an immense distance across the water could be seen a long row of lights.

"There she is!" exclaimed Wakefield.

The horses seemed to understand that speed was the essence of their master's contract, and went plunging across the fields almost at a gallop.

"They must have sent a boat in," said Ashley. "If only we can find it in this darkness!"

The driver made a horn of his hands and gave a long halloo. A moment later it was returned from some distance along the shore. Then they heard the slashing of a small propeller and the chug-chug of a launch. Ashley and the young doctor climbed out of the buckboard with their valises and stood waiting in the wet grass.

"Hello! Where are you?" came from the water.

"Here!" answered Ashley, climbing across the rocks to the water's edge.

"Careful! Wait a moment, sir!" admonished the second officer in charge of the launch. "Those rocks are covered with seaweed and are slippery."

"I can't wait for that!" retorted Ashley, sharply. "There's a boy's life at stake!"

"I know—here, take my hand, sir!"

At that moment a blinding flash of light illumined the slime of the rocks and the reeking weeds that swathed them.

Ashley, half dazed, saw at his feet a mahogany launch with two sailors and a mate in charge. The Cormorant, getting nervous at the delay, had thrown her searchlight across the bay to find out the trouble. The two doctors passed in their bags and clambered clumsily into the launch. The yacht withdrew her searchlight and the boat backed away from the shore. A moment more and they were racing toward the Cormorant, whose portholes blazed like the windows of an office building across the inky blackness of the water. He noted the strange resemblance borne by her wavering searchlight to the antennae of some huge insect. Slowly moving, she lay lazily churning the waves, ready the moment that the launch should return to leap upon her way homeward. As they approached, the light at her gangway broke out and a white coated steward and an officer in uniform stepped to the rail.

"All right, sir. Step aboard!" cried the mate, and Ashley swung himself up the slippery steps to the deck.

"Good evening, doctor."

The man in uniform, a tall, grizzled veteran of the sea, stepped forward and touched his cap.

"How do you do?" answered Ashley. "Are we on time?"

"Half hour late, sir," replied the stern faced captain. "Still, we may be able to make Eagle island by 9 o'clock. We've got a flood tide with us—that's worth four knots an hour."

"How did you leave the boy?" asked Ashley, anxiously.

"Pretty bad, sir," said the other, turning away. "They are counting on you, sir."

"Then let's be off at once!"

The captain nodded and moved to the rail.

"Take in that launch there!"

The sailors sprang to the davits.

"Let her go—full speed!" he shouted to the officer on the bridge.

A bell tinkled, the engine throbbed rapidly, the yacht vibrated and leaped forward into the night. An icy wind swept around Ashley's legs and shoulders. He thanked himself for having brought his heavy coat instead of that light one.

"You will find dinner ready for you in the saloon," said the captain. "If we can pick out our buoys we ought to make it, but it's going to be dark as a pocket and we'll have to use the searchlight the entire way. None of us has ever been in here before, and in the night one island looks just like another. If you care to come up on the bridge after dinner, I'll be there."

Ashley thanked him.

"I suppose we might as well eat," he commented to Wakefield. "I don't see how they are going to find their way through this maze of islands. The whole bay is thick with rocks and shoals."

The two doctors partook of their meal in silence, waited on deftly by two stewards. There was no sound save the steady throb of the engine and a slight rattle from the window casings. Outside it was pitch black. Night had fallen in earnest.

Dinner over, Ashley threw on his coat and stepped out upon the deck. He could hear nothing but the thump of the propeller and the rush of the water alongside, see nothing but a sparkling trail of phosphorescence sweeping toward the stern. Ahead the searchlight was bent in a long, tubelike shaft upon the water, showing a slowly heaving brown surface upon which floated occasional bunches of seaweed. He turned and made his way up to the bridge. The captain in a greatcoat was pacing back and forth, a watch in his hand.

"Where are we?" asked the doctor.

"I figure we're somewhere off the Three Wise Men," the captain answered doubtfully. "It should be clear water as far as the beacon—on the Lone Virgin. That's 18 miles, nautical. I've let her go west three-quarters south for—well, it's 25 minutes now—at 14 knots. We ought to be picking up the black buoy by the first of the Wise Men. But the whole bay is so jam full of islands and shoal water I daresn't go by a single buoy marked on the chart without makin' sure where I am—Hi, there! What's that?"

"Island ahead, sir!" yelled the forward watch.

The captain sprang to the indicator and threw it across to "full speed reverse." The engine groaned, the yacht heeled over, the propeller rattled in a frenzy as they gripped the water and shot backward.

"Steady!" said the captain, throwing the indicator to "stop."

The yacht lay still in a white, eddying froth. Faintly outlined in the hazy, distant circle, like a dissolving view on a stereopticon screen, Ashley saw the thin, white line of a small island, low lying and rocky, about a quarter of a mile ahead.

"Lucky we had the searchlight," ejaculated the captain. "I'd like to know what island that is. I never saw it before."

He bent over the table of frosted glass under which lay the chart, illuminated by concealed lights, and marked off a distance with his dividers.

"Hey, there!" he called forward. "Do any of you know that island?"

There was no response.

"The Three Wise Men make a kind of a triangle. So far as I can see, that could be either of 'em, or then, again, it might be Hardwood island or Trumpet island. Now, it depends on which one it is whether we get the right buoy to lay our course west one-fourth south for the Virgin. But if we're in behind one of 'em we may run aground. Turn that searchlight to starboard!"

The man in the bow swept the misty shaft of light along the surface of the water.

"Hold it!" shouted the captain, as a white object flashed sharply. "What's that?"

"Lobster buoy, sir," said the watch.

The captain muttered an oath. "Keep her moving," he growled.

Ashley strained his eyes after the light, fascinated like an insect by a flame. Out of the heavy blackness of the surrounding night things on or in the water sprang into blazing relief in truly startling fashion. The water and waves themselves looked brown, but the objects were picked out in burning white. Here, masses of weed floating on the surface shone in silver streaks, their edges tinged with flame; there, a sleeping seagull shone like a gleaming jewel, then rose, circled and flickered like a frosted moth in candle light. Lobster buoys, floating logs, sticks of wood, all glittered as if illuminated inside by electricity. When the edges of the waves broke they glinted with opalescence.

The mate came hurrying up in response to a summons from the captain. He knew they were off something, but which of several islands it was he could not tell. He had never been in that part of the bay before. Now as they threw the light in wider circles they saw other islands to starboard, all small, low and rocky, lying one beside the other—but no buoys.

"We must have overrun that buoy on Hardwood," said the mate. "But if we have, we ought to be able to see that other one marked there at the end of Trumpet island. This place has got me! There don't seem to be no buoys. We can't just go blind in here, and these islands all look alike."

They had now been lying still for 25 minutes, with the entire crew trying to make out a buoy which might or might not be there.

"Captain," said Ashley in a strained voice, "how soon can we get to Eagle island if we should find the buoy at once?"

"Barring accidents and assuming that we make all our marks and don't lose any buoys, one hour to the Virgin, one hour across to Pemetic Reach and half an hour to Eagle island harbor—two hours and a half."

"But it's nearly eight o'clock now," exclaimed Ashley nervously. "It would be half past ten by the time we got there! You know what that means!"

The captain turned a drawn face towards his companion.

"Doctor!" he said, and his voice trembled, "I'd give my right hand if we could pick up that buoy this minute. But if we go on and run the boat aground we'll never get there!"

"Can't you go through these islands and so right across to Eagle?" asked Ashley helplessly.

The captain shook his head.

"We draw 14 feet. This string of islands and shoal water stretches eastward 23 miles. There is no passage through them for a boat of our draft. We've got to go 'round them and back halfway again to make Pemetic Reach. If there was a channel through we could make Eagle Island in 55 minutes from here. It's just as if a wall that you couldn't climb lay in front of you, with the house just on the other side."

"Then every minute we lie here means that we lose that much time!" Ashley's heart sank, "Poor Tom!" he whispered.

But the searchlight reflected only the flare of the seagull's wings.

The two men cast together by chance in a common endeavor to save a human life stood silently side by side upon the bridge, the heart of each tortured by the same hopeless dread.

"There's only one thing we can do," finally announced the captain. "And that is to back out of here and run south until we make Pond island light. Then we can get our bearings and feel our way down into the Reach."

"How long will that take?" inquired the doctor

"If we do that we won't make Eagle island until after midnight," muttered the other.

Ashley wrung his hands.

"The boy may be dead by that time!" he groaned bitterly.

The captain turned a set face towards him.

"There never was such a kid!" he almost sobbed. "The finest little feller. Used to come and steer—"

Suddenly he bent forward and shaded his eyes.

"What's that to starboard? Hallo, forward! Is that a boat?"

"Dory ahead, sir—starboard bow!" shouted the watch.

"Thank God!" ejaculated the captain. "Now, at any rate, we'll find out where we are."

SPURLING, HALF HANGING OVER THE BRASS RAILING OF THE BRIDGE, POINTED AT THE WEIR BEFORE THEM.

II

John Spurling had lived with his wife and daughter for 16 years on Hardwood island, socalled from the fact that it boasted a few undersized maples, birches and beeches, in addition to a small forest of evergreens. He wrested a precarious living from the sea by means of lobster pots, a trawl and a small herring weir which he operated on shares with a capitalist from Goose cove who had put up the $300 necessary to underwrite the venture. The island was a pretty good place for sheep and Spurling owned five—he had once hoped to buy more. He also at one time had owned a cow but it had proved difficult to continue her milk giving qualities, a difficulty overlooked at the moment of her purchase. Winter and summer he was out before sunrise, pulling his traps or setting his trawl, and once a week a small motor boat put in from across the bay and carried away his catch. But it was a hard life. "A hell of a life for a girl!" he periodically remarked to Ingrid, his Swedish wife, thereby referring to Regna, now nearly 15 years of age.

Spurling, himself, was a tall, dark, silent man of 50, and in his youth he had done better. At one time, indeed, he had owned a third of a fishing smack and had gone to the Banks, but one fierce autumn they had lost her, uninsured—gale driven on the rocks of Mount Desert—and he had lost heart as well. About that time, too, he had fallen sick and had continued more or less, generally more, "ailin'" ever since. Not that his pain incapacitated him for work. Occasionally, to be sure, he would set his teeth at the agony of it, but there would be long stretches—months indeed—when he felt almost well. Once, at the earnest solicitation of his wife he had gone up to Bangor and consulted a physician there, who diagnosed his trouble as acute dyspepsia and told him to stop eating fish and to drink milk! This unconscious sarcasm had almost made the slow moving fisherman angry, but in the end he had only laughed grimly, paid his two dollars and departed without comment.

And so he labored on, trying to earn enough extra to buy magazines and periodicals for his wife and to send Regna to board in the winters at North West harbor where there was a good school. But this year there had been a bad season all 'round. Two of the sheep had died, the herring had gone somewhere else, and there was a paucity of lobsters. His pain, too, had come back with a strange intensity so that at times he had to curl up at the bottom of his dory and let the boat drift until the spasm had passed. Finally, in desperation, the family had packed up and moved across to the mainland, where his wife had secured work as a kitchen helper in a boarding house, and he had gotten employment on a farm. But the season was short and board was high, and the first of September had found them, including Regna—a pretty, lithe little girl with rose-brown cheeks—back at "Hardwood." This year they had no money to send her to North West harbor and they all looked forward to the winter with foreboding.

Yet John Spurling loved the coast upon which he had been born and where he strove to live. Although he could not have said so in the proper words, he reveled in the clear, sparkling atmosphere, the brilliant sunlight, the rocky, pine clad islands, the rigor of the life, the song of the wind swept sea. Deep down in his heart the strongest emotion of his being, next to his love for Ingrid and the child, was this feeling of unity with nature. Often he would pause in hauling his traps to watch the gulls as they rested so lightly upon the water, or the serried bands of white cloud marching across the sky like ranks of warriors driven before the northwest wind, or the moving shadows darkening the bays and islands, or the wrinkled hills of distant Mount Desert.

Sometimes in the morning, when his pain had left him, he felt ecstatic with the joy of it—of even his life—and he would stretch his arms and go singing down the beach to his weir, or call Regna to help him with his traps.

As the years went on he came to know every nook and corner of the coast for 50 miles in both directions. Each little bay, each tiny inlet, each twinkling channel, had some hidden secret known only to him. Here he had lost a trap; there he had caught a miraculous net of fish; over on that sandspit he had found that the ducks liked to pause in their southward flight; behind that ridge there was an unknown field of cranberries; in that inlet grew enormous clams.

So, too, he learned the rocks and reefs and their real names—not always the names given on the charts—and he learned also that in some places the soundings were given as too shallow or too deep. Year by year, too, he noticed certain changes wrought by wave and tide. Where his weir was, for example, on Hardwood island and between it and First Wise Man (The Flying Place was its right name—why, no one knew) the tide had sucked out a narrow passage in the sand through which even a small schooner might go safely if you only knew just where to turn, and thus escape the 12 or 14 miles necessary to go round the islands. He had watched this grow year by year and in a way measured his own age by it.

Some day when he should be dead, the islands would no longer present a barrier to vessels voyaging north and south. He had been a good navigator in his day, one of the best on the coast. Sometimes, if it had not been for the wife and child, he felt that he might have gone back to a seafaring life. But he did not complain. Life seemed good to him, and he labored on simply to live.

Spurling had come home early that afternoon. He had had no luck and the pain had come on again—worse than ever. Six times he had been forced to stop in rowing back from the weir, and when he had staggered to the house he stumbled into a corner without a word and sat down with his jaw set and his head in his hands.

"I'm awfully sorry, Yack!" said his wife, from where she was working at the stove. "A hot cup of tea will do you goot and mak' you feel some better."

"No, thanks, Ingrid," he muttered. "I don't want nothing'."

"I wish you had some Yamaica yinger," continued his wife. "Dot seem to help you sometime, but there aint a drop in the house. I meant to borrow some of Mrs. Wasgett when I was over to Seal Cove, but I forgot about it."

"Oh, I'll be all right," he replied, gasping.

Regna came in at that moment from the beach with an armful of driftwood.

"What's the matter, daddy?" she asked, putting her arms around him.

"Nothin', sweetheart!" he answered, turning his head to kiss her. Then he got up and without a word went into the next room and threw himself down on the bed.

At 8 o'clock he felt that he could bear the pain no longer, for it coursed through his veins like molten lead. He had never known such agony before.

"I'm going' to row over to Seal Cove and git some ginger!" he muttered, coming out into the kitchen.

"Want me to go with you, daddy?" asked Regna.

Spurling nodded. If he had one of his spells in the boat she would be needed.

"We'll be back in a couple of hours," he said to his wife; "I don't feel so awful bad!"

It was a sooty night and they felt their way with difficulty across the beach. To the west the yellow bead of Casco light winked feebly at regular intervals. Their own course lay eastward four miles without guidance through the blackness. Regna clambered into the dory and her father shoved it off and swung himself in over the bow. Then he lifted the oars into the rowlocks and pulled swiftly around the point. Darkness and light to him were both alike. He could have smelt his way along the coast in a fog. The next instant, half blinded, they were in the focus of the Cormorant's searchlight.

"A yacht!" cried Regna, covering her eyes with her hands.

III

"It's a boat, all right!" exclaimed the captain. "Man in it and a girl!"

He took the megaphone from its hook beside the binnacle and pointed it toward the boat, the occupants of which had ceased rowing.

"Hello, there!" he called across the brown, oily water.

"Shift your light!" came back faintly; "we can't see!"

The mate threw the misty white pillar skyward and in a moment they could hear the sound of resumed oars coming nearer. Impatiently they waited, anxious to hail and get their information, but knowing well that the rower would not speak until he had come alongside, rested on his oars, and inspected the yacht, after the manner of those who live on islands. Presently, however, the dory loomed out of the darkness and the man ceased rowing.

"Hello!" shouted the captain, "can you tell us what island that is over there?"

Spurling turned his head and started to reply, but the exertion of rowing had brought on the pain again. It shot through his groin like a red hot sword and he dropped his oars and crumpled up in the boat, groaning with agony. Regna caught the oars and climbed across the seats to his father's assistance.

"What's the matter down there?" cried the captain sharply. "Can't you speak? Throw on that search!"

And then Ashley saw, in the white glare, a fisherman lying in the bottom of a dory and a young girl with his head in her arms.

"That man's sick!" he ejaculated.

The captain nodded.

"Lower the gig and bring that fellow aboard!" he ordered.

Assisted by friendly, yet impatient hands, John Spurling dragged himself limply up the gangway and staggered to the engine room hatch. Under the electric light his unshaven face was like that of a dead man.

Doctor Ashley poured out a half tumbler of brandy and gave it to him to drink.

"Where are we?" demanded the captain, as the man opened his eyes. "What island is that?"

"That's Hardwood island," answered Spurling, weakly. "You've run by the buoy off the Three Wise Men—that is, if you're going west."

"We'll be going west all right in a minute!" almost shouted Larsen. "Say, if you know this bay, I'll give you $10 to pilot us around the Lone Virgin as far as Pemetic Reach. This gentleman here is a doctor, and he's got to get to Eagle island tonight to operate on a dying boy—ought to be there by 9 o'clock—Now, as it is he'll be nearly three hours late, and the child may die. Say, man, will you come?"

Through the painful glare of the lights, the throbbing of his brain, and the killing thrusts through his body, Spurling heard vaguely and but dimly understood. The tense faces of the men about him, however, shouted their message. Some one was dying—like him. Somebody needed a doctor—who must not be late, yet who was hours late already in the race with death. He thought of the Flying Place and its winding channel of swiftly swirling waters

"How much do you draw?" he gasped between the jabs of pain in his side.

"Fourteen feet."

"I know a passage—it ain't marked on the charts—between the Wise Men and Hardwood—that at flood tide is good for four fathoms."

"What! You do! Eh?" shouted the captain.

"The currents have dug it out in the last five or six years. It's high water now, and if you want to chance it—"

Captain Thomas hesitated. His employer's beautiful new yacht was as dear to him as a child. If he should run her on the rocks or get her aground—her owner's son would surely die. He looked mutely at the doctor.

"It's our only chance, captain," said the latter. "If we don't take it, it will be morning before we reach Eagle island."

"Come up on the bridge!" answered Larsen, putting his arm around Spurling and lifting him to his feet. Ashley followed close behind. He could see that the man was dying—it did not take a surgeon to appreciate that. When once they were through the islands he would attend him. Meanwhile the man must suffer—for the sake of the boy. He uttered a silent prayer that they might not be too late.

The bell rang in the engine room and the indicator pointed at "Ahead—Slow." The Cormorant shook for a moment and then moved forward.

"Keep the searchlights dead ahead!" shouted the captain as he spun the wheel to starboard. "Now, where's your passage?"

Spurling, half hanging over the brass railing of the bridge, pointed at the weir before them.

"Over there," he answered. "Bear off well to nor'ward. See that island? That's the first Wise Man. Now head her for that rocky point."

With her searchlight blazing before her the Cormorant stole silently toward the island. For a moment it looked as if she were going straight for shore; then a narrow passage not more than 40 feet wide opened behind the weir. Absolutely sheltered, the surface of the water was like a mirror save where here and there the minnows leaped in silver showers. On either side the rocky ledges cut sharply against the background of the night like the files of a theater. Looking over the side Ashley could see the white shelving bottom on either hand.

They turned the point and the passage widened to a shallow bay, in which sand banks raised their heads here and there and rocky "thrumcaps" lifted a lone pine or two sheer from the water. The searchlight, playing swiftly from port to starboard, showed land on all sides. Dead ahead a reef broke the surface, covered with hundreds of sleeping seagulls. They shone like a bank of driven snow, motionless, deflected row upon row in the still water, until at last one sleepy bird moved its head and stirred. A wave of motion ran along the rock. Then suddenly the night was filled with the mighty flapping of countless wings.

Once more they returned, circled the reef, threaded their way between some lobster buoys, and again entered a narrow channel beside a tide tip on whose surface wheeled flecks of circling foam. The captain shook his head. A few feet to the right or to the left and the Cormorant would rip off her keel or tear out her propeller. What if they should strike? Yet this white faced fisherman, with his hands pressed to his sides, seemed to know what he was about. What was the Cormorant to the life of little Tom Alexander!

Even as the thought crossed his mind the searchlight lost itself in the open sea behind the islands, touching one pointed cap and leaping into the void beyond.

"We're through!" gasped Spurling. Then he slid silently to the deck.

Captain Thomas glanced at the chart and signaled "Full speed ahead." The Cormorant bounded forward with a whirr from her engines.

Take the wheel, Jurgensen. West by north, three-quarters west. Pemetic light bears northwest."

Dr. Ashley already had thrown his coat beneath the prostrate fisherman and was quickly feeling him over with supersensitive hands. Assisted by Higgins and the captain he dragged him down the steps of the bridge and into the saloon. Here they bolstered him up upon the table and the assistant took Spurling's temperature and pulse.

"One hundred and five," said Higgins. "Pulse one hundred and seventy-three."

"How long to Eagle island, captain?" asked the doctor shortly, with a professional gleam in his gray eye.

"With a forced draft and barring accidents—thirty-nine minutes," answered Captain Thomas doubtfully.

"We've no time to lose, Higgins," said Ashley briskly, opening his bag. "Got your ether handy?"

IV.

It was exactly eleven minutes past nine when the Cormorant, roaring under her forced draft, shot through the darkness past the striped channel buoy at the end of Pemetic Reach and, with the searchlight playing right and left across the waves, raced toward her moorings off the point upon which stood the Alexander cottage. The launch had already been lowered almost to the surface of the water, the blue flame under her boiler flaring grotesquely upon the face of the sailor trying to start her engine. Inside the saloon Ashley, who was bending busily over the silent form of Spurling, heard the bell to stop and lifted a tense face.

"Good job we tackled this fellow when we did. Worst case of perforation I ever saw. How he lived long enough tonight to reach the yacht I don't know. He must have a constitution of iron. An ordinary man would have died of one of those earlier attacks years ago."

"Queer thing—picking a man out of a boat like that and cutting him up without hardly so much as by your leave," answered Higgins.

"If he hadn't agreed it would have been suicide," remarked Ashley, authoritatively. "Now we must sterilize these instruments and turn him over to his daughter. He'll do well enough until we can get back later."

Tom Alexander met them on the dock and clasped Ashley in his arms. His tension was almost at the breaking point.

"Thank God, Jim!" he cried, the tears slipping down his bronzed cheeks. "I've been standing here straining my eyes ever since 6 o'clock! Yes, Tom's holding his own, and Freemont says if you operate at once he doesn't anticipate any trouble. Oh, it's good to see you! I've been watching the searchlight for the last hour, worrying for fear the engine might break down or that you'd miss a buoy. Oh, Jim! Good old Jim! And punctual as usual!"

He dashed his hand across his eyes and half dragged the doctor up the steps of the dock and across the lawn.

An hour later Ashley, followed by Fowler and Higgins, emerged from the sickroom of little Tom Alexander. His father, who was loitering anxiously outside, searched their faces with suspicious eyes for the indication of some hidden fear in which he might not be permitted to share.

"No, Tom—it's alright!" said Ashley, slapping his friend on the shoulder. "No need to worry. The boy's in prime condition, and the operation was in plenty of time—thanks to the fellow in the boat— By George! I'd clean forgotten him. Hurry down to the yacht, Higgins, and make him comfortable. I'll pay him a professional visit later—but not just now. Fact is, I'm all in! This is the first time I've ever performed two operations by artificial light in one evening. Can you give me a brandy and soda and a cigar?"

"Can I!" answered Alexander. "Just come down to the library! But what do you mean by two operations? My boy didn't—"

"No, he didn't have two appendixes!" laughed Doctor Ashley. "But the fact is, I took the liberty of bringing a patient along with me and operating on him as we came down the Reach. He had a much worse case of it than your Tom, but I expect him to get through all right. I managed to take him in time, too."

And then the doctor briefly told Alexander of the coincidence by which he had happened upon Spurling in the hour of their need, which happened to be the hour of his need also.

"Then he saved my boy's life!" cried Alexander. "Fetched the Cormorant through those islands, did he? Why, it seems to me like Providence! Bless the chap! If he and Tom pull out of this together I'll give him a sea going vessel of his own."

That is all that is relevant and material in the story of how the 220 foot Cormorant, drawing 14 feet of water, squeaked through a chain of islands with a dying lobsterman pilot—via an uncharted channel, to bring a doctor to a dying boy, save to add that both the lobsterman and boy got well and were firm friends forever after. For now the lobsterman is called "Captain" Spurling and has command of a 50 foot yawl in which the boy goes cruising with his father every summer, and when he is not on duty he lives with his Ingrid and Regna in a little white cottage around the turn of the island and catches lobsters for the Alexanders and their visitors. Later on, when Tom goes away to school, and the holidays are over, the Spurlings move up to the big house and keep it warm and clean during the long winter months, while Regna goes to the normal school at Bangor.

And if you look on the chart between the first Wise Man and Hardwood island you will see two striped buoys and a passage marked Spurling's cut—which may be an accidental joke on the part of the government lithographer.