

The Secret Sharer and Other Sea Stories

JOSEPH CONRAD



Collins English Library

Collins English Library

Series editors: K R Cripwell and Lewis Jones

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The Secret Sharer and Other Sea Stories

JOSEPH CONRAD

Abridged and simplified by Roland John

Illustrations by Steve Parkhouse

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THE SECRET SHARER

One

I was alone on deck at night when this adventure happened. It was at the start of a voyage home from the East. We were waiting for a wind to fill our sails. My officers and crew had been working hard, so I had told them to rest. Everything was very quiet and peaceful. Not far away there was another ship; I could faintly see the tops of her masts behind a rock.

I must tell you that this was the first time I had been in command of a ship. I knew very little about her or her crew. I was a stranger on board and a stranger, in a way, to the job. I was almost the youngest man on board.

I was walking along the deck when I noticed a rope ladder hanging over the side of the ship. No doubt it had been used by the port officer when he came on board that afternoon. When he left, it should have been pulled up, of course. But it hadn't been. I decided to speak to my Second Officer about it. Meanwhile, I would pull it up myself.

Now a rope ladder of that sort is quite light. I gave it a sharp pull. It hardly moved. Wondering what could be holding it, I naturally looked over the side.

The ladder was held by a ghostly white hand. A long white body lay in the water close by it.

I decided to act as if this was just an ordinary

event. "What's the matter?" I asked.

"I'm a bit tired," the figure answered, quietly. Then the voice added, anxiously, "Are you alone on deck?"

"Yes."

"Can you . . . will you quietly fetch your captain to me?"

"I am the captain," I said.

There was a sound of surprise from below.

"My name's Leggatt," he said.

"You must be a good swimmer."

"Yes. I've been in the water a long time. The question is . . . should I go on swimming till I sink, or come on board your ship?"

I did not need to say anything at all. The man made up his own mind and began to climb the ladder. I hurried away to get clothes for him.

A few minutes later we were on the upper deck, and he was wearing one of my sleeping-suits.

"What's the trouble?" I asked, holding a lamp up to his face.

"It's an unpleasant business."

He was a good-looking chap, strong, about my own size and perhaps twenty-five years old.

"Tell me about it," I said.

"There's a ship over there," he whispered.

"Yes, I know."

"The *Sephora*. I am . . . I *was* . . . her First Officer."

"Well, is there anything wrong?" I asked.

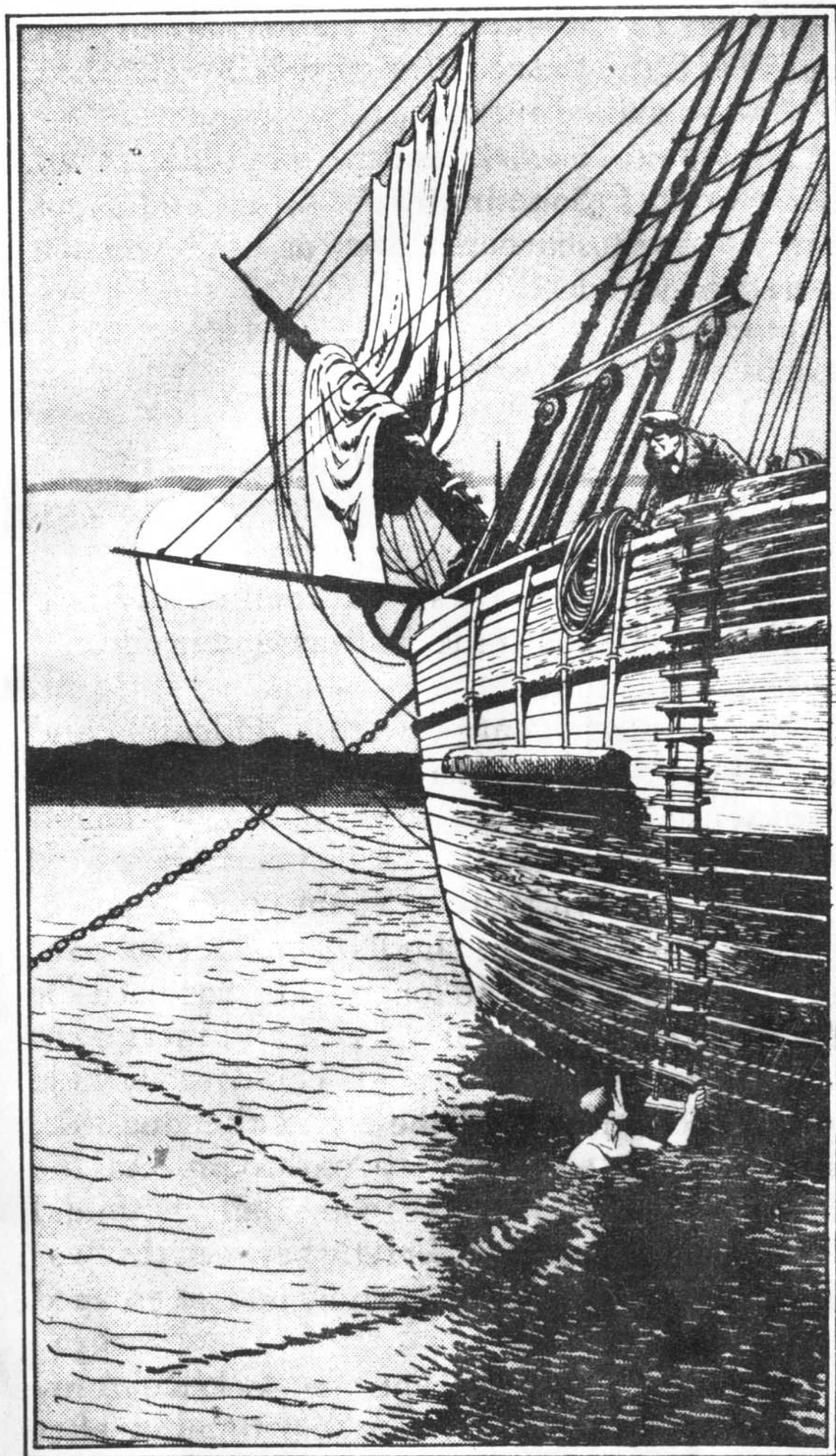
"Yes, very wrong. I've killed a man."

"When? Just now?"

"No, at sea. Weeks ago."

"One of your crew?"

"Yes. One of those men who cause trouble all the time. We were sailing through a very bad



storm at the time. The captain seemed too frightened to do anything, and I had to take control and give the necessary orders."

"And you killed one of the men," I said.

"He wouldn't work, and he wouldn't let the others work. I took him by the throat and shook him. A rough sea came over us, and when it cleared, he was dead."

Two

I kept Leggatt secretly in my room. I did that because I did not think he was a murderer. I wanted to help him.

The arrangements were difficult and dangerous. My officers might have been suspicious. Perhaps our steward, too, wondered what was happening.

Let me explain that my room was L-shaped. My bed was along the short side, with two arm-chairs and a desk. The longer side was used for storage; I kept my clothes there, and there were boxes of tinned food. Leggatt could easily hide behind these things. At the end of the long side, another door led into my bathroom. As the steward cleaned both these rooms daily, we found a way of moving Leggatt secretly between the two.

That morning he told me how he had escaped from the *Sephora*.

"Captain Archbold kept me locked in my room," he said. "Except for ten minutes after supper. I was allowed on deck then, to get some

fresh air. Well, yesterday evening, when I came on deck, I saw the tops of your masts. Two minutes later I'd kicked off my clothes and was in the water. Somebody heard and raised the alarm.

" 'He's gone! He's jumped! Lower the boats! He's trying to kill himself! No, he's swimming.' "

"Certainly I was swimming. It's not easy for a swimmer like me to kill himself in the sea. They got a boat into the water, but I was a kilometre away by then. They soon gave up and went back to the ship. I swam the five kilometres to your ladder."

"Do you think the people from the *Sephora* will be along here soon?" I asked.

"That's almost certain."

He looked suddenly very tired.

"We shall see, then," I said. "Meanwhile, get into that bed and rest."

I sat in one of the armchairs, thinking. I didn't want to sleep. But after a time, I was troubled by a knocking in my head. It seemed to go on for a long time before I realised someone was knocking on the door! I must have been asleep in the chair.

Without thinking I called out, "Come in"; and the steward entered with my coffee. I was so frightened then that I shouted, "This way! I am here, steward." He put the coffee on the table and said, very quietly, "I can see you are, sir."

Fortunately I had pulled the green curtains round the bed, so he didn't see the sleeper.

I had to show myself on deck, of course, and in the dining room. There must have been a worried expression on my face. Certainly, some very puzzled looks passed between my officers and the steward. After breakfast I woke Leggatt and we

arranged the dangerous business of the room-cleaning. It was a success...I even had my usual bath...and the steward discovered nothing.

Later that morning I had a visit from Captain Archbold of the *Sephora*. We talked in our dining room, and Leggatt could hear the conversation through the thin wooden wall.

"I've been up since daylight," Archbold said, "searching the rocks around here."

"Why did you do that?" I asked.

"I was looking for a killer. My First Officer. He jumped overboard last night."

He then gave me his side of the story. I will not repeat it here. It was over two months since the seaman's death, and the facts were no longer clear in his mind. I listened politely and then said:

"And now you are anxious to find your First Officer and give him up to the police in port."

"I was. Now I suppose I must report that he is dead. Well, I never liked the man. He wasn't the right sort of person to be First Officer of a ship like the *Sephora*."

The words gave me a shock. By this time I was closely connected in my thoughts and feelings with the secret sharer of my room. I felt as if I, too, was not good enough to be First Officer of the *Sephora*!

Three

When I got over my surprise, I smiled at Captain Archbold and said:

"Why do you think your First Officer is dead?"

"Well, beyond these few rocks the shore must be ten to twelve kilometres away. Too far to swim."

"Yes, I suppose so."

"But it's only five kilometres or less from my ship to yours."

He looked at me rather sharply when he said that.

I replied, "That was far enough for your men to bring you in this morning's heat."

I think my politeness and lack of excitement puzzled him. If he had asked me a direct question... "Have you seen my First Officer?"... I could not have told him a direct lie. I guessed that he did not trust me; so I decided to show him around my ship.

I showed him everything, including my own room and bathroom. Leggatt, of course, kept himself well hidden.

At last we came out on deck again; and Captain Archbold and his men departed with much handshaking.

After they had gone, my First Officer said:

"The Captain seemed a very nice man. His boat's crew told our chaps a strange story. I suppose you heard it, sir?"

"Yes, I had story from the Captain."

"A bad business, isn't it, sir?"

"It is."

"Those fellows seemed to think the killer was hidden on board here. Did you ever hear such nonsense, sir?"

"Impossible, isn't it?" I said.

"Our men got angry about it. 'As if we would hide a murderer on our ship!' they said. They had quite a quarrel. I suppose the man is dead, sir, don't you?"

"I don't suppose anything."

"You have no doubt at all, sir?"

"None."

I left him suddenly. I felt unsafe on deck or, at least, less safe than in my room. I wanted to discuss Archbold's story with Leggatt, but I did not have enough time. I had been below deck only five minutes when there were footsteps in the passage. Someone knocked heavily on my door.

"The wind is rising, sir. We can set sail."

"All right. Call out the men," I cried through the door. "I'll be on deck in a moment."

"This is a very difficult situation for you," Leggatt whispered. "I'm thinking of a plan of escape and would like to talk to you about it."

"There's plenty of time for that," I said.

I went on deck and soon got the ship moving. Although I commanded her, it would be truer to say that half of me commanded her. The other half always seemed to be with Leggatt.

He was right: his presence was a problem. He filled my thoughts. Commands that should have come quickly to my lips did not do so now. I had to think before speaking.

I had many serious frights, too. Several times

the secret sharer of my room was *almost* discovered. I grew to hate the sight of the steward; I jumped at the sound of his voice. If anyone found out the secret, it was most likely to be him. The danger hung like a sword over our heads.

One very narrow escape left me cold and shaking. When I saw Leggatt next, I said:

"Perhaps you are a ghost of a man, and only my eyes can see you."

He raised his hands and whispered, "The steward was less than one metre from me and saw nothing!"

Orders were being shouted on deck, and the ship was turning. There were sounds that deadened our voices.

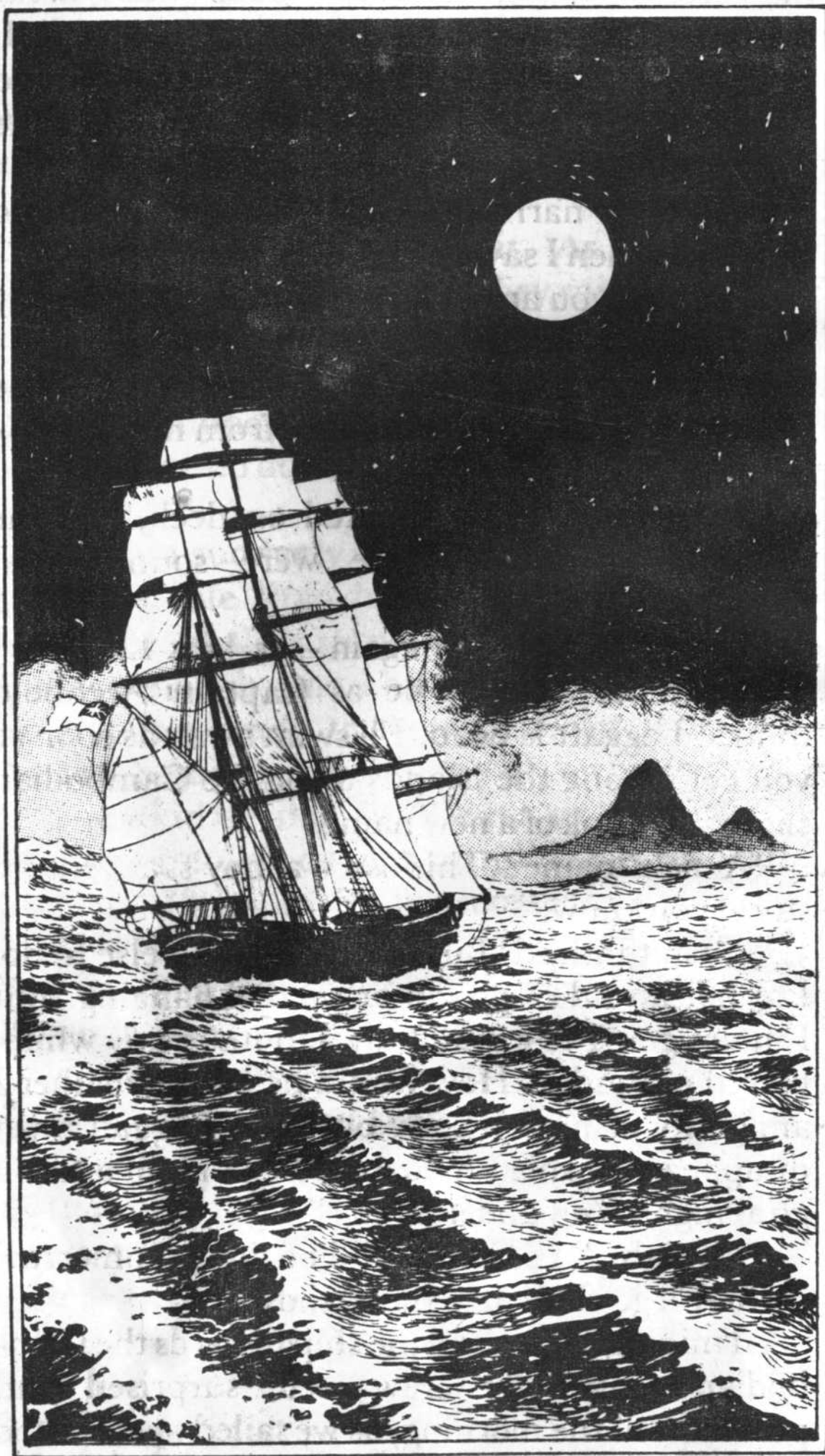
"I can't come to life again – as Jack Leggatt," he went on. "Let it be as Captain Archbold thinks: Leggatt is dead. I'll swim away as soon as you get among the islands along the Cambodian shore. I'll think of a new name."

"A new name? This isn't a boy's adventure story, you know."

"It isn't indeed. But there's nothing else to do. I'm not afraid of prison or even of hanging. But I'm not going to explain my actions to any white-haired old judge. How would he know whether I am guilty or not? It's my business. Leggatt must disappear. I came on board here at night and I'll go at night. You understand?"

"All right," I said. "It will be done. Tomorrow night. I'll go close in to the islands."

At midnight I turned the ship towards the Cambodian coast. My crew were surprised and puzzled. All the morning, as we sailed towards the islands, we were blown by the faintest of winds.



I said to my officers: "I'm going as close as I can to the islands. There are stronger winds blowing off the land. I must look for them."

"Among the rocks and shallows at night, sir?" my First Officer asked.

"Yes, that's where we'll find the land winds."

He seemed afraid now, as well as surprised.

Four

A map of the coast was lying open on my bed.

"There," I said to Leggatt, pointing. "That's the best island for you. Koh-ring. It's big, so there'll be people there. The mainland is just behind it, with a river. No doubt there's a town not far up the river."

"Good. Koh-ring will be fine."

"We'll reach it tonight," I whispered. "There are two high rocky hills. I'll take the ship as near as I can judge in the dark. Then you swim."

"Be careful," he warned. "Your future will be in ruins if anything goes wrong."

On deck, I found the young Second Officer on duty. For a time I walked up and down, thinking. Then I called him over.

"Send a couple of men to open the quarter-deck windows," I said, pleasantly.

He stepped back, puzzled. "What for, sir?"

"Because I tell you to do so, of course. Have them open wide and fastened back properly."

He turned red and went off. In a minute the First Officer appeared, staring at me strangely.

Just before supper I went down to my room. In a hurried whisper I told Leggatt my plan.

"I'll sail in as close as I dare before turning away. After supper I'll get rid of the steward somehow. Then you leave here and run down the passage into the sail-room. There's an opening there that leads straight on to the quarter-deck. When the ship is turning away, get overboard through a window. I've had them both opened wide. Go down a rope into the water to avoid a splash."

"I understand," he whispered.

"I hope I have understood, too," I said.

"You have, from first to last."

After supper I stayed on deck till darkness. The wind had not increased. To the left the huge rocks of Koh-ring filled a growing space in the sky.

Later, I went below again. I gave Leggatt some money – three gold coins. He tied these in a handkerchief to the belt of the sleeping-suit. For no reason I could think of then, I also gave him my large white hat and pressed it down on his head. Then I turned out the lamp and went out, leaving the door wide open. I walked a few steps along the passage.

"Steward!" I called.

He appeared at once. "Sir!"

"Can you bring me some hot water?"

"I'm afraid the kitchen fire's out, sir."

"Go and see."

He ran off, down beyond the dining room,

"Now," I said. Leggatt was at my side in a moment and then down into the sail-room. I was standing quietly by the dining room door when the steward returned.