

The Little Red Gods

By Thomas H. Raddall



Nobby couldn't understand Kerrigan's allusion—but then Kerrigan was Irish.

DESOLATION and the gray shadow of death—that is Sable Island. A twenty-six-mile strip of sand bar in the North Atlantic, tufted here and there with the coarse salt grass, and blown into wild cliffs, ridges and ravines that shift at the whim of the four winds. Sand and salt grass, with a few wind-blasted ground junipers in the hollows, and cranberries thick on the slopes around reedy seep holes. There is not a tree on all that golden surface. There is not a stone as big as a walnut. It is the meeting place of several strong currents, and to this meeting the island owes its existence. They made a sea monster of sand, these currents, and down through the centuries they have brought it ships and men for sacrifice. The beaches are littered with a tangle of spars, planks and cordage; here and there offshore the sea breaks over a rusty boiler or a barnacle-incrusted sternpost. The wind whistling down through the ravines uncovers huddled

SEA—1

groups of whitened bones and covers them again with the everlasting sand; but this is only fragmentary evidence of disaster. Most of the victims, ships and men, are buried deep in the quicksands, for Sable swallows her catch whole, like an octopus.

There are living things upon the face of Sable. Wild ponies, stunted descendants of the horses abandoned there by hopeless colonists in the dim past, find a sparse living on the coarse grass of the dunes. Terns nest there in the millions—a wheeling, screaming canopy for the place. In the fall great clouds of ducks come out of the North, and winter there among the reeds by the lagoon. Seals are there, feeding on the neighboring cod banks, and sunning themselves on the level sands in scattered herds. And there are men, women and children—exiles all. These are the people who man the two lighthouses, the life-saving establishment and the wireless station, and they are scattered along the length of the island and separated by the miles of tangled dunes and gullies. They

D 71

have caught some of the wild ponies, it is true, and broken them in for riding; but there are patrols to be made and watches to keep, and there is little intercourse among them. I was thirteen months on the wireless staff at Sable and never saw the East Point light keeper's face.

Robinson Crusoe and his man Friday were not more lonely than Kerrigan, Piggott, and I, who wore the phones, and "Nobby" Clarke, the little cockney who cooked our meals. There were days when the sun shone and the surf rippling mildly over the bars was like the chime of distant bells and the salt breeze weaving through the grass hummocks made such sounds as the land winds make in lush meadows far from the sea. Then we would stride along the beach and whistle dance tunes that the world over the sky line yonder had already forgotten, and stop here and there to rummage in the débris thrown up by the last tide like curious children at a shore picnic.

Or we would sneak up on a herd of wild ponies drowsing in a sunny hollow and mount one, before he could get under way, and then whoop with the sheer fun of the thing until the wiry beast humped us into a sand bank with an expert twitch of his back. Or we drifted in our dory across the lagoon, stabbing at sand dabs on the shallow floor with weird spears of our own making. But it only wanted the sight of a white-decked liner snoring past West Point to bring back the old longing to be far away, back in the world we had left. We were young—Kerrigan was twenty-eight and the oldest, if you except Nobby, who was an old soldier, fifty, and disillusioned—and we ached for a glimpse of that world with its lights and music and the soft voices of women as I hope I shall never want anything again in this world.

And then there was winter, when the lagoon froze and the snow and sleet came down from Newfoundland and drove across the bleak dunes like the wrath of Heaven, and made four prisoners of us there in the little drafty shack that was exposed to every wind that blew. The glitter storms made ice upon our aërials until they broke under the weight, and we bedeviled exiles would venture forth to fumble with stiff and clumsy fingers at icy ropes, wires, and insulators. The older wild ponies and the sick ones, unable to stand the gaff, would lie down and die

resignedly in the hollows about the station, where they would stink to high heaven in the warm winds of spring. For us there were the interminable watches and the bleak vista of gray and empty days ahead. We got morose in the monotonous round, curtmouthed or silent with each other, and oftentimes quarreled bitterly over trivial matters.

"'Tis the work that makes it worse," Kerrigan said. "This listenin', everlastin' listenin' at the phones, all hours o' the day an' night. It whittles your nerves down to a fine edge, d'ye see? A fine edge that'll break some day, an' cut deep in the breakin'."

I remember that one night I struck Kerrigan full in the mouth because, as operator in charge of the station, he reproved me in his fluent Irish way for leaving the engine running more than I need. It was the lone gasoline engine that drove our dynamo, you understand, and Kerrigan nursed it like an ailing child. The blood started on his lip, for I had hit him with all the force of a high-strung blind rage, and he said quietly, "I could beat ye, an' beat ye to a jelly, my sweet man. But—I won't!" He took the butt of his last cigarette from behind his ear and lit it with a hand that shook with his fury. And I remember that I sat on the table by the receiving apparatus and wept like a hysterical woman, while Kerrigan leaned back and shouted with a wild loony laughter that brought Piggott from his bed to know the trouble. Now, with all this in mind, perhaps you will understand why I misunderstood the strange feud between Kerrigan and relief operator Grattan O'Leary Emmett McAvity.

I HAD been nearly a year on Sable Island when Piggott's time was up and McAvity came from the ships to take his place. Piggott was wild with excitement. He danced, he cavorted, and he sang, for which we cursed him soulfully. Finally he jumped on the table and recited that old "Operator's Farewell to Sable Island," which Billums Williams had composed on a similar occasion a long time before. It goes like this:

"Twelve months in any place, dear friends, is quite a weary while,
And seems more like a century when spent on Sable Isle:

But now my exile's over and I've packed my little trunk,
I'm goin' to the mainland where a feller can get drunk.

There's trees an' girls an' taxicabs, an' movie shows an' booze,
An' I can walk for miles an' feel hard roads beneath my shoes.

The only seals I'll find will be fur coats on ladies' backs,
An' I'll have Christian grub to eat when I'm in Halifax.

"An' when I have grown old an' have gray hairs beneath my cap,

Before I kick the bucket with a loud an' fatal rap,

I'll drag my feeble limbs aboard the boat when sailing's nigh,

An' have another look at Sable Isle before I die.

For when I've seen the breakers pound along that sandy length,

The thought of what a hell on earth it is will give me strength;

An' when the devil lets me into Tophet with a curse,

I'll tell him, 'Nick, it ain't so bad—I've seen a place that's worse.'

The inkpot that I threw missed Piggott by a foot and made a horrible splodge on the wall, but Kerrigan—always a better shot than me—caught him in the short ribs with a Bucher's "Practical Wireless Telegraphy" and folded him up like a jackknife. We bundled him down to the landing beach and assured him with profane ambiguity that we were sorry to see him go and glad to get rid of him; and when he stepped gayly into the waiting boat I thought my heart would burst. Kerrigan and I sat on the dune and watched the suriboat crawl out through the breakers to the government ship on the sky line, an exquisite torture that we might have saved ourselves had we paid any attention to McAvity, the newcomer, or to our stores that were piled higgedly-piggledly there on the beach, or to anything under the sun but the fact of Piggott going away. On inspection McAvity seemed a right good fellow. He had red hair and a quick smile that I liked, and the way he thumbed his nose at the departing steamer made me laugh as I had not laughed in a long time. I introduced myself and beckoned Kerrigan over, saying, "Paddy, here's another harp to keep you company."

"Irish?" asked Kerrigan, moving over and looking hard at McAvity.

"From County Clare," said McAvity. "Wid the green shamrock still growin' out my ears."

They stepped up to each other till they were toe to toe, and shook hands with their wrists down low at their waists, and looked into each other's eyes more like two wrestlers feeling for a hold than brother meeting brother in an outpost of the world.

"Pleased to meet you," said McAvity in his soft voice that was like the clean sea breeze in the hills of Cork.

"—and you!" said Kerrigan in his curt brogue that was like the quick ripple of the Foyle under Derry walls.

They were eying each other in the manner of two strange bulldogs, and it occurred to me suddenly that there was an instinctive animosity between them that I could almost touch, a sudden flaming aura of hatred that enveloped them and shut me off from them. Old Nobby, who was full of Hindu superstition that he had picked up in India, would have said they were reincarnated spirits of deadly animal foes that had died at each other's throats a thousand years ago. Then, abruptly, they walked off over the dunes to the shack, Kerrigan carrying a suit case of McAvity's and pointing out the various features of the island on the way. They might have been Damon and Pythias from the rear, but I who had seen that strange meeting knew that here was fire and here was powder, and that all the far-flung length of Sable Island was not big enough to hold them.

We settled into dull routine again. Watches in and watches out, messages received and messages sent, ice warnings broadcasted, weather forecasts broadcasted—eternal buzzing and whining in head phones over hot ears, and the patient mind sorting out the jumble and listening always for the *dit-dit-dit-da, da-dit-da-dit-da*—VCT—which was our call sign. Slogging at the water pump in the hot little engine room of nights, rolling gasoline drums over the dune to refill the greedy fuel tank, filing down the charred studs of the rotary spark discharger—a never-ending chore because the hot electric spark ate up brass rods like wax—oiling the shrill dynamo and the *chug-chugging* gas engine that drove it; adjusting belts, replacing packings and so on. The same old things that we had done a thousand times in the same old way, which constituted the duty of the Sable Island radiomen.

We took far better care of our apparatus than of ourselves. Our clothing was

in rags, and, though the government steamer called four times a year, we never seemed to have a sound pair of boots or trousers between the four of us. Our hair—excepting Nobby's, which had left his shining dome long since—grew long enough to touch our shoulders, and at irregular intervals we would give each other a hair cut of the kind that is usually associated with jails and fever hospitals. Shaving was easier, but we seldom shaved. Living like the untamed savage served to dull the keen edge of exile.

McAvity shed the neat habits of ship-board duty reluctantly, but before many moons he was as ragged as ourselves and possessor of the finest red beard in all North America. But the strangeness between himself and Kerrigan continued. Outwardly, you understand, they were natural enough; but there were little things. They were invariably polite to each other, which was a bad sign. And they invariably relieved each other on time, which was another; and in all the weeks that passed they never spent an off-watch hour together. When Kerrigan wanted a pot at the wild duck he waited until McAvity was on watch and then lugged me off with him; and when McAvity wanted another sealskin for his floor he would come to me when Kerrigan was at the phones and suggest a hunt together.

I was in the kitchen one day, idly watching Nobby peeling potatoes, and remarked that Kerrigan and McAvity seemed an odd pair. "I've seen some queer rows between men when the loneliness was on them," I said, "but these two take the gold-headed cane."

Nobby, the wise old cockney, who had spent twenty years in the British army and knew more about the good and evil in the world than most men I have met, said, "They're flint an' steel, that's wot; an' there'll be ruddy war atween 'em afore one of 'em gets away from 'ere!"

"And what d'ye mean by that?" I demanded.

He waved the potato knife under my nose. "Are you so blinkin' blind you can't see Kerrigan is black Irish an' McAvity is red? Hi! There's allers blood on the heather when the black Irish meets the red, m'son. I've see it meself, an' 'undred times, from Injia to the Curragh an' back agyne."

I scoffed at this. "Man dear, haven't

you been here long enough to know the island fever when you see it? Haven't you seen Kerry when he was sociable as a sick bulldog, pacin' up an' down with a chip on each shoulder and the black mood ridin' on his head, an' never a word for the rest of us? And Piggott—why, Piggott wasn't fit to live with a quarter of the time!"

"Yus," said the solemn little cockney. "And 'ow abaht yerself? You've bin aroun' 'ere time an' agyne wiv yer brows pulled down over yer eyes like you was afraid the sun 'u'd 'urt 'em, an' that lower lip o' yourn stuck out like a drip can for yer nose."

I made an impolite gesture with my thumb and fingers. "All of which supports my contention, pal of my childhood days, that Kerry an' Mick are sufferin' from a spell of depression an' takin' it out on each other."

"Yus," answered Nobby; "a spell as is three or four 'undred year old an' still goin' strong. I tell yer it'll take 'ell an' 'igh water, an' more than a bit o' war to make peace atween them two. Mark my words."

THERE came a night of storm, when we were gathered as usual about the stove in the instrument room, and the northeaster drove sand and rain against our windows in great gusts that shook the little building. Great seas were pouring clear across the south beach into the lagoon, filling that usually placid water with masses of seaweed and old wreckage from the beach. The surf boomed like great guns along both sides of the island and flung bitter white spray far up into the grass hummocks. The raindrops were like flung stones. It was one of those nights when we wondered if the island could stand the gaff, if the thin bar of slithering sand might not be engulfed and washed away in a tumult of tremendous sea. It is an old prophecy that Sable Island, which was made by the sea, shall return in the fullness of time to the sea once more.

Our whole world seemed to be filled with sound, the strains of what Kerrigan called the "devil's orchestra"—deep boom of the surf, patter of raindrops on the roof and walls, swishing of driven sand, and the wind in the stays and aërials which howled like the foul fiend itself. So it was that we did not hear old Benny Portus until

he flung himself from his wet pony into our doorway and startled us beyond belief. When we saw him there blinking in the light, with his stubbly gray beard all glistening with the rain, we knew that something serious was amiss. Benny was carpenter at the lifeboat station two miles away, and like all the island people did not favor the outdoors after dark. Urgent business only could have driven him to saddle a half-tamed pony and ride two miles in the teeth of a Sable Island storm. We were all on our feet in a second, and Kerrigan leaped to the door, forgetting the short leads of the phones, which jerked from his head and fell floorward.

"Jim Hallett's wife," said Benny jerkily, "is hurted bad. Fell down the steps o' the light—from the top. Jim, he's bin sick these five days, an' she's bin tendin' the light, standin' watch an' watch wi' young Martin."

Jim Hallett was keeper of the West Point light, and young Martin was his assistant. We knew that the motor that turned the big lamp had been broken down for a week, and that the two light keepers had been turning it by hand every night since; and we had cursed deep and long the crack liner which, passing the island the night before, had complained by wireless of the erratic timing of the West light.

"Broke her ribs on one side so they're stickin' in her lungs. Keeps a-spittin' blood. An' she expectin' a child."

I tell you it froze our blood, for you must know there is no doctor on Sable Island, nor much in the way of medical supplies, and the nearest mainland is White Head, eighty miles of stormy sea away. Jim Hallett had planned to send his wife ashore on the government steamer, due at the island a week or two hence with supplies, but here was one of those emergencies that confound the plans of mice and men.

It was curious how we all looked to Kerrigan then. They say no man can be a hero to his valet, but Pat Kerrigan was little short of an idol to us who knew him better than his mother. We had sampled his quick decisions a hundred times and found them uniformly good. Kerrigan's resource was a byword in a service which counts few fools.

He was running a quick finger over the log in search of "TR's"—the daily position reports that ships give their nearest radio

station for traffic purposes—and came to a stop at KTOX ORB 70 BND VCO FM WBF. Which being interpreted reads, "S. S. *Bunker Hill*, 70 miles from your station, bound Sydney, N. S., from Boston."

He turned to old Portus. "Ride your moke back to West light, Benny, an' tell Jim to do what he can. We'll have a steamer here by mornin'."

We all looked dubious. Old Benny said, "There's a tremenjus sea on the beach, Mister Kerrigan, sir—'twouldn't be possible to get a boat away from the island. What I come for was the morphine tablets in your medicine chest."

Neither McAvity nor myself looked at Kerrigan then. A week before, when it had rained for days on end and the gray monotony was on us like a clammy stifling blanket Kerrigan had arisen from a long session with his head between his hands and opened the medicine chest. He took the morphine tablets, dropped them into the stove, and then went out to walk along the lonely beach in the rain. We never knew the reason, but we could guess.

"We have no morphine, I'm sorry," said Kerrigan, staring out the window into the black night, "nor any opiates. Do what I told you." He turned to his key.

"KTOX-KTOX-KTOX-de-VCT-VCT-VCT-D," sang our high, wailing spark into the storm as Kerrigan called the *Bunker Hill* and ended his call with the urgent "D." Old Nobby, sensing something amiss, came in from the kitchen, aimlessly polishing a spotless plate on his apron. We grouped ourselves around Kerrigan's chair and watched the pencil in his long fingers.

"Here he comes," muttered Kerrigan. The pencil moved in his bold scrawl.

VCT-VCT-VCT-de-KTOX-ORK-K—"Sable Island from *Bunker Hill*. I am receiving your signals well. Go ahead."

Kerrigan "K'd," telling KTOX the situation in those terse abbreviations which are at once the radio operator's shorthand and his language.

I tell you it was drama of the sort you don't get in the movies. There was Jim Hallett's wife at death's door, a woman of the kind that keeps this old world turning as she kept that West light turning—with her frail hands and a courage that no man can know. And there were we, an unshaven group in the little bleak wireless shack, and the operator over there across

the wild sea on the ship, brothers of the brass key, and the sole link between this woman and a chance for life. And there was the captain of the ship, weighing the thing in a mind that knew well the danger involved, and trying to reconcile his duty to his owners, and to his men, with that small voice which came over his aerial wires. And then there was Sable Island—"

Every North Atlantic sailor knows the graveyard of the Atlantic. The visible twenty-six miles of said is in the shape of a half-moon, and submerged bars run out northwest and northeast from the horns of the half-moon a distance of fifteen miles or more. The whole presents the appearance of a great yellow mouth gaping northward, and it has been the jaws of death to more ships and more men than there is count. To carry the simile of a mouth still further, there are teeth in the shape of submerged spits of sand, running parallel with the island between the bars and shifting constantly in the storms. The only approach to the island for landing purposes in any but dead calm is on the north side, which is a naked beach, but more suited to the launching of boats than the south—and a ship intending to pick up a boat from the island must venture into that gaping mouth. We did not know it then, but the *Bunker Hill* was an ancient steamer whose engines had broken down once already on her current voyage, and asking her skipper to venture into the graveyard was as good as reading the burial service over himself and his crew.

"Is it serious?" asked the clear spark of KTOX.

"Life and death," snapped the brass key under Kerrigan's long fingers.

A pause, while half the ocean listened and wondered.

"Coming," said the *Bunker Hill*.

YOU'RE mad," said Nobby, nervously polishing the plate on his apron. "Mad, the 'ole lot o' you. Why, even if 'e does get in 'ere, 'ow you goin' to launch a boat? An' even if you get a boat awye, 'ow you goin' to get the woman in it?"

As if to give point to his argument a great gust of wind shook the windows and the driven sand rattled against the panes.

"Dry up, ye keener," urged McAvity. "Ye look like part av a Kerry wake wid

that long mournful face av yours. Bedad, I've seen the dead spit o' ye sittin' on a coffin in the farm cart, yowlin' like a hundred banshees an' tearin' hair—little you've got—an' stoppin' the cortege at every pub for another dhraft o' porter!"

"Yus." Nobby waved the plate in protest. "But all you blokes bin 'ere long enough to know you can't get a boat orf the beach without the wind an' sea is down. An' ruddy well down, too!"

The worst of it was that we knew he spoke the truth. In any but flat calm the surf breaks on the Sable Island bars seven or eight miles from dry land, and the water inshore over the treacherous spits is a caldron in which more than one experienced lifeboatman has lost his life.

"Then there's Missus 'Allett," continued Nobby, dolefully. "Wot's the use o' drownin' 'er? Might's well let 'er die ashore. Besides, if she was willin' to tyke a chance 'erself, she wouldn' 'ear o' riskin' the lives o' the 'ole crew on 'er account."

"She's too ill to know much of what's doin'," Kerrigan said soberly.

"An' 'tis not the will o' the gods to drown a woman like that," added McAvity.

"Wot gods?" asked Nobby dubiously.

"The little red gods o' the wind an' water," answered McAvity.

There was no sleep for us that night. We sat in the little instrument room, smoking and listening for the hourly report of the *Bunker Hill*, and venturing down to the beach at intervals in the darkness to divine the state of the surf. The wind went down toward morning, but it was still blowing a stiff breeze by daylight, and the sight of those great gray seas rolling in and breaking into a smother of sand-yellowed foam on the landing beach was one to stop your heart.

A pony came lathering over the dunes in the bleak dawn, bearing big Arad Lynch, coxswain of the lifeboat. His face was grim. "That steamer's in sight yonder, 'an you better tell him to clear out afore he piles up. I can't put the boat off in this," he said, waving a hand seaward. "Whose wild idee was it, anyway?"

"Mine," snapped Kerrigan. "Is it afraid you are?"

"You know me better'n that," said Lynch quietly.

McAvity was on his feet. "Answer

the gentleman's question!" he yelled. "An' tell us since when has a coward had charge o' the Sable Island boat?"

Big Arad went white to the lips. I thought for a brief moment he would fall on the two of them with those great fists of his. Then he said, "It's not in the mouth of you or you"—glaring at Kerrigan and then at McAvity—"to call me a coward. What chance are you takin', here in your shack on the dry land? Besides, I'm short three men of my crew. I sent Bowes an' Hardcastle an' Coggin to East light two days since, to help Gascoin repair his store shed. They're twenny mile away an' the telephone wires is down all along the island."

Kerrigan slammed the phone down. "I'll go!"

"Can ye pull an oar?" asked Lynch, looking over the Irishman's wide shoulders.

"I," lied Kerrigan distinctly, "was born wid an oar in my hand."

"An' I'll go!" snapped McAvity.

"Can ye pull an oar?" sneered Kerrigan.

"As good," said McAvity, looking him in the eye, "as the best Ulster horse coper that ever got seasick on the Holyhead ferry!"

Nobby was taking off his apron. "An' I'll go."

"You will not!" I shouted in a rage. "I'll be the third."

"You," ordered Kerrigan, tapping me gently on the chest, "will stay at the phones. Somebody's got to be here to keep touch wid the steamer."

I grumbled, but Kerrigan ended the argument with a sudden tremendous shove that hurtled me into the worn armchair at the table.

"Siddown an' stay down," he thundered.

"An' pipe down," added Nobby, pulling on his cap.

They went away at a run.

The lifeboatmen had brought the injured woman in a wagon from the West light during the night. Jim Hallett, risen from his sick bed, a grim gray ghost of a man, had walked at the ponies' heads all the way, easing them over the rough dunes; for the beach—the only road on Sable Island—was wild with breaking seas and impassable.

At the lifeboat station, which lies between West light and the wireless station, the men gathered in the weatherworn wooden lookout tower and stared out over

the white water northward to the dim shape of the *Bunker Hill*.

"What d'ye think of it?" panted Kerrigan, hot from the scramble over the dunes.

"I'm wishin' to Heaven the outer spit was a mile farther in," answered Lynch. "Yon steamer could come in close enough then to get a rocket line aboard."

"You couldn't put a woman wid a smashed side in the breeches buoy," McAvity pointed out.

Lynch shrugged. "We could lash her stretcher to it some way. She might strike water once or twice on the way, but I'd ruther risk that than chance upsettin' her in the surfboat. But that's all wishin', though. The steamer daren't come nigher than two mile o' the shore, an' then she's got to stan' off an' on whiles we're gettin' out to her. She can't anchor there as you know, for she'd drag an' be aground in a flash."

THE boatmen hitched their half-wild ponies to the great broad-tired wagon that bore the lifeboat, a twenty-five-foot cedar self-baler designed for surf work, and drove the vehicle over the seaward dune and down the beach until the wiry beasts were rearing nervously at the white foam surging about their feet. Then the runway with the well-greased rollers was placed, one end on the wagon, the weighted end in the swashing water.

The coxswain turned to Kerrigan. "D'ye still think we should go?" he asked anxiously.

The Irishman nodded determinedly. "Arad, my strong fellow, I was a medical student at Dublin 'varsity, back before I gave in to this cursed cravin' for the sea. An' I tell you that woman can be saved if we get her to a hospital inside o' two days or mebbe three. An' I tell you likewise that she'll die in the most dreadful agony if we leave her here—an' not a soul can do a thing for her."

"All set," said Lynch quietly. "Boat hands, take yer places."

Jim Hallett's wife was lying in a little store shed just above sea mark at the top of the beach. Beneath her was a comfortable mattress, and under that the crudely fashioned stretcher to which she had been gently but securely lashed.

"Miz Hallett, ma'am," said the big coxswain, "we're a-goin' to take ye out to a steamer in the surfboat. The sea's a

leetle mite bad, but we can make it a' right if ye think ye can stan' the pitchin'."

The sick woman opened her eyes. "Twas stormin' bad when I got hurt. How long sence I was hurt? The sea ain't had time to go down."

"Why," Lynch lied, "you've bin fainted-like this twenny-four hours, ma'am. 'Tain't stormin' much now." The sweat was running down his face from under his black sou'wester.

She closed her eyes again wearily. "There's sech a drummin' in my ears. Can't hear the surf for the noise in my head. Can't tell whether you're lyin' or not, Arad. I don't—I don't want the boys reskin' their lives account o' me."

"Sho'," young Reuben Rawleigh said quickly, "sho', ma'am, we ain't a-reskin' nothin'. 'Tis you is takin' the resk."

They picked up the stretcher and carried her shoulder high out of the shed and down to the boat. They went so gently and so slow, old Benny Portus told me afterward, that they seemed like pallbearers at a funeral, and he found himself unconsciously feeling for the crucifix under his shirt. As they drew alongside the boat carriage one man stumbled over a piece of driftwood and gave the stretcher a jolt that set big Arad to swearing under his breath. Some one said, "She's fainted."

"Leave her so," said the gray-faced man who was her husband. "'Tis better."

The stretcher was stowed on the board floor of the boat under the seats. It was awkward footing for the men who sat over the woman, but that was of little moment. "Ef we spill, she'll be fastened in," pointed out one of the boatmen, "an' it'll be all up with her."

"If we spill," said Arad Lynch of the quiet voice, looking out over the sea, "it'll be all up with all of us."

Kerrigan rejected a proffered life belt, figuring that he could swim better without it, and stripped to his singlet and trousers. McAvity was not a strong swimmer, and was reaching for a life belt when he observed Kerrigan's boots going over the side. "Faith," he said aloud, "if he can, I can," and stripped likewise. He did not know then that Kerrigan could swim like a fish.

Those who were not boatmen, such as old Portus, the life-station cook and the rest, now waded out to their waists beyond the runway, holding each other's

hands while they struggled for footing in the undertow.

"Now, m'sons," called the coxswain, "ye know the lay as well as I do. If we lose way after we strike water, we're gone. The sea'll swing us beam on an' roll us over an' over like a bar'l. Thirty feet from shore an' we're safe enough. The p'int o' danger is right yere at the start, clawin' off the beach."

A great comber surged about the runway, almost sweeping the feet from under the men standing in line there. "Let go!"

A tremendous shove and the heavy boat shot down over the greased rollers like a thunderbolt. As the bow entered the frothing water the waiting men there seized the gunwale and heaved with all their might seaward.

"Give way!" bellowed big Arad, standing up in the boat, rudder yokes wound around his knotted hands.

They gave way with all that was in them. The wild bellow of the surging water deafened them, it seemed to fill the whole world, a world which had gone black except for a blur of white faces there about the runway. The boat seemed to lose ground under their puny efforts, but the backwash of the big wave had them now—they moved perceptibly seaward. Then suddenly the helping backwash was gone and the succeeding wave was towering ahead of the boat like a green wall that must fill them and obliterate them. To Kerrigan and McAvity, sitting side by side on amidships thwart and tugging at the tough ash oars like devils possessed, the stern seemed to drop away under their eyes and the bow at their backs rose until young Rawleigh cried, "She's pitch-poling!"

More than one boat has been pitched end over end in the great seas that beat over the Sable Island bars. Old Benny Portus, standing on the beach with the surf swashing about his knees, put up his hands to shut out the sight and screamed over and over again.

Arad Lynch, leaning forward on his rudder lines, seemed a mahogany statue to the straining rowers in the boat. When the peak of the great comber touched the boat and it seemed she must pitch over, he roared, "Dig, bow!" The bow oars called forth some hidden muscular reserve and dug, gripping the swirling gray water, holding it and digging again. The boat

teetered on the crest of the wave a moment, and then she was coasting down the seaward slope of the green ridge. Another comber. The process repeated. And another.

"Clear!" bellowed the big coxswain, white teeth flashing in triumph. Away they went. A straight course out to the dim ship on the heaving sky line meant wind and sea on the beam, an awkward point of sailing for big ships, let alone an open cockleshell off the Sable Island bars, and so big Arad steered them into the eye of the wind. It was back-breaking, heart-breaking work, but they knew that every foot gained brought them nearer to the point where they could go about and run down the wind to the steamer. The windward course brought them past the wireless station, where I was listening at the phones for five minutes and alternately running to the top of our dune for a sight of the boat. I could see them only at intervals, for they were dipping out of sight between the great gray seas half the time, and the waves breaking on the beach flung intermittent curtains of yellow spray that shut out boat, sea and all.

They were nearly three hours making it to the swinging wet side of the *Bunker Hill*, and the hands of the two Irishmen, unused to the rough looms of oars, were red raw meat.

"I niver thought," panted McAvity, "as I'd be pullin' side be side in the same boat wid an Orangeman."

"Fix it in your mind, my sweet man," Kerrigan said. "Ye'll niver see the like ag'in!"

THE little red gods had been kind in their selection of a man to send to the rescue, for Captain Ephraim Payne of the *Bunker Hill* was not only blessed with courage such as is given to few men in this niggardly world, but he had served in the Gloucester Bankers in his youth and knew all there is to know about small boats in a seaway. He had rigged a boom and tackle out over the water on his leeward side so that the surf-boat need not approach his quarter and risk being dashed to pieces against it. They unshipped the thwarts over the woman while big Arad steered the boat under the hanging tackle. The boat lifted on a surging sea and quick hands were busy at once with stretcher and tackle, and when

they dropped out from under as the roller passed, the wife of Jim Hallett was swung aboard the ship in less time than it takes to tell. The steamer's men gave them a toot of the whistle and a great cheer as the *Bunker Hill* swung away for Halifax and hospital, and Arad's crew yelled back in kind. They had both taken great risks for the end that had been so swiftly accomplished.

And then, in the moment of victory, the little red gods played another move in the game. A great sea swept under the surf-boat and pitched it violently as the steamer removed her protecting lee. The men were all standing up, refitting the thwarts after removing the stretcher, and they were thrown with one exception onto the broad bottom of the boat. The one exception was Pat Kerrigan, who went overboard and was swept away. The suddenness of it took their breath.

McAvity cried in a dazed voice, "He's gone! Kerrigan! Kerry!"

Then old Nobby exclaimed, "Hi! Stop 'im!"

McAvity was poised on the gunwale. Nobby made a wild futile clutch at him, but McAvity had gone overboard in a clumsy floundering dive before they could touch him. For a moment they saw the two heads, the black and the red, and then they faded away into a gray squall of rain.

Arad Lynch steered the boat toward the last sight of them, but the rain, pelting down in great drops, was like a wall. They searched wildly until a nearing boom of surf reminded them of the lee shore and the gale that was still blowing.

The big coxswain, grim of face, gave them up and headed for the open sea. "They can't make the shore, it's too far; an' they couldn't get through the breakers alive if they did. An' I reckon we better not try gettin' ashore ourselves until the sea goes down some. We on'y got off the beach by the skin of our teeth, an' 'twould be flyin' in the face o' Providence to risk the breakers agen when we can ride it out safe enough where we are."

THE wireless man on KTOX told me they had the woman safe aboard, and I had just tapped out TKS-OM-BV—"Thanks, old man, bon voyage"—when he snapped back a sputter of hurried Morse that set my pulses hammering.

"SA-OM 2 men just lost obrd ur boat." I slammed down the phones and ran madly to the dune top, but the rain gave me only a momentary glimpse of the steamer and Arad Lynch standing out to sea, and then shut down.

Some mad little devil in my mind kept reminding me that Nobby, Kerrigan, and McAvity were the only greenhorns in the boat and therefore the most likely to miss their footing. Kerrigan, I knew, was a seal in the water; but McAvity was a weak swimmer, and poor old Nobby could not swim a stroke. And swimmer or not, no man could make the shore in those two miles of threshing breakers. All the concentrated loneliness, misery, and desolation of the graveyard seemed to descend upon me in that moment, standing there on the windswept dune and staring dumbly at the froth of surf. *Alone.* The driven sand stung my face and my bare throat, and the blinding rain saturated my ragged shirt and trousers and plastered my long unkempt hair to my skull. I must have made a pretty sight for old Benny Portus as he flogged a pony over the westward dune.

"Hey! Somepin happened out yander! We was watchin' wid the tellyscopes up in the lookout, the cook an' me, an' we see a feller or mebbe two fellers fall outn the boat just arter the steamer turned away. An' then the rain come down." His eyes bulged like watery-blue marbles and his old mouth was gibbering and whimpering under the gray stubble of beard. I had a wild impulse to lie down on the wet sand and kick up my heels and scream with laughter. "Lord help 'em, Lord help 'em all," he kept saying.

"Bah!" said I. "Arad's all right. He's standin' out to sea an' waitin' for a better landin'."

"They're tired, boy, they're done out," he whimpered.

"They'll make a sea anchor with some oars an' a bucket," I said, "and get all the restin' they want. Dry up! I'm worryin' about the two that went over-side."

He ceased his whimpering. "Them two is past worryin' for," he said soberly.

I went back to my phones, for standing there gazing at the gray sea and rain was an open door to lunacy. The station clock stood at noon as I marked up my log, scrawling the convenient "local interfer-

ence" to cover elapsed time. The afternoon dragged on. Ships gave me their messages for retransmission to the mainland and I gave them mine, and the hand that tapped the big brass key or alternately held the stubby pencil seemed a mechanical thing that did not belong to me. Copying those inane "Wonderful voyage wish you were here love and kisses" messages that dribble from ships to shore stations in a never-ending stream, when my mind was out there with those poor doomed devils in that wilderness of white water!

Toward four in the afternoon the sun came out and I became suddenly aware that the wind had died. I had cleared my radio traffic, the line was fairly quiet, and so with a precautionary HR-VCT-BI-10-MINS, I climbed over the dune once more for a look at the sea.

What a difference warm sunshine makes! The island was golden again, gleaming in the sun. Kerrigan used to say that bright sunlight on Sable was like the gold-toothed smile of a street woman. The first faint movement of the heat haze was already shimmering over the dunes. Far down the beach there seemed to be a piece of new driftwood flung high on the sand by the storm, and near by a couple of seals were basking in the sun. Strong sunlight on a long stretch of sand plays queer tricks with your eyes. And, besides, my attention was drawn seaward by the white side of the surfboat flashing in the sun as she rolled in the sea. Arad Lynch was heading for the beach again.

As a matter of fact, the bit of wreckage was Mrs. Hallett's abandoned stretcher, and the two seals were Kerrigan and McAvity. The little red gods had rounded off their game with amazing thoroughness. First they had swept the abandoned stretcher, to which was firmly lashed Mrs. Hallett's kapok-stuffed mattress, into the path of the desperately swimming men. Then they had sent the strong Sable Island tide, which sweeps with great force across the bars from southward and flows along the north beach, and produces the phenomenon of wreckage and bodies from wrecks on the *south* side of the island being strewn along the *north* beach. Riding high on this flood of tide and storm, the stretcher and the two amazed Irishmen had been flung on the beach and left there by the receding

sea. How long they were in the water and how long they lay steaming in the sun, they could never approximate. It was one of them sitting upright which caught my attention, for I never saw a seal—even in the sun blink—act that way. I ran along the beach yelling at the top of my voice. When I came up to them they were sitting facing each other and looking into each other's eyes as they had done in that first queer meeting months before. They paid absolutely no attention to me, which was ungrateful when you come to think of it, seeing what agonies I had endured on their account. Not to mention standing McAvity's watch all afternoon.

"My hand!" said McAvity, offering his raw palm.

"Keep it!" said Kerrigan, making no motion to take it.

"I saved your life," McAvity said bitterly. "Do they teach no gratitude north o' Dundalk?"

Kerrigan sat upright in his surprise. "Saved phwat? My life? Mine? Why, you great southern gom, I dragged ye to the raft there by the hairs o' your carroty head!"

McAvity shoved his salt-incrusted face within an inch of the other's. "Didn't I jump overboard to give ye a hand? Answer me now, did I not?"

Kerrigan's lean jaw was sticking out like a bowsprit. "Ye fell in, the same as me, ye blatherin' turf cutter. An' a time I had gettin' ye safe ashore, begob!"

McAvity leaned back on his haunches and drew a long breath. "We might as well have the thing out, here an' now. Take that to remember me by, ye croppy!"

He fetched Kerrigan a mighty slap in the face.

In a moment they were at it, on their feet, hammer and tongs. Not crouching, with an arm extended for defense and a fist held back for walloping, as sane men would, but backing away from each other several feet and then rushing in like peevish bulls. They swung their arms like windmills and uttered wild war cries.

"Up, the Green!" yelled McAvity, and slammed a fist into Kerrigan's eye that must have filled his head with skyrocket.

"Boyne Wather!" answered Kerrigan, with a wallop into McAvity's ribs you could hear thirty feet. I have kicked a barrel and got the same sound.

"Limerick!" bellowed McAvity, with a

wild swing that missed and carried him half around.

"Derry Walls!" answered Kerrigan, landing three blows, *wop-wop-wop*, on the side of McAvity's hard skull, to the great detriment of his knuckles.

A group of wild ponies stopped their frugal grazing on a near-by dune and craned their necks in uneasy wonder. Great flocks of terns, always intolerant of human movement about the beaches, wheeled and screamed overhead. But the most interested spectator was myself, grunting at every blow as though I had received it myself, and making my hands go as a man will when a good fight is before him. The lonely beach below Sable Island wireless station has seen many a bout with flying fists—the only decent cure for the gnawing restless hatred that comes upon men in lone places—but it never saw one like this. What was it old Nobby had said? "It'll take 'ell 'an' igh water, an' more than a bit o' war to make peace atween them two." Well, there had been hell and high water aplenty, and here was more than a bit of war; but could there be peace between these two? They had put in an exhausting day, and in spite of their rest on the sand I knew they could not keep this up. The end came quicker than I expected, at that. McAvity, with a wild shout of "Saint James!" knocked the Ulsterman off his balance, and Kerrigan went down until he was touching sand with one hand and one knee. McAvity, carried forward a little by the swing, stood there teetering on his toes and wiping the sweat out of his eyes. Then Kerrigan made his last despairing effort. He swung upward and forward until his fist met McAvity's jaw with a resounding thump. It was that all-conquering blow which sport writers know as "picking one off the floor," perfectly timed and executed. It was the only decent blow in the whole amazing fracas—and pure luck at that—and McAvity went down and sprawled full length, swearing faintly and incoherently. Kerrigan fell in a heap at his feet and panted like a tired dog.

I did not stir from where I squatted on the sand. I had learned in several months of close quarters with them that the Irish are best left to themselves in family squabbles. After a time they stirred and sat up, rubbing their sore spots and dabbing at the blood here and there.

"Soul," said McAvity, "an' 'tis a sweet punch ye carry in your right."

Kerrigan was prodding gingerly at his closed eye. "I've always said there was mule in the southern Irish," he observed. "'Tis in their hands, begob."

"A sore gob ye've given me, Kerry," said McAvity, with a horrible twisted grin. "But I'll offer ye once more my hand. Will ye take it?"

"I'd rather have it in me hand," Kerrigan grinned, "than in me eye."

He took McAvity's barked knuckles in his own, and they shook solemnly for a solid minute. They looked, with their ill-used features, ludicrously like a pair of gory totem poles come to life.

There was a faint shout down the beach. Arad Lynch had beached his boat successfully, and a running straggling line of men was heading toward us. Old Nobby Clarke was in the lead, running twice as fast as a man of his years should, and the tears were streaming down his face thick and fast.

Kerrigan squinted down the beach with his good eye. "Here's the whole pack, Mick, with the overbearin' English in the lead."

I leaned forward. "After witnessin' this little performance," I said easily, "I want to state that any one oppressin' the Irish has got to be smarter with his paws than

the English ever were. Overbearin' fish feathers! You're a mad race, my fine murderous fellows, else why should you maul each other after riskin' your lives together, first for the woman, an' then for each other?"

Kerrigan wagged a finger at me. "Listen," he said. "The Irish, bein' the Lord's chosen people——"

"Hear, hear!" said McAvity.

"——an' a chivalrous race beside, they will always fight side be side in a common cause."

"Hear him," said McAvity. "Hear the man!"

"——always reservin' the right," continued Kerrigan, "to squabble among themselves betune times."

"An' that's the curse o' the Irish," McAvity said. "Oh, very neatly put."

"The devil's chosen people an' a race of quarrelsome pups," I said, taking good advantage of their exhaustion. "An' why you're not rollin' on the bottom is more than I can see. Nobody but a couple o' mad harps could ha' made it. Why didn't you drown? Tell me that!"

"That," said Kerrigan calmly, "is a personal arrangement betune the Irish an' the gods."

"Wot gods?" panted old Nobby, coming up.

"The little red ones," grinned McAvity.

