

THE TIDAL WAVE AND OTHER STORIES

BY

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CHANCE, GREATHEART, ETC.**

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CHAPTER I

STILL WATERS

Rufus the Red sat on the edge of his boat with his hands clasped between his knees, staring at nothing. His nets were spread to dry in the sun; the morning's work was done. Most of the other men had lounged into their cottages for the midday meal, but the massive red giant sitting on the shore in the merciless heat of noon did not seem to be thinking of physical needs.

His eyes under their shaggy red brows were fixed with apparent concentration upon his red, hairy legs. Now and then his bare toes gripped the moist sand almost savagely, digging deep furrows; but for the most part he sat in solid contemplation.

There was only one other man within sight along that sunny stretch of sand—a small, dark man with a shaggy, speckled beard and quick, twinkling eyes. He was at work upon a tangled length of tarred rope, pulling and twisting with much energy and deftness to straighten out the coil, so that it leaped and writhed in his hands like a living thing.

He whistled over the job cheerily and tunelessly, glancing now and again with a keen, birdlike intelligence towards the motionless figure twenty yards away that sat with bent head broiling in the sun. His task seemed a hopeless one, but he tackled it as if he enjoyed it. His brown hands worked with a will. He was plainly one to make the best of things, and not to be lightly discouraged—a man of resolution, as the coxswain of the Spear Point lifeboat needed to be.

After ten minutes of unremitting toil he very suddenly ceased to whistle and sent a brisk hail across the stretch of sand that intervened between himself and the solitary fisherman on the edge of the boat.

"Hi—Rufus—Rufus—ahoy!"

The fiery red head turned in his direction without either alacrity or interest. The fixed eyes came out of their trance-like study and took in the blue-gerseyed, energetic figure that worked so actively at the knotted hemp. There was something rather wonderful about those eyes. They were of the deep, intense blue of a spirit-fed flame—the blue of the ocean when a storm broods below the horizon.

He made no verbal answer to the hail; only after a moment or two he got slowly to his feet and began leisurely to cross the sand.

The older man did not watch his progress. His brown, lined face was bent again over his task.

Rufus the Red drew near and paused. "Want anything?"

He spoke from his chest, in a voice like a deep-toned bell. His arms hung slack at his sides, but the muscles stood out on them like ropes.

The coxswain of the lifeboat gave his head a brief, upward jerk without looking at him. "That curly-topped chap staying at The Ship," he said, "he came messing round after me this morning, wanted to know would I take him out with the nets one day. I told him maybe you would."

"What did you do that for?" said Rufus.

The coxswain shot him a brief and humorous glance. "I always give you the plums if I can, my boy," he said. "I said to him, 'Me and my son, we're partners. Going out with him is just the same as going out with me, and p'raps a bit better, for he's got the better boat.' So he sheered off, and said maybe he'd look you up in the evening."

"Maybe I shan't be there," commented Rufus.

The coxswain chuckled, and lashed out an end of rope, narrowly missing his son's brawny legs. "He's not such a soft one as he looks, that chap," he observed. "Not by no manner of means. Do you know what Columbine thinks of him?"

"How should I know?" said Rufus.

He stooped with an abrupt movement that had in it a hint of savagery, and picked up the end of rope that lay jerking at his feet.

"Tell you what, Adam," he said. "If that chap values his health he'll keep clear of me and my boat."

Everyone called the coxswain Adam, even his son and partner, Rufus the Red. No two men could have formed a more striking contrast than they, but their partnership was something more than a business relation. They were friends—friends on a footing of equality, and had been such ever since Rufus—the giant baby who had cost his mother her life—had first closed his resolute fist upon his father's thumb.

That was five-and-twenty years ago now, and for eighteen of those years the two had dwelt alone together in their cottage on the cliff in complete content. Then—seven years back—Adam the coxswain had unexpectedly tired of his widowed state and taken to himself a second wife.

This was Mrs. Peck, of The Ship, a widow herself of some years' standing, plump, amiable, prosperous, who in marrying Adam would have gladly opened her doors to Adam's son also had the son been willing to avail himself of her hospitality.

But Rufus had preferred independence in the cottage of his birth, and in this cottage he had lived alone since his father's defection.

It was a dainty little cottage, perched in an angle of the cliff, well apart from all the rest and looking straight down upon the great Spear Point. He tended the strip of garden with scrupulous care, and it made a bright spot of colour against the brown cliff-side. A rough path, steep and winding, led up from the beach below, and about half-way up a small gate, jealously padlocked in the owner's absence, guarded Rufus's privacy. He never invited any one within that gate. Occasionally his father would saunter up with his evening pipe and sit in the little porch of his old home looking through the purple clematis flowers out to sea while he exchanged a few commonplace remarks with his son, who never broke his own silence unless he had something to say. But no other visitor ever intruded there.

Rufus had acquired the reputation of a hermit, and it kept all the rest at bay. He had lived his own life for so long that solitude had

grown upon him as moss clings to a stone. He did not seem to feel the need of human companionship. He lived apart.

Sometimes, indeed, he would go down to The Ship in the evening and lounge in the bar with the rest, but even there his solitude still wrapped him round. He never expanded, however genial the atmosphere.

The other men treated him with instinctive respect. He was powerful enough to thrash any two of them, and no one cared to provoke him to wrath. For Rufus in anger was a veritable mad bull.

"Leave him alone! He's not safe!" was the general advice and warning of his fellows, and none but Adam ever interfered with him.

Just recently, however, Adam had begun to take a somewhat quizzical interest in the welfare of his son. It had been an established custom ever since his second marriage that Rufus should eat his Sunday dinner at the family table down at The Ship. Mrs. Peck—Adam's wife was never known by any other title, just as the man's own surname had dropped into such disuse that few so much as knew what it was—had made an especial point of this, and Rufus had never managed to invent any suitable excuse for refusing. He never remained long after the meal was eaten. When all the other fisher-lads were walking the cliffs with their own particular lasses, Rufus was wont to trudge back to his hermitage and draw his mantle of solitude about him once more. He had never walked with any lass. Whether from shyness or surliness, he had held consistently aloof from such frivolous pastimes. If a girl ever cast a saucy look his way the brooding blue eyes never seemed aware of it. In speech with womenkind he was always slow and half-reluctant. That his great bull-like physique could by any means be an object of admiration was a possibility that he never seemed to contemplate. In fact, he seemed expectant of ridicule rather than appreciation.

In his boyhood he had fought several tough fights with certain lads who had dared to scoff at his red hair. Sam Jefferson, who lived down on the quay, still bore the marks of one such battle in the absence of two front teeth. But he did not take affront from womenkind. He looked over their heads, and went his way in massive unconcern.

But lately a change had come into his life—such a change as made Adam's shrewd dark eyes twinkle whenever they glanced in his son's direction, comprehending that the days of Rufus's tranquillity were ended.

A witch had come to live at The Ship, such a witch as had never before danced along the Spear Point sands. Her name was Maria Peck, and she was the daughter of Mrs. Peck's late lamented husband's vagabond brother—"a seafaring man and a wastrel if ever there was one," as Mrs. Peck was often heard to declare. He had picked up with and eventually married a Spanish pantomime girl up London way, so Mrs. Peck's information went, and Maria had been the child of their union.

No one called her Maria. Her mother had named her Columbine, and Columbine she had become to all who knew her. Her mother dying when she was only three, Columbine had been left to the sole care of her wastrel father. And he, then a skipper of a small cargo steamer plying across the North Sea, had placed her in the charge of a spinster aunt who kept an infants' school in a little Kentish village near the coast. Here, up to the age of seventeen, Columbine had lived and been educated; but the old schoolmistress had worn out at last, and on her death-bed had sent for Mrs. Peck, as being the girl's only remaining relative, her father having drifted out of her ken long since.

Mrs. Peck had nobly risen to the occasion. She had no daughter of her own; she could do with a daughter. But when she saw Columbine she sucked up her breath.

"My, but she'll be a care!" was her verdict.

"She don't know—how lovely she is," the dying woman had whispered. "Don't tell her!"

And Mrs. Peck had staunchly promised to keep the secret, so far as lay in her power.

That had happened six months before, and Columbine was out of mourning now. She had come into the Spear Point community like a shy bird, a little slip of a thing, upright as a dart, with a fashion of holding her head that kept all familiarity at bay. But the shyness had all gone now. The girlish immaturity was fast vanishing in soft

curves and tender lines. And the beauty of her!—the beauty of her was as the gold of a summer morning breaking over a pearly sea.

She was a creature of light and laughter, but there were in her odd little streaks of unconsidered impulse that testified to a passionate soul. She would flash into a temper over a mere trifle, and then in a moment flash back into mirth and amiability.

"You can't call her bad-tempered," said Mrs. Peck. "But she's sharp—she's certainly sharp."

"Ay, and she's got a will of her own," commented Adam. "But she's your charge, missus, not mine. It's my belief you'll find her a bit of a handful before you've done. But don't you ask me to interfere! It's none o' my job."

"Lor' bless you," chuckled Mrs. Peck, "I'd as soon think of asking Rufus!"

Adam grunted at this light reference to his son. "Rufus ain't such a fool as he looks," he rejoined.

"Lor' sakes! Whoever said he was?" protested the equable Mrs. Peck. "I've a great respect for Rufus. It wasn't that I meant—not by any manner o' means."

What she had meant did not transpire, and Adam did not pursue the subject to inquire. He also had a respect for Rufus.

It was not long after that brief conversation that he began to notice a change in his son. He made no overtures of friendship to the dainty witch at The Ship, but he took the trouble to make himself extremely respectable when he made his weekly appearance there. He kept his shag of red hair severely cropped. He attired himself in navy serge, and wore a collar.

Adam's keen eyes took in the change and twinkled. Columbine's eyes twinkled too. She had begun by being almost absurdly shy in the presence of the young fisherman who sat so silently at his father's table, but that phase had wholly passed away. She treated him now with a kindly condescension, such as she might have bestowed upon a meek-souled dog. All the other men—with the exception of Adam, whom she frankly liked—she overlooked with the utmost indifference. They were plainly lesser animals than dogs.

"She'll look high," said Mrs. Peck. "The chaps here ain't none of her sort."

And again Adam grunted.

He was fond of Columbine, took her out in his boat, spun yarns for her, gave her such treasures from the sea as came his way—played, in fact, a father's part, save that from the very outset he was very careful to assume no authority over her. That responsibility was reserved for Mrs. Peck, whose kindly personality made the bare idea seem absurd.

And so to a very great extent Columbine had run wild. But the warm responsiveness of her made her easy to manage as a general rule, and Mrs. Peck's government was by no means exacting.

"Thank goodness, she's not one to run after the men!" was her verdict after the first six months of Columbine's sojourn.

That the men would have run after her had they received the smallest encouragement to do so was a fact that not one of them would have disputed. But with dainty pride she kept them at a distance, and none had so far attempted to cross the invisible boundary that she had so decidedly laid down.

And then with the summer weather had come the stranger—had come Montagu Knight. Young, handsome, and self-assured, he strolled into The Ship one day for tea, having tramped twelve miles along the coast from Spearmouth, on the other side of the Point. And the next day he came again to stay.

He had been there for nearly three weeks now, and he seemed to have every intention of remaining. He was an artist, and the sketches he made were numerous and—like himself—full of decision. He came and went among the fishermen's little thatched cottages, selecting here, refusing there, exactly according to fancy.

They had been inclined to resent his presence at first—it was certainly no charitable impulse that moved Adam to call him "the curly-topped chap"—but now they were getting used to him. For there was no gainsaying the fact that he had a way with him, at least so far as the women-folk of the community were concerned.

He could keep Mrs. Peck chuckling for an hour at a time in the evening, when the day's work was over. And Columbine—Columbine had a trill of laughter in her voice whenever she spoke to him. He liked to hear her play the guitar and sing soft songs in the twilight. Adam liked it too. He was wont to say that it reminded him of a young blackbird learning to sing. For Columbine was as yet very shy of her own talent. She kept in the shallows, as it were, in dread of what the deep might hold.

Knight was very kind to her, but he was never extravagant in his praise. He was quite unlike any other man of her acquaintance. His touch was always so sure. He never sought her out, though he was invariably quite pleased to see her. The dainty barrier of pride that fenced her round did not exist for him. She did not need to keep him at a distance. He could be intimate without being familiar.

And intimate he had become. There was no disputing it. From the first, with his easy *savoir-faire*, he had waived ceremony, till at length there was no ceremony left between them. He treated her like a lady. What more could the most exacting demand?

And yet Adam continued to call him "the curly-topped chap," and turned him over to his son Rufus when he requested permission to go out in his boat.

And Rufus—Rufus turned with a gesture of disgust after the utterance of his half-veiled threat, and spat with savage emphasis upon the sand.

Adam uttered a chuckle that was not wholly unsympathetic, and began deftly to coil the now disentangled rope.

"Do you know what I'd do—if I was in your place?" he said.

Rufus made a sound that was strictly noncommittal.

Adam's quick eyes flung him a birdlike glance. "Why don't you come along to The Ship and smoke a pipe with your old father of an evening?" he said. "Once a week's not enough, not, that is, if you—" He broke off suddenly, caught by a whistle that could not be resisted.

Rufus was regarding the horizon with those brooding eyes of vivid blue.

Abruptly Adam ceased to whistle. "When I was a young chap," he said, "I didn't keep my courting for Sundays only. I didn't dress up, mind you. That weren't my way. But I'd go along in my jersey and invite her out for a bit of a cruise in the old boat. They likes a cruise, Rufus. You try it, my boy! You try it!"

The rope lay in an orderly coil at his feet, and he straightened himself, rubbing his hands on his trousers. His son remained quite motionless, his eyes still fixed as though he heard not.

Adam stood up beside him, shrewdly alert. He had never before ventured to utter words of counsel on this delicate subject. But having started, he was minded to make a neat job of it. Adam had never been the man to leave a thing half done.

"Go to it, Rufus!" he said, dropping his voice confidentially. "Don't be afraid to show your mettle! Don't be crowded out by that curly-topped chap! You're worth a dozen of him. Just you let her know it, that's all!"

He dug his hands into his trousers pockets with the words, and turned to go.

Rufus moved then, moved abruptly as one coming out of a dream. His eyes swooped down upon the lithe, active figure at his side. They held a smile—a fiery smile that gleamed meteor-like and passed.

"All right, Adam," he said in his deep-chested voice.

And with a sidelong nod Adam wheeled and departed. He had done his morning's work.

CHAPTER II

THE PASSION-FLOWER

"Where's that Columbine?" said Mrs. Peck.

A gay trill like the call of a blackbird in the dawning answered her. Columbine, with a pink sun-bonnet over her black hair, was watering the flowers in the little conservatory that led out of the drawing-room. She had just come in from the garden, and a gorgeous red rose was pinned upon her breast. Mrs. Peck stood in the doorway and watched her.

The face above the red rose was so lovely that even her matter-of-fact soul had to pause to admire. It was a perpetual wonder to her and a perpetual fascination. The dark, unawakened eyes, the long, perfect brows, the deep, rich colouring, all combined to make such a picture as good Mrs. Peck realised to be superb.

Again the pure contralto trill came from the red lips, and then, with a sudden movement that had in it something of the grace of an alighting bird, Columbine turned, swinging her empty can.

"I've promised to take Mr. Knight to the Spear Point Caves by moonlight," she said. "He's doing a moonlight study, and he doesn't know the lie of the quicksand."

"Sakes alive!" said Mrs. Peck. "What made him ask you? There's Adam knows every inch of the shore better nor what you do."

"He didn't ask," said Columbine. "I offered. And I know the shore just as well as Adam does, Aunt Liza. Adam himself showed me the lie of the quicksand long ago. I know it like my own hand."

Mrs. Peck pursed her lips. "I doubt but what you'd better take Adam along too," she said. "I wouldn't feel easy about you. And there won't be any moonlight worth speaking of till after ten. It wouldn't do for you to be traipsing about alone even with Mr. Knight— nice young gentleman as he be— at that hour."

"Aunt Liza, I don't traipse!" Momentary indignation shone in the beautiful eyes and passed like a gleam of light. "Dear Aunt Liza," laughed Columbine, "aren't you funny?"

"Not a bit," maintained Mrs. Peck. "I'm just common-sensical, my dear. And it ain't right—it never were right in my young day—to go walking out alone with a man after bedtime."

"A man, Aunt Liza! Oh, but a man! An artist isn't a man—at least, not an ordinary man." There was a hint of earnestness in Columbine's tone, notwithstanding its lightness.

But Mrs. Peck remained firm. "It wouldn't make it right, not if he was an angel from heaven," she declared.

Columbine's gay laugh had in it that quality of youth that surmounts all obstacles. "He's much safer than an angel," she protested, "because he can't fly. Besides, the Spear Point Caves are all on this side of the Point. You could watch us all the time if you'd a mind to."

But Mrs. Peck did not laugh. "I'd rather you didn't go, my dear," she said. "So let that be the end of it, there's a good girl!"

"Oh, but I—" began Columbine, and broke off short. "Goodness, how you made me jump!" she said instead.

Rufus, his burly form completely blocking the doorway, was standing half in and half out of the garden, looking at her.

"Lawks!" said Mrs. Peck. "So you did me! Good evening, Rufus! Are you wanting Adam?"

"Not specially," said Rufus. He entered, with massive, lounging movements. "I suppose I can come in," he remarked.

"What a question!" ejaculated Mrs. Peck.

Columbine said nothing. She picked up her empty watering-can and swung it carelessly on one finger, hunting for invisible weeds in the geranium-pots the while.

Mrs. Peck was momentarily at a loss. She was not accustomed to entertaining Rufus in his father's absence.

"Have a glass of mulberry wine!" she suggested.