The other titles by the author, published by Children's Book Trust, are *Wolf!, Hunt for the Golden Langur, The Shami Tree, Kuttan* and *Malana.*
Prologue

The big Portuguese galleon lay becalmed off the coast of the islands known as the Seychelles. For over a week had the vessel enjoyed fair weather and a good wind, crossing the Indian Ocean without incident. The Captain hoped to put in at Madagascar within another few days, for a well-earned rest, before continuing the long journey back to his country.

"Ship ahoy!"

The sudden shout from the look-out brought the Captain out of his reverie.

"What is it?" he called back to the man atop the main mast.

"Too far to make out yet, Capitano."

"Keep an eye on her!" ordered the Captain, wiping sweat off his brow. Already it was beginning to get very humid.
They had put out to sea early in April, hoping to avoid the onset of the monsoon. But if this weather continued, mused Captain Porfirio Diaz, they might yet run into a storm or two before the ship got to the Cape.

"Ship ahoy!" came the warning again.

"What? Another?" Diaz swung around calling to the Mate, "The spyglass, my friend!"

Clapping the long, tapering contraption to his right eye, the Captain peered out across the stretch of greenish-blue sea. But the distance was too great, even for the telescope. As the look-out had announced, the two vessels could be seen in the distance. But it was not possible to divine their identity or intent. Sliding the telescope shut, Captain Diaz handed it back to his Mate.

"Perhaps they are only traders, Capitano," offered the Mate, noticing his leader's obvious agitation.

"That they may well be, but..."

"There is little need to worry, Capitano," offered the Mate. "We are well armed. Few, if any, would dare to pit themselves against a Portuguese galleon armed with cannon!"

"Holy Mother, I pray that it is indeed as you say! Nevertheless, I shall be a relieved man when I am rid of this cargo."

"What is it that disturbs you so, my son?"

Captain Diaz gazed thoughtfully at the newcomer. For his age, the Archbishop exhibited a surprising degree of energy. Nearing seventy, the clergyman was tall and broad-shouldered. In his official habit, which he had now shed for a more comfortable pair of trousers and an open-necked
shirt, the Archbishop could not have looked less than imposing.

As he walked up to join the two sailors, the priest smiled, "Is there reason for worry, Capitano? What is it? Pirates or enemy ships?"

"That is too early to say, Excellency," the Captain shook his head. "But as I said, I shall be a happy man when this cargo is safely locked away in the vaults at Lisbon."

"Piffle, my son!" the Archbishop clapped his younger companion on the shoulder. "This is a Portuguese galleon with thirty-eight pieces of cannon and a contingent of the King's finest soldiers! Enough to keep away the rashest of bandits, I should say."

"Perhaps so, Father...yet..." Captain Diaz shrugged, "I am uneasy. God alone knows how long we shall lie inactive in the ocean, like this. These waters are far from safe."

"They say La Bouse is in the Madagascar," said the Mate. "There have been no reports of any raids by his gang of late."

"Nevertheless, I shall rest easy when we are out of these parts," insisted Captain Diaz.

"Who...who is this 'Bouse'?" the Archbishop raised an imperious eyebrow. "A pirate? Is he so dangerous that a Portuguese galleon with armed men and cannon cannot keep him at bay?"

"There are those who have tried and failed, Your Holiness!" returned the Mate. "No one knows when or where he strikes. And his speed and ruthlessness are well known. It is not for nothing that they call him La Bouse...'The Vulture'!"
"Is that so?" the Bishop asked slowly. "We shall see Senor Bouse!"

Captain Diaz, notwithstanding the Archbishop and his own Mate's reassurances, had good reason to be perturbed. Beneath him, sealed within his ship's holds, was a vast fortune in gold, silver and precious stones. This treasure, obtained after the Portuguese possession of Goa on the western coast of Inde, was being transported to the Captain's motherland.

From the outset the Captain had been unhappy with the idea of crossing the Indian Ocean without an escort while carrying such a vast treasure. Even the battery of cannon with which the ship was equipped did not allay his fears.

And now, here they were in the open sea, stationary and God only knew how far from land. His look-outs had not reported any land in sight, as far as eye or spyglass could see.

Having entered the southern latitudes, they had been lucky so far, Captain Diaz realised. But this sudden calm might portend difficult times ahead for the ship and her occupants.

A veteran of forty years on the high seas, Diaz had spent most of his life crossing and recrossing the great oceans in his nation's ships; first as cabin boy, then as Mate and for the past ten years as Captain.

While he was not unduly worried about the threat of a squall, which he could tackle with some luck and his own vast experience, the cargo below the decks was another matter altogether.

Never before in all his journeys did Captain Diaz have to ferry such a huge fortune as he had now been charged with.
The presence of the Archbishop on board his galleon did little to lessen the Captain's anxiety. It was his responsibility to ensure that this representative of the Holy Order reached Portugal safe and well.

"There is trouble brewing, Capitano," whispered the Mate, not wanting to alarm their exalted passenger. Captain Diaz and the Archbishop were at supper in the former's cabin.

"What is it, Pedro?"

"We are heading for some rough weather, Senor;" continued the Mate. "The look-out has just reported a gale approaching. It should be upon us within a couple of hours."

"Well, at least it is better than lying inert like this, waiting for trouble!" Captain Diaz tried to keep the concern out of his face, darting a quick glance at the Archbishop.

"How far are we from land, Pedro?"

"Difficult to say, Capitano! But, by my reckoning, we cannot be too far from the French colony of Reunion."

"Hmm..." Captain Diaz was thoughtful for a moment, then nodded, as if coming to a decision. "Can we make it to the island in time?"

"Well..." the Mate shot a quick look at the Bishop. The latter, apparently, was quite preoccupied with his meal. "Well, Senor...we might and then again...with this cargo...it will slow us down considerably."

"What do you suggest then?"

"It is too early to say, Senor. But..." the Mate hesitated, glancing again at the priest.

"Are you suggesting that we shall have to jettison some
of that weight, Pedro?" Captain Diaz tried to keep his words as even, unhurried as possible.

For the first time, the Archbishop appeared to notice the turn that the conversation was taking. He looked up from his plate, yet said nothing.

"It is either that or face the risk of being tossed about in the storm, Senor. And she looks like a pretty nasty one, this gale!"

"What are we talking about throwing overboard, Senor Capitano?" The Archbishop's tones were measured, exuding an authority he was accustomed to exercising.

"It is nothing, Your Excellency," put in the Mate hastily. "We were only discussing the weather."

"Wait, Pedro!" Captain Diaz stopped him, palm raised in admonition. Then he looked directly at the priest, feeling the other's scrutiny. The deep, black eyes were tying to bore into his skull, to divine his innermost thoughts. The Captain seemed to come to a decision.

"It is like this, Your Excellency," began the Captain. "That storm brewing out there appears to be a bad one. And I cannot run the risk of...I cannot endanger your life, Sire. Our only chance is to make a run for it, to reach the isles of Reunion. And loaded as she is, this galleon stands little chance of outrunning that gale."

"What are you suggesting then, Senor Capitano?" the Archbishop's eyebrows rose haughtily. "Am I to understand that you are in favour of throwing overboard some of our cargo?"

"If you put it that way," Captain Diaz shrugged, "yes, Your Excellency. Men's lives are more important than any
treasure, in my reckoning. And when the lives in question include one so exalted as yours, Sire, I have little choice!"

"The treasure in your holds, Senor Capitano, belongs to the Portuguese nation. Mere human lives cannot be more important than the glory of our fatherland! Is that clear?"

"As Captain of this ship, Sire, it is my responsibility to land you safe and sound in Lisbon. I cannot play with your life or with those of my crew and the King's soldiers, to save a few trinkets!"

"Those 'trinkets' as you call them," the Archbishop's face was now tense, the suppressed rage clearly evident in the flared nostrils, the lips drawn in a thin line, "those trinkets include some objects of great value, Capitano. They are more important for the Church and for mankind than all our lives put together."

"I care little for such matters, Holy Father, when human lives are in the balance..."

"Are you questioning the authority of the Church and the King, Senor Capitano?" the Archbishop's tones were silken, but the menace, the threat in them was not concealed. "Men have been tried for less, my son."

"I have no choice, Your Excellency!" said Captain Diaz. If the threat affected him, the Captain did not show it.

"Yes, you do!" snapped the holy man.

Captain Diaz said nothing, waiting for the other to continue, watching him try to restrain his rage.

"The cannon, Senor Capitano! You have the cannon!"

"The cannon?" For a moment Captain Diaz was caught off-guard. "What can the can..."

Then, as the import of the Archbishop's suggestion began
to sink in, the Captain's face turned ashen. He was on his feet, his fists clenched.

"Not on my life, Excellency! Not the cannon! Out of the question!"

The Archbishop was also on his feet now. His tall form seemed to tower over the Captain, himself no dwarf.

"You have no alternative, Senor Capitano," warned the priest. "It is the Lord's will as it is our duty! What do you want with all that cannon, anyway? Have you not on board, a company of the King's best soldiers? They can take care of any eventuality, I am certain!"

"This is the Indian Ocean, Your Excellency! And I would not trade my ship's cannon for the fiercest fighting men in the world!"

"Why, what are you afraid of?" demanded the Archbishop.

"Nothing...not yet anyway. But I am not getting rid of my cannon, for anything or anyone in the world!"

"Capitano! you try my patience," thundered the Archbishop. "Remember, in these holds of yours are locked some of the holiest possessions of the Church! Sacrificing those for mere...to save the armaments of a ship will be high treason!"

"Perhaps he is right, Senor Capitano," whispered the Mate in his skipper's ear. "Anyway, why get into trouble with the Church or the King? We have headaches enough, as of now. Meanwhile, we shall try to keep the cannon, unless discarding them becomes inevitable."

Captain Porfirio Diaz was silent for a few moments. He paced the length of his cabin, his gaze shifting from his Mate to the Archbishop. Then he stopped pacing and halted
in front of a large round table that bore his navigational charts.

For what seemed a long while, he stared at the map. Then, as if coming to a decision, the Captain straightened his shoulders and turned to face the others.

"Well, then, let us save the King's treasures!" He shrugged and spoke to the Mate, "Full speed ahead, Pedro! All hands to their stations. On the double!"

When the Mate had gone to have his Captain's orders carried out, the two men were silent for a while, lost in their own reflections. Presently the Archbishop smiled, a smile that did not reach his eyes, and gestured, "Shall we continue with the meal then, Senor Capitano?"

Diaz bowed and shook his head, "Please continue, Your Excellency. I seem to have lost my appetite."

"A pity!"

The King's vessel, 'La Vierge du Cap', lay motionless on the ocean. The storm was long past. Nothing stirred on the blue-green expanse of the sea. Even the breeze that had wafted the ship into this safe bay, off the island of Reunion, had fallen off.

At dusk, Captain Diaz had given the order to reduce sail. It was now night and the ship's lights cast weird shadows on the water.

The few look-outs who had been left on deck, dozed at their posts. The King's soldiers on board the ship were all probably asleep, quite bored with the journey and sick from the tossing the ship had taken in the cyclone.
The 'du Cap' had managed to escape the worst of the storm. But only after a desperate struggle had the crew managed to steer the heavily laden vessel out of trouble. The men were all exhausted.

The four men playing cards in the Captain's cabin spoke little. Captain Diaz gazed listlessly at his cards. On his right was a splendidly-attired man, obviously an officer of the King's army. The Archbishop's face, as usual, was an expressionless mask.

"I am going up on deck for a round!" Pedro, the Mate, threw down his cards. He glanced quickly at his Captain, who nodded.

"You are too nervous, friend," laughed the officer, placing his cards face down on the table. He leaned back in his chair, stretching.

Captain Diaz said nothing until his Mate had left. Then he looked at the soldier and shrugged, "Not nervous, Lieutenant. Careful! Forty years on ships have taught me to be careful."

"But what is there to worry about, Senor Capitano?" insisted the Lieutenant. "You have some of His Majesty's best fighting men aboard this ship at this moment!"

"Lieutenant Vasquez is right, Senor Capitano," smiled the Archbishop, watching the sailor closely. "Only a fool would dare attack such a well-guarded ship, that is protected by both the King and the Church."

"From what I have heard of these buccaneers, filibusters...they are a cowardly lot, a bunch of undisciplined ruffians!"

"I do not worry about undisciplined rogues, Senor."
But La Bouse is no coward. Nor is he a fool...

"Who is this Bouse?" scoffed the Lieutenant slapping his thigh. "Let him come, whoever he is! He shall feel the edge of my sword!"

"Enough of him, gentlemen! We worry unduly." The Archbishop pointed to the stack of cards, "Deal, Lieutenant! Please!"

* * *

As he passed the mizzen rigging, Pedro hesitated. He had, thought the Mate, heard something. He waited a few seconds for the sound to be repeated. It was not. Then he turned and resumed his patrol of the deck.

Pedro continued on, aft. A man shouted.

"Diablos!"

"The devil!" swore Pedro and rushed forward. He saw them now. Two shadowy figures struggling by the ship's bulwarks.

"What is going on?" demanded Pedro, rushing into the action.

Pedro saw a body pitching overboard; he heard the scream. An instant later red-hot agony swept through his body. He felt himself falling.

Trying desperately to shout, to warn his mates, Pedro saw the running forms through a haze of pain and blood. The sound of hurrying feet was now faint in his ears...

Even though they heard feet scrambling down the companionway, the men in the cabin did not realize their peril.
The door burst open.

The Captain was the first to react, reaching desperately for the sword that hung on the wall a few feet away.

"No, Senor Capitano! Don't try that!" snapped the leader of the intruders, as the point of his cutlass whipped up to dig into the latter's throat. "Do not try to do anything so foolish, friend!"

In seconds, the other buccaneers had taken control of the situation, dispersing themselves about the cabin, their weapons threatening the hapless occupants.

"Le Vasseur!" gasped Captain Diaz, his fist clenching in impotent fury.

"La Bouse!" exclaimed Lieutenant Vasquez. The soldier's face was pale as death. One of the pirates had a pistol to the fine, frilled neck.

"The very same, friends!" shot back the man pinning Captain Diaz to his seat, "I am also well-known as La Bouse."

La Bouse—Oliver Le Vasseur—was a handsome man. For a buccaneer he was well dressed. A short jacket, shirt open at the throat, a purple sash across his torso. Into the sash were tucked two pistols. A short boarding axe jutted out of his waistband. The full, sensuous lips twisted in a laconic smile as the buccaneer spoke.

"Ah, so? What do we have here? An Archbishop in the flesh...no less...Your Excellency, my respects!" The pirate curtseyed, his tone mocking, "I am blessed, indeed!"

A couple of attackers guffawed.

"Quiet!" rasped the Bouse. "Respect, my worthies! Behave yourselves!"
"You crook!" the Archbishop was on his feet now, his features contorted in a mixture of rage and fear. "I...I shall have your heads for this...this outrage! This ship belongs to the King of Portugal! Our soldiers...we have...don't you dare lay a finger on them..."

"Well, now! I am sure my men are attending to the King's soldiers, Your Excellency. I hate bloodshed, you see. Now, then, shall we get down to business, gentlemen? Please remain seated, and no harm will come to anyone. All we want is the King's treasure."

"You cannot hope to get away with this, Bouse!" warned Captain Diaz. "The entire Portuguese navy will be after you, when news of your misdeed reaches Lisbon."

"Let us hope that will not be too soon, Monsieur Le Capitano," scowled the Bouse. "Come then, my friends. Please sit down, all of you, while I attend to the business that brings us here!"

Feet clattered down the companion ladder. Heads turned. "Look! See what I found!"

One of the buccaneers staggered down the ladder. He was obviously drunk. "Look what I found, La Bouse! Look at this!"

In the drunken man's fist, held aloft, was a cross. But it was no ordinary cross. In the solid gold of the object were studded several large jewels. They sparkled in the light of the cabin's lantern. The cross was so heavy that the inebriated pirate could barely hold it up.

"Le magnifique!" exclaimed the Bouse, crossing the cabin floor in one bound and wrenching the cross out of his follower's fist, "beautiful!"
The Archbishop's hoarse, choked voice interrupted the buccaneer's admiration of his booty.

"Let that be, you pirate!" shouted the holy man. "Take your sinful hands off that holy cross immediately!"

"Take my hands off a beauty like this?" the Bouse chuckled. "Not on your life, Excellency. This is the prize of a lifetime's effort!"

"That is the...the sacred Fiery Cross, you villain! Its glory and power will destroy you! Anyone who misuses it will perish!"

"Not to worry, Senor," laughed the pirate. "I shall not let this fall into disrespectful hands. I will guard this with my life!"

"Be warned, fiend!" shouted the Archbishop. "You shall hang for this sacrilege!"

"That I shall, no doubt," retorted the other. "But I shall die a happy man. Others have spent years scouring the seas for something as valuable, as precious as this. And see how it has fallen into my lap! Madre Dios! My search is rewarded, Capitano."

"Do you think they will let you get away with this?" demanded Captain Diaz, looking the pirate in the eye. "If only I had my cannon, you rascal..."

"How thoughtful of you, Senor Capitano. La Bouse smiled wolfishly. "I wouldn't have dreamt of boarding this ship, if you had not been kind enough to get rid of all that firepower!"

Captain Diaz shot a glance at the Archbishop. The latter squirmed. But the Captain was not angry anymore. His shoulders slumped in despair.
"Now, let us..."

Lieutenant Vasquez, seeing that the buccaneers' attention was on the cross, moved. He lunged at the Bouse, a knife materialising in his right hand. In one smooth motion, the pirate's hand whipped down and up. Steel flashed and the Lieutenant staggered back, clutching at the cutlass buried hilt-deep in his chest.

"Foolish man!" scowled the pirate, stepping across to look down at the fallen officer. The man was quite dead.

"No more tricks, anyone!"

"The curse of the Fiery Cross is upon you, scoundrel!" thundered the Archbishop. "You will come to a bad end!"

"You are too kind, Excellency," mocked the Bouse, bowing gallantly. "But this cross is worth much more than a buccaneer's life."
"Surprise!"
"What is it, Papa?" I looked up from my book, as my father marched into the room.
"Guess."
"Oh, Papa!" I put my arm around his neck, pouting.
"Don't be so mysterious, Papa! What is it? What have you got for me?"
"Ahem..." Papa cleared his throat, preparing himself for the momentous announcement. "Well, my child! You asked for this then..."
"Oh?" I tugged at his lapels.
"The Sahais are going abroad!"
"Abroad?" I jumped back, my jaw dropping in amazement.
"What are you saying, Papa? Who is going abroad?"
"All of us, child," Papa was enjoying his little surprise. "The whole Sahai family—Papa Sahai, Mama Sahai and little Aarti!"
"But why, Papa?" I was bewildered. "Why and where are we going?"
"The life of a diplomat, my child, is full of travels and travails. It has pleased the Government of India to post Ram Sahai, your own Papa, to the Seychelles!"
"The Seychelles? Oh, wow! And where is that, Papa?"
"And you, a student of Geography...tut...don't you know?"
"Wait...let me see..." I racked my memory. Come on, where had I heard that name before?..."Ah, yes! I have got it! The Indian Ocean! That is where they are! The Seychelles lie in the Indian Ocean, south of the equator."
"Correct, my child. The islands of the Seychelles are off the eastern coast of Africa, north of Madagascar."
"But when are we going, Papa?"
"Soon, little girl. Within the month, I should say."
"Within the month? But..."
"No buts about it, child. The Government orders and off I march! Such is life in the diplomatic corps! And now," he chuckled mischievously, "it is time to shock your dear mother, little girl. Come, let us give her the news."
"The Seychelles...Wow! Wait until the girls hear about this! They will all be green with envy."
I strutted out of the room already on cloud nine.

'"Aarti in Wonderland', 'Adventures of a Bookworm' were some of the comments my friends could not resist hurling at me, when they heard the news. Of course, they were jealous. All except Maya, that is.
"You will be gone long, won't you? And won't you come back, Aarti?" wondered my dearest chum.
"Of course I will, dummy," I reassured her. "We shall be gone two years, maybe three. But back we will be!"
"What kind of a place is this, She...or See...She..."
"Hold on there. Seychelles!" We all laughed at Renu's confusion. "Sea...shells—that is how it is said."
"Oh, so you have been reading about it already, have you, dear bookworm?"
"Not yet, but I will, I assure you."
"What on earth will you do there, Aarti? It is some kind
of an island, isn't it? How will you spend your time?"

"Islands are beautiful places and so mysterious!" breathed Renu.

"The Seychelles are a group of islands in the Indian Ocean, and that is all I know," I said, shrugging. "More later, after I have reached the place!"

"Do send me a picture postcard," gushed Renu. "I have a collection, you know. My aunt in Canada..."

"Oh, no! Not your aunt in Canada! Not again..." chorused Maya and I, clapping our hands to our ears.

"Spoilsports!" pouted Renu.

"Wait! Let dear Aarti reach the Seychelles first. You could write long letters to her then..." said Maya, her eyes twinkling, "about your aunt in Canada, of course!"

"Humph!" stamped Renu.

And we all laughed uproariously.

'Unique by a thousand miles'

I was in a state of shock. It would take me a few days to get over the sudden change that my life had undergone. One morning I was in India, among known and loving faces, and the next I was in this unknown, faraway place.

The flight from Bombay had taken several hours to deposit us on the islands of the Seychelles. Most of the distance covered was over a grey expanse of ocean. I was surprised at the number of Indians visiting the islands. Most of them, Papa told me, were businessmen.

As our flight screamed into Mahe International Airport in
Victoria, the capital city of the Seychelles, I saw an unrelieved landscape of palms and beaches whipping past. If nothing else, this was certainly a beautiful little country. As I read in some of the tourist brochures on the island, the place was, indeed, 'unique by a thousand miles'. To explain—the central point of the archipelago is about a thousand miles from the African coast.

Waiting at the airport to receive and escort us to our new home on the island were Mr. Patherya and his family. Mr. Patherya was the officer my father would be replacing at the Indian Office in the Seychelles. The Patheryas were quite delighted to see us.

We drove straight to the bungalow that was to be our home for the duration of our stay there. The Patheryas, understandably, were already making preparations to vacate the house. It would be a few days, though, before Papa finished taking over charge of his office. Until then our two families would be staying together in the bungalow.

My mother had already struck up a good rapport with Mrs. Patherya. Papa spent most of his time discussing official matters with his predecessor. So that it was only I, suddenly bereft of the company of half a dozen teenagers, who was left to mope. Our hosts were a very young couple, only recently married. There was no one my age to keep me company. I had, of course, been sensible enough to carry along a small portion of our library from Bombay. I now re-read as many books as I could. There was little else for me to do all day long. It would be some days yet, before the formalities for my admission to the local school were complete. In short, I was bored stiff, those first few days on
the islands. I could not even go out. My mother had decided that it was not safe enough for a girl my age to be gallivanting about.

An exception to the uninteresting bunch of adults around me was Albert Maurel, our Creole chauffeur. He would spend a little time talking to me everyday, telling me about the island and his countrymen.

Albert was a good-looking fellow and he wore his uniform as if it were a military dress—all starched and polished. He saluted smartly with the perfection of a veteran sailor whenever any of us entered or left the car...Albert's battleship!

"Where do you live, Albert?" I asked him one day, as we sat chatting on the lawn of our new home. I had noticed that Albert drove off every evening, after dropping Papa home from his office. He would materialise again the following morning, both the car and himself sparkling like new.

"Oh? Over there, mademoiselle," he replied, gesturing over his shoulder into the distance. "You see that line of palms? That is where I live."

I was not any wiser. Victoria was as full of palms and vegetation as Bombay had been devoid of greenery. Nevertheless I nodded, as if I understood.

"With wife and two little kids!" said the Creole proudly, his white teeth glittering.

"Can't we go and meet your people, Albert?"

"Oh no, mademoiselle!" he clapped a hand to his mouth in alarm. "I couldn't do that. Monsieur would have my hide!"

'Monsieur' was Albert's appellation for Uncle Patherya.
"Whatever for?" I was surprised and irritated. "What is the harm in meeting your folks? All these grown-ups have their affairs to keep them busy. Mama and Auntie Patherya keep chatting all day long. Papa and Uncle have their work at the office. What do I do? Sit here and vegetate? I am bored, bored, bored!"

"Don't be so upset, little mademoiselle!" soothed Albert. "Maybe I will take you home someday. My wife would be glad to meet you. You can tell her all the stories about India!"

"But tell me, Albert, why would your 'Monsieur'—Uncle Patherya—not want me to go there in the first place? What is wrong?"

"Well, mademoiselle," he looked uncomfortable, "that part of Victoria does not have a good reputation, you see. All kinds of people frequent the place. But don't you worry! You will be quite safe with me. Everyone knows Albert here in Victoria. They respect me!"

"Goody, then!" I clapped for joy. "That is just what I need. A change from this boring bungalow!"

But the opportunity to go out and shake off my overpowering inactivity did not come until one morning several days later.

"So, how is little Aarti enjoying life here?" asked Papa at breakfast.

I pouted and said nothing.

"What? Is my little girl angry?" Papa came over and put an arm around my shoulders. "Come, come dear, what is the matter? Don't you like it here?"

"I can easily understand," said Uncle Patherya, "why she
is so bored. Staying home all day! No school, no friends, no
adventure, eh?"
"We shall have you in school very soon, dear," reassured
Papa.
I saw my chance. I sniffed, casting a hurt glance at Papa.
"Oh, no! Is my little girl still unhappy?"
"Oh, Papa! Can't I get out of this bungalow for a while?"
I pleaded, trying to look as miserable as I could. "You have
the office to keep you busy, Mother has her friends...but I
am sick, so sick of sitting around all day! Nothing to do, no
one to talk to! I have already read all my books twice, thrice
over!"
But the question is, what do I do? I can't send you out on
this island with just anyone, can I?"
Uncle Pathreya caught Papa's enquiring glance, shrugged,
then nodded slowly.
"Let me go out in the car with Albert, Papa. Please?"
"With Albert?" Papa looked alarmed. "Alone on an
unknown island, with a stranger? Well..."
"He is no stranger, Papa!" I said vehemently. "Albert is
a good man. Besides, what harm can it do?"
Papa spread his hands in helplessness, looking at Uncle
for advice in the matter.
"On second thoughts," said Uncle Patherya, "maybe little
Aarti could go. I shall ask Albert to take her on a round of
the island tomorrow. He is not a bad sort, really."
"Hooray!" clapped I, and ran to hug Uncle.
True to Uncle Patherya's promise, Albert was at the
bungalow next day, all ready for my tour of the island. He
had polished the white limousine until it sparkled like a diamond. And his uniform, if anything, was crisper than ever before.

A few minutes later we were out of Victoria and on the open road. Victoria, the administrative capital of the islands, was practically the only town in the Republic of the Seychelles, said Albert. Situated on the north-eastern corner of the island of Mahe, as I gathered, Victoria is a neat little town.

"I have never been on an island before!" I said to Albert. "Ah, that is as well," he smiled. "That is all to the good. You will enjoy your stay here the more for that. There are over a hundred islands in our Republic, you know? And this, Mahe, which we are now driving on, is the largest."

"Are the others as beautiful, too?"

"Well, I suppose so, mademoiselle. Honestly, I myself have been only on a few of our islands. There are too many of them, you see. And some so far away! I have been to Praslin, La Digue...the Amirantes, too, once. Anyway, most of the islands are not inhabited. Besides, almost all our population lives here on Mahe.

We drove leisurely along on the highway which runs parallel to the coast of Mahe through almost the entire length and breadth of this wedge-shaped island. On our left were white, sandy beaches and to our right the thickly vegetated interior of the island. Also visible was the range of granite peaks running through the centre of the island, north to south.

"I don't see any fields," I wondered, used as I was to India's generally agricultural landscape and greenery.
"That is not surprising," said Albert. "Most of our land is rocky, you see! It is a back-breaking job, getting anything out of such soil. But nothing to worry about. There is plenty of coconut about. And other things too...lots of fish!"

"What is that?" I shouted, as we passed a vast stretch of low bushes that looked familiar. "Is that...is that...?"

"Cinnamon!" supplied Albert, quite enjoying my consternation. "It grows wild here. On Mahe we have a lot of it. So the government sends most of it overseas. Brings in plenty of money, you know!"

"Cinnamon growing wild!" I was fairly stumped. This was no ordinary island, after all! "Wait until I tell Mother and Papa about this. They won't believe their ears."

"Here we are!" announced Albert, breaking my reverie. In my excitement I had not noticed that we were now at some kind of a settlement. There were several neat little houses scattered about the place.

"Where are we, Albert? Why are we stopping here?"

"Anse Royale," said Albert, as he manoeuvred the car through some lanes, eventually pulling up outside a pretty little house. "We are in Anse Royale, mademoiselle."

"But, why did you stop..."

"My house!" Albert flashed a broad grin, looking proprietorially at the neat cottage. "Get down, please. You are welcome to my humble dwelling."

As I got out of the car, a woman emerged from the house. She was young and quite handsome.

"Jeannie!" introduced Albert. Then he spoke to his wife in a dialect I did not understand. She replied rapidly in the same dialect, then smiled warmly in welcome at me. Her
pearly teeth gleamed, set off by her golden brown skin.

"Jeannie is happy to see you," interpreted Albert. "She asks you to come in. Our house is small, but she hopes you will like it."

I nodded to the lady, following her into the house. The house was small, but looked cosy. Two little children, a boy and a girl, stood looking up at me, smiles playing on their lips.

"That is little Albert and Joan," Albert pointed to the children.

"I like them, Albert," I said.

Albert translated and the children laughed delightedly.

Albert's wife now put an arm around my shoulder and made me sit down. She looked closely at me, speaking all the while in her dialect.

"I am sorry, Albert," I said, quite bewildered, "but I cannot...I don't follow..."

"Ah!" Albert chuckled. "Of course, you don't! She speaks Creole, you see. She knows only Creole! I speak both English and Creole. My ancestors were from England, probably. Hers were from France!"

"How wonderful!" Then a thought occurred to me, "Will you teach me Creole, Albert? It sounds like a beautiful language."

Albert explained to his wife. She laughed, clapping her hands in approbation at the suggestion.

Presently Jeannie went into the kitchen and returned with a large coconut, the top of which had been sliced off.

"Drink that," encouraged Albert. "It is very good!"

We chatted for a while, Albert continuously interpreting
for his wife. He seemed to be enjoying the role tremendously.

"We must go now, mademoiselle," Albert got to his feet, interrupting our chatter. He glanced at his watch, "Too late already. Your mother will worry. I must take you home, no?"

We passed through a few more settlements, driving back to Victoria. These were, if anything, even smaller than Albert's village.

* * *

"What? Albert took you to his place?" Mother was alarmed. "Wait until I tell your father about this!"

"Whatever is the matter, dear?" enquired Papa that evening, when we were all at supper.

"Did you hear?" Mother was still furious. "Albert took Aarti along to his home!"

"Well?" Papa raised an eyebrow. "What is wrong with that?"

"You ask me what is wrong?" Mother was outraged. "Don't you know anything, Aarti's father?"

"But, whatever is the matter, Mother? What was wrong in my going to Albert's place?" I was perplexed at all this fuss. "He has such a pretty wife! And she is very nice, too. Such lovely children!"

"Wife?" snorted Mother. "That is not his wife! He is not married to the woman, do you know that?"

"It is true, my girl," nodded Papa. "But then, most of the natives here live that way. They do not marry. It is their custom, Aarti's mother. Nothing to be upset about!"
"Nothing to be upset about?" Mother was piqued. "Can you imagine the influence it will have on my child?"

"Nonsense, Mother! I am grown up enough, don't you realize? Besides, if it is their custom, it is their custom! You can't, really hold it against poor Albert, can you?"

"She is right, you know," Papa agreed, glancing at Mother. "That is the way they live. We must get used to the customs of the natives, Aarti's mother. After all, this is not our land..."

"When you are in Rome..."

"What?" Mother looked furiously at me. Papa laughed, as I ducked out of the room. But I resolved to ask Albert about this, anyway.

* * *

When I put the question to him, Albert chuckled softly. But he did not seem to be in the least embarrassed.

"That is so, mademoiselle," he agreed. "Jeannie and I were never married in a church, although we are Roman Catholics. I know, from what I have heard of the world outside, that this is an odd custom. But here it is so. Almost half the people here live this way."

"My mother and Mrs. Patherya don't approve of it."

"Perhaps they are right," Albert smiled. "However, it suits us fine, this arrangement. She makes clothes for herself and the children, and I buy mine. I also get food for the family."

"Nothing wrong in it," nodded I. "Sounds like a fair arrangement, sharing the responsibilities of the family."

"Well, that is how it has been here for the past two hundred years or so," shrugged Albert.
"You promised to teach me Creole, Albert," I reminded him.

"If you wish," he agreed. "It is mostly French, you know!"

"I did a bit of French in school, before coming to the Seychelles," I ventured.

"That is wonderful! You will learn very quickly then. All you have to do is listen and try to speak like us. But, for a beginning," he smiled, "stop calling our country 'Sea shells'! Shehlz...Shehlz...that is what it is called!"

"Okay, okay! She... Shehlz...Shelz..."

"That is better!" he grinned. "Mademoiselle, do you know how our islands got that name...Shehlz?"

I shook my head.

"From a minister of France!" he said. "Moreau de Sechelles was Louis XV's Minister for Finance. These islands were named after him when the French occupied them about two hundred years ago."

"Who lived here before that?"

"No one, probably. Even after the French took over the islands, they did not live here. There were only pirates using these isles for a long time!"

"Pirates!" I ejaculated.

"Yes, pirates. They looted ships. Haven't you heard of them, ever?"

"Well, I have read about them in books," I answered, still quite amazed by this bit of information. "There were pirates in Stevenson's Treasure Island. Have you read the book?"

"Well, no! I am not too interested in reading books, mademoiselle," Albert looked embarrassed.

"Oh, that is all right, Albert. To each his own!"
"Well said, mademoiselle," he cheered up, "well said, indeed."
"You were telling me about pirates," I prompted. "Well...?"
"Oh?" He shrugged, "I don't know too much about those things. Only the stories I have heard on this island. Ask your Uncle, Mr. Patherya...maybe he knows a lot more!"
This I decided to do.
But my enquiries into the violent past of the islands were interrupted by another development. When Papa and Uncle came home that evening, they had news for me.
"Good news, little girl!" announced Papa, ruffling my locks. "You will be going to school again."
"Is that so? How wonderful!"
"Yes, indeed," Uncle Patherya smiled encouragingly.
"Now, at least, you will have something better to do than chatting with Albert all day long!"
"Oh, he is very interesting, Uncle!" I defended my loyal driver and companion.
"That he is!" Uncle and Papa looked at one another and laughed.
"When will I be going to this school, Papa?"
"You start tomorrow, child."
"But, Papa!" Suddenly I remembered something. "Everyone speaks Creole here, Papa. How will I..."
"Not to worry, child!" reassured Uncle. "This school you will be going to, has English as the medium of instruction. Besides, many of the children studying there are outsiders, like us. The teachers know that and take care."
"Oh, goody!" I said. "This should be interesting."
"You bet!" Papa smiled indulgently.
Back to school

School was a low-key affair. Nothing like the huge school buildings with several thousand children that one was used to in India. But, for all that, it was an interesting place.

Most of the children of the island, I gathered, attended some kind of school or the other, which explained the very high rate of literacy, almost sixty per cent, in the Republic.

Many of the students in my school were foreigners, as Uncle Patherya had said. They were British, French and a few Africans. Even among the Seychellois, the population was pretty mixed. As Albert had explained, these islands had probably had no indigenous population before the French and British colonised them. So that the present population is made up of mixed European, African and Asian stock. Of the Asians, those of Chinese and Indian origins are the most abundant.

School was in a low-roofed, neat little building. In keeping with the climate of the islands, which is generally rainy, the building had a sloping, tiled roof.

The Principal of the school—a tall, greying gentleman whose origins were distinctly African—welcomed me into his institution, and handed me over to the care of Mr. Andrade.

Mr. Andrade looked sternly down at me through his bifocals. I gazed unflinchingly back, until the teacher smiled and nodded.

"Good girl!" he said. "I see you are very bright. But see that you do not get into any mischief in my class. I am very strict with trouble-makers."
"I will not create any trouble for you, Sir!" I reassured him, trying to look suitably chastened.

"Ah, well! That is good. Come along, then, and join your class."

From the first day, Mr. Andrade took a particular interest in me. He must have seen my report card from India; for he tried me out with questions on History, Geography and a bit of Science. Probably spurred on by my quick replies, the teacher then bowled me a googly.

"What do we know of the Seychelles?" Mr. Andrade peered near-sightedness at the class. Inevitably, his eyes came to rest on me, "We live on the Seychelles. Do we know anything of our islands? Miss Sahai...well?"

"All I know is that everyone here speaks Creole, Sir!"

The class guffawed.

"Silence!" Mr. Andrade pounded his table. "Everyone knows that, Miss Sahai. Haven't you tried to learn anything about the place where you will be spending the next few years?"

"I haven't had the time, Sir," I answered. "But I am trying."

The class snickered again.

"Oh?" Mr. Andrade looked closely at me, not sure whether I was serious or only trying to pull his leg. I put on my most innocent look. Apparently it worked, for the teacher shook his head and returned to the blackboard.

"The Seychelles," droned the teacher, "are an archipelago. Now, can anyone tell me what is an archipelago? Here...Miss..." And so it continued over the next few weeks—Mr. Andrade trying to snare me with his questions, and I ready with my replies most of the time. But I had a
feeling that, gradually, the teacher was getting used to me. He knew now that I was not a mischief-monger.

I soon made several friends among my schoolmates. Many of us were new to the islands and so we had a certain bond linking us. We exchanged notes about our respective countries, our backgrounds.

But as time passed, my closest companion, it turned out, was not a foreigner. Rita Seebsagar was a native Seychellois. Although her parents were of Indian origin, the family had lived for three generations on these islands.

"My great grandfather came to the Seychelles more than a century ago," Rita told me. "He was brought here as a slave."

And so I encountered one of the unpleasant aspects of the islands' history—the import of slaves by the colonists, to work on what must have then been a remote, almost forgotten outpost of the British Empire.

Despite their humble origins, Rita's ancestors had done well for themselves. Rita's father, she informed me, was one of the biggest merchants on the archipelago. He owned several shops all over the islands, besides being an exporter of copra and cardamom. Over the years the Seebsagar family had built up their fortune by dint of hard work.

Rita took me home to meet her folks one day. I went gladly. Papa's busy schedule at his office did not leave us much time for socialising. We spent most of our leisure hours at home. The visit to Rita's house was a welcome change.

"We are so glad you could come, Miss Sahai," smiled my friend's father warmly.

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"Aarti, Uncle. Please call me Aarti!"

"Okay, Aarti!" he grinned, looking at his wife. "I am happy that Rita now has a friend from our motherland—a true Indian!"

"My mother says that we still own a house in Benares," said Rita's mother looking hopefully at me. "Have you ever been to Benares?"

"I am sorry, but I haven't," I apologized. "You see, India is such a vast country and our vacations are so brief...just about two months in a year. And then, Auntie, we are so busy catching up on our home assignments..."

"We understand, my child," Mr. Seebsagar laughed. "That is one advantage the children have here—not too much homework, eh, dear?"

"Oh, yes!" agreed Rita. "It is only Mr. Andrade who loads us with assignments, sometimes. The other teachers are all good sport!"

"What do you think is the matter with Mr. Andrade, Rita?"

"Ah, well! He is just one of those people who cannot be happy nor let anyone else be happy. That is why we call him 'Sad Sack'...don't you know?"

"Sad Sack? Oh dear..." I laughed. So did Rita's parents. "Speak no ill of your teachers, children," Rita's father waved an admonishing finger, although his eyes twinkled. "As they say in India—Mother, Father, Teacher and God...that is the order of importance..."

"Come on, girls," invited Rita's mother. "Time to eat. All talk and no food is not good for your brains or bodies!"

"Yay! That is a wonderful idea!" clamoured Rita, leading the charge on the meal, which was laid out on a beautifully
carved little table. The meal was entirely vegetarian and delicious.

After lunch Rita took me into their garden. The 'garden', in fact, was a large tract of land, almost as vast as a field. Several strange plants and trees, which I could not remember having ever seen in India, grew in this garden. Strangest of all, however, were a pair of palms that stood in the middle of the garden, occupying pride of place, so to speak. Each tree was easily about a hundred feet high.

"What are those?" I wondered, pointing to the palms. One of them bore some very odd looking fruit, indeed. The other carried a drooping, spike-shaped inflorescence.

"See those nuts? That, friend, is the Coco-de-mer," explained Rita. "This palm is found only on the Seychelles, nowhere else in the world!"

"Really?" I was impressed. "I say, what are those huge bags hanging on the palm?" I pointed to the large twin sacs on the palm.

"Those are the coconuts!"

"Coconuts?"

"Yes...those are twin coconuts...the Coco-de-mer," explained Rita. "These palms are usually seen on Praslin and a couple of other small islands. Papa got them for our garden during one of his business trips. Miraculously, they have not died here as they usually do outside their natural habitat. See how they have grown!"

"I say, I have never seen anything like this before," I ejaculated. "Look at the size of those coconuts!"

"Of course, you haven't! They are not commonly found elsewhere. The Coco-de-mer is probably the largest nut in
the world. Do you know that those nuts weigh up to twenty kilos each?"

"Twenty kilos?" I gasped. "Remarkable!"

"Another feature of the palm," continued Rita, "is that you cannot plant anything else for several metres around this tree."

"How like a king and queen they stand!" I continued to gape admiringly up at these unique specimens of the plant kingdom. "Monarchs of all that they survey!"

"King and Queen...quite! The one bearing the nuts is the female. Wait until you visit some of the other islands, Aarti," said Rita, "you will have more surprises."

As we were chatting, my eyes suddenly fell on a singular object in the garden. In fact, it was an animal—a huge tortoise.

"Hey! Look over there!"

"What is the matter, Aarti?" Rita chuckled suddenly. "Oh, so you have noticed Peter, have you? That is our pet, Peter! He is a giant tortoise."

"How extraordinary!" I exclaimed, gaping at this veritable giant among tortoises, as he lumbered around slowly in a corner of the enclosure.

"Peter is one of a kind. A rare giant tortoise, found only on the Seychelles and the Galapagos Islands. In fact, our nation's coat of arms has a giant tortoise with a **Coco-de-mer** perched on its back."

"Wow!" was all I could say. "Look at him!"

"There is a whole colony of his species on the Aldabra atolls," said Rita thoughtfully. "Maybe we can go there, some day..."
"Wonderful!" I clapped. Then, as a thought occurred to me, "But...Papa is always so busy! I wonder...how..."

"Don't you worry! I shall speak to Father. He keeps travelling all over the place on business. Maybe he can take us along some day on his boat."

"Great! That would be wonderful!"

* * *

But Mr. Seebsagar would not hear of taking me anywhere without first talking to my parents about it. So it was, that Rita's parents visited us, one holiday.

"This is a pleasant surprise," Papa welcomed the Seebsagars. "Aarti did not tell us you were coming!"

"Oh? I am not even prepared," complained Mother. "I would have got a proper meal ready, if I had known we were having guests...and Aarti's friend's parents, at that!"

"That is quite all right, Mrs. Sahai." Mrs. Seebsagar was a bluff, enthusiastic woman. "Come along, I have so much to talk about to you. Let us leave the menfolk to themselves."

So while Papa and Mr. Seebsagar talked shop and the women chatted, we slipped away. Albert was lolling about on the porch of the bungalow, telling one of his interminable stories to a hapless servant.

"Ah! there you are, mademoiselle," Albert's face lit up as he saw us. "Where have you been all these days? I know you have found a friend, a little girl like yourself. But, have you forgotten your friend, Albert, altogether?"

"Far from it, Albert," I smiled trying to mollify him. "But tell me, aren't you going to take us on a drive somewhere? We have all afternoon at our disposal and nothing to do.
"Oh dear! Poor children!" Albert chuckled, "Not to worry. Albert to the rescue...as they say in the comic books! As a matter of fact, I was planning to go along and visit one of my friends at Takamaka. Haven't seen the fellow for quite a while now. Would you like to come along? You may find it interesting."

Rita and I needed no further invitation. "Of course, we are coming," I said, as we piled quickly into the rear seat of our car.

"But, mademoiselle, a favour," Albert lowered his voice conspiratorially, as he slipped behind the driving wheel. "Speak and it shall be granted!"

"Don't tell your Papa that I took you there. He will be so annoyed if he hears."

"Why is that? What is so special about this place...this Take...Take..."

"Takamaka," helped Rita. "It is one of the seedier parts of Mahe, Aarti. I have heard my father say that all the riff-raff of the Seychelles hang around there. A dangerous place! Am I right, Albert?"

"Correct, mademoiselle," nodded our chauffeur, "and particularly for children!"

"Who is this friend of yours, then?" I teased. "Is he a vagabond too? Some kind of a criminal?"

"No! No!" protested the fellow. "My friend runs a small bar cum restaurant there, by the waterfront. He has, for twenty years. Victor knows everyone on Mahe—or practically everyone!"

"He should be an interesting person to talk to," I said,
relishing the prospect of more information on the islands, probably a little bit of adventure.

"That he is. That he is!" assured Albert.

Discontent

Takamaka, if anything, was seedier than we had imagined the place would be, though not by appearance. Like other settlements on Mahe, the buildings here were pretty. There was plenty of vegetation about. But the general air of decrepitude that hung about the place was inescapable. It even seemed to infect the people we saw frequenting the place.

They were of every hue and nationality: Whites, Blacks, Asians, Chinese. It appeared that every segment of the island's population was represented here—by the worst specimens of the respective races, at that.

And adding colour and noise to the crowd were the tourists. Most of them were Europeans. But they were not the best of their kind either.

All in all, Takamaka was a shady kind of place, exuding an air of menace, a lurking danger. Or perhaps it was only the overheated imagination of a pair of teenagers, out for adventure on a dull island.

Victor's bar, judging by the crowd at the place, was one of the more popular haunts of Mahe's floating population.

Victor himself was a tough-looking character, which was probably necessary, considering his clientele. He stood over six feet tall and was of an almost equal circumference.
heavy beard clothed the lower half of the cheerful features of his face.

"Whoa! Albert!" bellowed the proprietor of 'The Aldabra', as he caught sight of our guide. He waved two huge arms at us.

"Victor! There you are!"

"This is a surprise, Albert," said Victor, clasping his friend in a bear-hug from which the latter could extricate himself only with great difficulty.

"Victor, mon ami, it is ages since I saw you," gasped Albert, trying to recover from the giant's enthusiasm.

"And who are these little ladies, here?" continued Victor, pointing. "Haven't seen them before, have we?"

"Ah, meet Mademoiselle Sahai!" introduced Albert. "I work, or rather drive, for her father these days. And this other lady is a friend, Rita...Rita...?"

"Seebsagar!" I helped. "Rita Seebsagar. Rita is a Seychellois like you. We are at school together."

"Seebsagar...Seebsagar...let me see..." the bar-keeper's eyes narrowed, as he tried to remember something. "Wait a minute! Are you Aniroodh Seebsagar's daughter? The same who owns..."

"The very same, Uncle," nodded Rita.

"You are doubly welcome then," beamed Victor, patting our heads with his huge paws. "Seebsagar is a friend of mine. Come on, come into the house. This is your first visit and the restaurant is no place for little girls!"

Victor was not wrong. The occupants of his bar were a motley crowd. Rough, even vicious countenances were plain in that collection.
They talked and argued loudly while partaking of Victor's liquor. Some gambled, many smoked and I had a sneaking dread that a few even looked stealthily in our direction. We were glad at Victor's invitation to enter the house. He now led us through a door at the rear of the establishment.

Victor's house presented a remarkable change from his place of business. It was a well laid-out, cosy little place. But there appeared to be no one else about.

However, Victor clapped and a Chinese materialised. He stood impassively, unperturbed by our presence, awaiting his master's orders.

"Coconut water for the ladies and tea for two!" The lord of 'The Aldabra' lowered his voice when the Chinese had gone to do his bidding, "Miss Seebagar, does your father know you are here?"

"He doesn't!" snapped Albert. "And don't you go telling him! I shall be without a job, if the boss finds out that I brought them here!"

"Ah, that is so," the other chuckled. "Never fear, my lips are sealed."

"Tell me, Victor, what is happening in this part of the town? Anything new? What is the news?"

Victor looked uncomfortable for a moment. Then he shrugged, "As a matter of fact, there is. But mum is the word!"

"Mother of God!" ejaculated Albert. "So, there is something going on after all! I thought so, I thought so. There have been strange goings-on in Victoria."

"There has been some recruitment again," whispered Victor. "Perhaps it will be a coup this time!"
"A coup!" Albert's eyes popped out. "But that is dangerous!"

A coup! I looked at Rita. Our eyes met. I could feel my heart thudding. What had we stumbled on to? This was more excitement than I had bargained for.

"Of course, it is dangerous," continued Victor. "But what did you expect? Everyone is playing for high stakes."

"Who is the rebels' choice for President, though? Much of their support will depend on that. Have you any information?"

"Nothing is clear yet," replied Victor. "But something will happen soon. Everyone is waiting for the explosion."

"But let us talk about other things, Albert," shrugged the barkeeper with a glance towards us. "It is better that the young ladies do not know too much about these matters."

"Ah, yes. That is so." Albert nodded.

"How is Jeannie, then? And those two devils she has brought up?"

"They are well, thank you," smiled Albert. "But when are you starting a family, Victor? You are not getting any younger, you know? And you can't live with only this Chinese as company for ever!"

"A family?" Victor shrugged, then guffawed. "I have too much on my hands right now. It is all I can do to keep the bar running well."

"Nevertheless..."

A sharp rapping on the door outside interrupted the conversation. Victor sat up, his eyes narrowing.

"Who is that? What do you want?"

"It is me, boss! Peter! This is important!"
For a man of his weight, Victor moved with surprising agility. He crossed to the door and a moment later had dragged Peter into the room, shutting the door behind the fellow. Peter looked very agitated.

"What is it?" demanded Victor.

"The police were around asking questions," panted Peter. "Police? What were they looking for? Do they know anything?"

"I don't think so, boss. But they are suspicious all right. Yesterday a couple of guys were picked up and questioned. The cops let them off, but after a beating!"

"The devils!" cursed Victor. "You go on, Peter. But keep your eyes and ears open. Things are going to begin happening soon."

Victor herded his informer out of the room, then turned to us, frowning.

"I say, Victor," breathed Albert, "what is this you have got yourself into? Are you fighting the government?"

"Sshhhhh!" Victor put a finger to his lips. Then he shrugged, "Someone has got to do it, Albert! And maybe we can win this time. When fair means fail, you try other ways. And the other side won't stop at anything..."

"Be careful, Victor!"

"Oh!" Victor grinned, waving a hand as if dismissing the danger. "I shall be all right. I will live to be an old man...I know that!"

"I wouldn't bet on that, Victor, if I were you—not the way you are going on with all these activities!"

"Come off it, Albert! Don't be a wet blanket. It is a job and it has got to be done. Someone has to try at least."
"You are a foolish man, Victor," Albert shook his head in despair at his friend's obstinacy, "but brave!"
"Forget it!" Victor grunted, waving off the comment.
"I say, it is getting late, girls!" Albert glanced at his watch, suddenly. In fact we had all lost track of the time, so intriguing had been the conversation.

"We must be going now, Victor. The mademoiselles have been away from home too long already, eh?"

And so we took leave of the burly proprietor of 'The Aldabra'. He waved au revoir from behind his bar.

As we drove out of the settlement, I noticed that the crowd on the streets had thinned noticeably, perhaps as a result of the police raid, thought I, remembering what Peter had told his employer—and no wonder. In a neighbourhood of this sort, most of the inhabitants probably had reason enough to keep out of sight of the law.

Albert was not his usual chatty self. He drove in silence, his eyes fixed on the road ahead.

"What is the matter, Albert?" I could not help asking.
"You seem to be disturbed about something?"
"Victor!" Albert shook his head unhappily, "I am afraid for him!"

"Oh? But he looks like he can take care of himself."
"Nevertheless...a...coup..." Then he turned and gazed at us. "Please do not mention that conversation to anyone, mademoiselles! Victor will be in trouble, if you do."

"Of course not, Albert! What do you take us for? We can keep secrets, you know!"

"I say, what is happening out there?"

Rita's loud interruption brought us back to reality.
A short distance away, in the middle of the road, a small crowd was gathered. It consisted mostly of children. They were laughing and shouting.

"What in heaven's name is going on?" demanded Albert, bringing the limousine to a halt, only a few paces away from the odd gathering.

We could see what was happening quite clearly now. In the centre of the ring of children was a man, if he could be called that. The wretched-looking creature was hopping about like a monkey. Behind him was tied a string carrying several battered, empty tin cans that clattered and bounced as the fellow jumped about.

"Hey! Hey!" Albert called, wading into the children. "What are you doing? Shoo! Scat!"

In an instant the crowd of urchins had scattered leaving the hapless subject of their mirth alone on the street; except for us, that is.

To my surprise, I saw that the man was a White. His hair hung about his shoulders in ragged wisps. His clothes were in tatters. Now that the crowd of teasing, taunting children had vanished, this poor wretch stood there in the middle of the road, gasping. His eyes looked plaintively up at the sky. His arms hung listlessly by his sides.

"I say, pal!" Albert walked up to the 'creature' and put a hand on his shoulder. "What are you doing here, so far away from home? How did these children get you?"

The man, or what had once been a man, jumped at Albert's touch, as if he felt an electric shock. He cowered, his eyes terror-stricken.

"Relax, old chap!" Albert reassured him. "I mean you no
harm. Nor do these ladies here. But why were those kids after you? What are you doing here on the street, anyway?"

The man gazed helplessly up at Albert, blubbering unintelligibly. Then abruptly he fell in a heap at the chauffeur's feet, burying his face in wasted, grimy fingers.

"Who is this, Albert?" I could not hold my curiosity any longer. "What is happening? Do you know this poor fellow?"

But Albert only waved me towards our car, ignoring my eager queries. He was trying to drag the man upright.

"Help me with this fellow, mademoiselles," said Albert. "Let us get him in the car first. Quickly, quickly! Poor chap has got a fever, looks like."

Somehow, with our help, though we exchanged exasperated glances at Albert's sudden taciturnity, Albert managed to haul the object of our attentions into the back seat of the limousine.

There he lay, a near bag of bones, the wreck of what might once have been a tall, energetic man. His eyes were now closed. But the man seemed to be in a delirium, for strange little words, mostly incomprehensible, escaped his lips intermittently. His breath came in short, laboured gasps.

Rita and I crowded into the front seat beside Albert. As he gunned the engine and screeched out of there, I turned, once again, to question Albert about the stranger.

A strange tale

"Now what was that, Albert? Who is this? And why are we carrying him in our car?"
"This, mademoiselle, is Ray Watkins," replied Albert with the air of one revealing a major secret, "also called La Bouse—as a taunt, of course!"

"But why? Why would anyone want to tease a poor, wretched man like this? Has he done anyone any harm?"

"No...not really," Albert shrugged. "But it is the way of the world, little friend. Once, when this same man was wealthy and had gifts to throw around, they worshipped him...here on Mahe! Now that his money has all gone, he is a laughing stock."

"But..." I said. Albert was hiding something. "That is no reason why anyone should torture a man. Tell us the whole story, Albert. Please!"

"Well, if you insist, mademoiselle," Albert made a gesture of helplessness.

"Of course, we insist!"

"Here you are, then. Forty years ago, maybe more, a young Englishman came to these islands. He was Ray Watkins, a wealthy peer. He carried with him money, a lot of equipment, and a story of lost treasure..."

"Treasure!" I sat bolt upright, suddenly fascinated.

"That is nothing new," interrupted Rita. "There are dozens of those stories in our country—about buried treasure and lost treasure..."

"But this one is different, my friend," smirked Albert. "The clue that Watkins had, or thought he had, was to Oliver Le Vasseur's great hoard. There have been stories going around these islands for centuries that the pirate buried his booty from the Portuguese galleon, somewhere on the Seychelles."
"Pirate? Booty?" This was more exciting than I had anticipated. "Tell us more, Albert."

"I will, mademoiselles, I will. Patience!" The car swerved suddenly, as Albert avoided a speeding truck. He spat out of the window cursing in French.

"This is a difficult job—driving and telling such an interesting story," said our chauffeur.

"No excuses," I said with a wink at Rita. "You will have to tell us the whole story, Albert!"

"Oh, you ladies!" moaned the helpless Albert. "There is no end to your curiosity. But don't interrupt, okay?"

"Of course, we shan't!"

"Anyway, there is not much to it," continued Albert. "The truth is that Ray Watkins spent the best part of forty years looking for La Bouse's treasure."

"La Bouse?" exclaimed Rita. "Who is that?"

"Le Vasseur, the pirate, of course! In plain language, 'The Vulture'—that is what they called the buccaneer who carried off the Portuguese ship's bounty."

"Buccaneer?" I queried. "Who is a buccaneer? What Portuguese treasure is this, that you keep referring to?"

"Remember, I spoke to you of pirates some time back?" said Albert. "They are known also as buccaneers, filibusters...Oliver Le Vasseur was one of the most notorious and dangerous among the pirates who roamed the Indian Ocean. He was a Frenchman, mind you."

"What of the Portuguese treasure? What does it have to do with Le Vasseur? Or the Seychelles?"

"Well...there are stories...La Bouse is supposed to have buried his loot on one of these islands."
"How exciting!" exclaimed Rita. "And to think that I never knew of it!"

"A hidden treasure!" I exclaimed. "That is wonderful! But, where is this treasure hidden? Do you know..."

"That, mademoiselle, is the problem," Albert scowled. "I have been hearing this story since I was a child. But no one knows for certain. Lots of people have searched for the treasure. Then again...perhaps it is all a hoax! A story cooked up by some islander..."

"It is no hoax!"

The words came from behind us, from the rear seat. So busy had we been in our conversation that we had quite forgotten the presence of the stranger. He was now sitting up, erect as could be, and gazing at us. In his eyes was an intense look, a fervour surprising for one who had so recently been the butt of ridicule and abuse.

"Who are you?" asked the man now, in a surprisingly strong voice. "I don't know you people."

"Easy there, friend!" Albert pacified him. "Don't go getting suspicious of us. We are not after your treasure. We saw you being teased by those brats out there on the street. All we did was to get you out of there."

"I am sorry," apologised Ray Watkins. "I suppose I ought to be grateful. Thank you, friends. But I have been very ill the past week...those urchins got hold of me...I can't say how...thanks, anyway!"

"You are welcome!" Albert looked embarrassed. "Besides, I wouldn't stand for anyone treating anybody like that, not even a foreigner."

"Don't you dare call me a foreigner," snapped Watkins.
"I have been on these islands for over four decades. This is my home!"

"Sorry again, mon ami."

"Who are these ladies?" Watkins looked suspicious.

"This is Mademoiselle Sahai," introduced Albert, "and this is Mademoiselle Seebsagar. I work for the Sahais. They have just arrived in Seychelles from India. And Seebsagar...haven't you heard of Seebsagar, the merchant?"

Watkins nodded. The distrust had been replaced by a certain wariness now. Then he seemed to remember something and the bushy brows darkened.

"What was that you were talking about? The treasure...did you say it was a hoax?"

"I did, I did!" retorted Albert. "Well, if it isn't all a tall tale, why has nothing been found so far? You yourself have been searching these past forty years...haven't you?"

"That means nothing," grated Watkins. "The treasure is here! I stake my life on that. I will find it someday, I promise you!"

"All power to you, friend!" smiled Albert. "I hope, for your sake, that you do. If anyone deserves to find that hidden gold, it is you!"

Watkins looked mollified. He nodded sullenly.

"Albert was just telling us the story of the treasure, Mr. Watkins," said I, "but he knows so little about it! Maybe you can tell us more?"

Immediately the suspicion was back in his eyes. "Why do you want to know?" he demanded. "What will you do if I tell you anything? Have you come from India to look for that treasure?"
"Oh, no!" I could not help laughing loudly. "Not at all! My father has come to the Seychelles on a posting, Mr. Watkins. As for the treasure, it sounds like a great story! But Albert here knows nothing, he claims."

"The less people know about it the better," Watkins frowned. "If the news gets out, we shall have thousands of treasure seekers crawling all over these islands. And most of them stupid, with not a notion about hunting for buried wealth!"

"Here we are, at Anse aux Pins!" announced Albert, cutting the engine and turning to our guest. "Where will you get down, Mr. Watkins? At 'La Retraite'?"

"How do you know?" demanded Watkins, looking suspiciously at our chauffeur.

"Ah, well!" Albert chuckled. "I get around too, you know. I grew up on this island. I know a bit about the goings-on here...don't I now?"

"Yes, the 'La Retraite'," mumbled Watkins.

As Albert pulled up outside an establishment with the sign-board proclaiming 'La Retraite' in faded French, the door of the guest house opened and a portly woman, looking agitated, stepped out.

"Oh, no!" Watkins almost winced at sight of the huge woman who was glaring angrily in our direction. "She has seen me. I will have hell now!"

"And where have you been, Ray?" demanded the lady. "What have you been up to? Didn't I tell you not to get up on your feet...you with fever and all! Into the house with you!"

And Ray Watkins, the proud Englishman, whom time
and the disappointments of his treasure hunt had not broken, sidled into the house like a cowed child.

"Where did you pick him up?" the lady demanded of Albert. "Here I am, worrying myself sick about that no good..."

"Easy...easy, madame," Albert pacified her. "I found him down in Takamaka. He was in a bit of trouble there. Thought I would drop him back home."

"I am very obliged, Mr...?"

"Albert!" said Albert proudly. "Albert Maurel. And these here are Mademoiselles Sahai and Seebsagar."

"Everyone knows me, Madame Duvall, of course," smiled the lady, shaking hands with us. "Everyone who stays here on the isle, at least. Won't you come in, girls?"

"Oh, no!" I glanced quickly at Rita and she nodded. "I don't think we could do that, madame. We have been away from home too long, as it is. Our folks will be worried!"

"Well, that is quite all right then. But drop in any time you feel like it, girls. And you too, Monsieur Maurel..."

Madame Duvall stood waving to us on the porch of her little, white guest house, as Albert started the engine and sped away from the 'La Retraite'.

* * *

"Bonjour!" Papa surprised me with the Creole greeting

I nodded, still quite distracted by the events of the previous day—the visit to 'The Aldabra', the plotters, the treasure hunter, the pirate's treasure! It was all really too much excitement for a young mind.

"I say, little girl, aren't you listening?" queried Papa,
noticing my abstraction. "I said, Bonjour! Kom Sava? How are you?"

"Mon byen, Merai!"

"Ah, that is my girl! So you are not lagging behind in your Creole lessons from Albert, I see!"

"Why don't the two of you start your petit dejeuner then?" interrupted Mother.

"You too, Mother?" I gaped at her.

"I have not been slow," she smiled. "Mrs. Patherya is a good teacher. She has promised to teach me enough Creole before they leave, so that I am able to do my own shopping without getting taken for a ride."

"That I shall look forward to!" chuckled Papa.

"Humph! You men!" pouted Mother. "Anyway...here you are! See how you like breakfast today..."

"Why, Mother? What have you been up to? A new recipe?"

"You bet!" she said preening herself. "There is pain and beurre, with oeufs and Carri Coco with rougaille—that is fish curry with sauce, Creole fashion."

"Oh, Mother! You are wonderful! However did you manage all this in so short a while?"

"Why do you think I married your mother?" smirked Papa naughtily, as she looked daggers at him.

The petit dejeuner—breakfast—was, indeed, everything Mother made it out to be. The Carri Coco was delicious, and the rougaille—sauce—just right.

"Albert's wife couldn't have done better, Mother," I smacked my lips as I made to get up, wiping my fingers on the serviette.
Then a thought occurred to me. I stopped and glanced at Papa. He was still busy with his breakfast.

"What is it, child?" Papa's voice from behind the newspaper surprised me.

"How...how did you know, Papa...I was about to ask you something?"

"Can't I even divine the thoughts of my little girl? Shoot, little one. I am listening."

"Have you heard of the treasure, Papa? The pirate's treasure?"

"What?" Papa's spectacles were now visible above *The Nation*, a sure sign that I had caught his attention. "What was that you said? Treasure? Where?"

"The pirate's treasure, Papa. Oliver Le Vasseur's hoard. Haven't you heard about it? It is somewhere here, on the Seychelles!"

"Really?" Papa had put his newspaper down now and was gazing thoughtfully at me, chin resting on his fist. "And how on earth did you get to know about that?"

"Well...er..." I squirmed, not sure whether to tell him the whole story. "Albert...we met someone yesterday, Papa. We met a man...he has been searching for the treasure for the past forty years. That is what Albert claimed at least."

"That Albert!" grumbled Mother. "He is filling Aarti's head with all kinds of stories, mostly lies..."

"Hold hard there! Wait a minute, Aarti's mother. I recall having heard that story before somewhere, about some lost treasure. Where was it now?"

Papa pondered for a moment. "Ah yes, I get it now. Someone at the embassy was telling me about a treasure...a
treasure site...I forget the name of the place. It is somewhere on Mahe."

"Bel Ombre," I supplied. "That is where the treasure is supposed to have been buried."

"Ah, you are far ahead of me there!" smiled Papa.

"Albert told us about the place. It is on the other side of Mahe, on the western coast."

"This man you met, who was he?"

"Ray Watkins. That was what Albert called him. He has been looking for that treasure all these years. He spent all his money on it, Papa. We...when we met him yesterday, the poor fellow was in a miserable state—half crazy!"

"Not an unlikely end for treasure-seekers," chuckled Papa. "Most of these so-called treasures are products of wild imaginations, child. I doubt very much if there is anything of the sort. Even if there is, there is not likely to be much left of it, anyway."

"You had better keep away from these people," warned Mother. "It could be dangerous. Don't go getting yourself into any kind of trouble."

"I shan't, Mother!" I assured. "I was just trying to find out, that is all."

Treasure-hunters

But my search did not end there. As we left school that evening, Rita whispered in my ear, "Aarti, you want to know more about Le Vasseur's treasure?"

"Of course, I do, you ninny! Don't you?"
I looked at her, surprised. What did she have up her sleeve?

"Well then, I will tell you where we can get more information," replied Rita. "My father gave me the idea."

"Well?"

"The archives, dear. At La Bastille."

"The Bastille? I was taken aback. "But, isn't that the place where the French revolution started?"

"Not that Bastille, silly," scolded Rita. "This one is in Mahe, right here in Victoria! La Bastille is at Union Vale, not far from the city. And this is no prison, like the one the revolutionaries stormed in 1789. This one houses our National Archives. It has got a museum, too."

"Oh, I didn't know that!"

"Well, now you know. Dad says that is the place where we might find something about the treasure. Some information...clues."

"Clues?" I gripped her arm. "What are we waiting for then? Let us go!"

"Hold on, not so fast!" said Rita. "We shall have to tell our folks, shan't we? And your mother! She will be angry, if she knows you have been hunting for treasure again!"

"I will just have to make up a story, then."

Rita was right, of course. But how could we slip away and spend some time at La Bastille?

"Idea!" Rita shouted.

"What is it?"

"Simple! We will tell Albert to take us there. You tell your mother you are visiting me. We will go to my house later, that is all."
"So be it then. But when do we go?"

"Tomorrow, after school," suggested Rita. "You tell your folks that you will be visiting me. And ask Albert to get the car along."

"Great idea!"

* * *

La Bastille, housing a museum as well as the National Archives of the Seychelles, stands on the outskirts of Victoria. Located at Union Vale, north of Victoria, this, in reality, is an old building of colonial times, that was converted for its present use.

The Director, Mr. Potter, was happy to see us. Rita's father was a popular man on the island and a good friend of the Director, besides.

"Well ladies, what can I do for you?" smiled Mr. Potter, after having ushered us into his room and seated us on comfortable chairs.

"Er...ah..." I glanced at Rita, but she was equally speechless. "Well, Sir..."

"Are you looking for something?" the Director looked indulgently down at us through his bifocals. "What is it? A treasure, perhaps?"

We started, gaping at each other. How could he know?

Mr. Potter laughed.

"In fact, your father told me, Miss Seebsagar. He rang me up a while ago to say you were coming. He said you were looking for information on a treasure. Well, what treasure are you looking for, friends? Not La Bouse's hoard, I hope?"
Rita and I looked at each other again. Then we both burst out laughing.

"In fact, Uncle, that is exactly what we are looking for," said I. "We are researching the story of that treasure."

"There are already quite a few people looking for the Bouse's treasure, girls. No one has found anything yet."

"Maybe we can obtain some information here on the story of that treasure?"

"Well, there is not much known about it, really. I can give you a few old clippings, some newspaper stories, a couple of books...that is all. There is no real documentary evidence of it, you see! No authentic account."

"Perhaps there is no treasure!" said Rita.

"Oh, no! I don't agree with that theory either, Miss...it is a fact that the pirate looted a Portuguese galleon. But where he hid all that wealth...that is another matter altogether. It could be on the Seychelles or Reunion or even Madagascar, for that matter. There are hundreds of islands here. It is all pure conjecture, if you ask me."

The Director gave us a few books, journals and some old newspaper clippings which contained references to the lost treasure. For the next hour or so Rita and I pored over these, but without learning much more than we already knew. Most of the references either just mentioned La Bouse's hidden treasure or talked of the incessant search that had been going on on the islands for the pirate's bounty.

"Wait a minute! Here is something..." said Rita. "This sounds interesting. Look here..."

Rita had chanced upon an old newspaper article. It was a longish write-up and rather detailed. According to the
story it told, the Portuguese galleon, 'La Vierge du Cap', had left India for home in April 1723. The great ship had been fitted out in the ports of Goa, then a Portuguese possession. It carried, in its specially designed interior, a huge amount of gold, silver, precious stones and valuable artefacts. Accompanying this vast hoard was the Archbishop of Goa, who was to deliver it personally to the royal vaults in Lisbon. On board the ship had also been a contingent of soldiers to protect the treasure.

As the ship entered the south latitudes, it was spotted by two pirate vessels. One belonged to an Englishman named Taylor. Aboard the other was Oliver Le Vasseur, better known as La Bouse—'the Vulture'.

Threatened by a cyclone, the Captain of the Portuguese ship then took, what was later to prove, a fatal decision. To outrun the cyclone, he decided to decrease weight by throwing overboard all his cannon.

He did manage to guide his vessel safely to the island of Reunion. But then tragedy struck. Sensing the opportunity and knowing that his quarry was without cannon, La Bouse swooped on the hapless Portuguese. He and his men escaped with the magnificent treasure, leaving behind many dead and dying, and an outraged Catholic world.

When the French Navy finally captured La Bouse, in 1730, he was brought to Reunion. According to popular legend, continued the article, Le Vasseur did not divulge the location of his booty, despite terrible torture. But, as the condemned man mounted the gallows, he threw into the crowd a chart, shouting, "Find my treasure, he who can!"

Since then, scores of people from all over the world have
scoured these islands—some with maps, others only guided by tales—looking for the buried wealth.

"Remarkable!" sighed Rita. "Wonder where he hid it?"

"Wait!" I said. "There is more information here. It gives some kind of a list of the treasures the 'du Cap' was carrying...here...look at this...Fiery Cross...the sacred Fiery Cross of Goa...Did you see that? The Fiery Cross of Goa...an oversized cross of gold, studded with jewels...wow!"

"That must have been something!" agreed Rita. "It probably weighed kilos!...All that gold and gems!"

"Hmm...where do you think La Bouse hid such a beautiful thing? In a cave? Inside a tree...?"

"Would I be here, if I had known?" pouted Rita.

We both laughed.

We thanked the Director profusely and left the archives considerably better informed about the pirate's treasure, but still no nearer finding it.

Albert was waiting in the car, as patient as one of the giant tortoises that saunter around the Seychelles.

"Did you find the gold, mademoiselles?" he raised an eyebrow.

"Humph!" I snorted, trying to guage whether he was being sarcastic. But the Creole's face showed no expression. For once, he was gazing intently at the road ahead.

* * *

"Papa, have you heard of the sacred Fiery Cross of Goa?"

"Now, what on earth is that, dear?" He looked curiously at me. "The cross...of Goa? No, no! I don't think I have
heard anything of the sort? What are you trying to tell me anyway?"

"La Bouse's treasure, Papa. The sacred cross was part of the wealth the pirate stole."

"Well? What of it?"

"After all, Papa...I was thinking...if that wealth was taken by the Portuguese from Goa...doesn't it belong to us? To India?"

"Well...er..." Papa looked stumped by that one.

"Think of it, Papa! After all, it was taken from our country by the Portuguese, forcibly! Don't we have a right over it?"

"You have a point there, child. But what of it? It is all lost, anyway. Of what use is a missing treasure? To India or to anyone else?"

"Suppose it is found, Papa? What then?"

"Found?" Papa waved a hand, dismissing the possibility. "Ah! That is not likely. It has not been found all these years by expert treasure hunters or even by the Government of this place. It is not likely that it will ever be found!"

"But...think of it, Papa. Suppose it is," I insisted. "Wouldn't it be wonderful for us...er, for India?"

"What is the use of building castles like that, little one? That pirate...who was he...Le Vasseur...he knew what he was about, certainly, when he hid his booty!"

"But Papa, he is supposed to have thrown a clue, some kind of a map, into the crowd that came to watch him be hanged. Somebody must have that chart, the clues!"

"All that happened over two centuries ago," shrugged Papa. "God knows what has happened to his treasure and the clues!"
"Maybe it can be found, Papa!"

"Oh, no!" He waved a warning finger, "This is no game for little girls, my dear. Leave it to the experts. Treasure hunting is dangerous business!"

But something happened the following morning, that took my mind off the lost treasure, for a while at least.

**Bid for power**

We were at breakfast when the firing started. At first it sounded like firecrackers bursting.

"What is that, Papa?" I asked, sipping distractedly at my *jus de fruit*. "What are they celebrating out there on the street?"

"God knows!" Papa did not even look up from his paper. "Today is the holy festival of The Immaculate Conception. But I didn't know they would celebrate such a solemn occasion with firecrackers!"

He shrugged and went back to reading *The Nation*, the Government of Seychelles's mouthpiece.

But the noise did not stop. It continued intermittently, for a while. Then came a couple of loud expolsions which almost shook our bungalow.

"I say, what was that?" Papa sat up, casting aside his newspaper.

"I tell you, there is something going on outside," said Mother. "Something is wrong. I know it!"

"I will find out," I said, jumping to my feet. But I had barely reached the verandah of our house when a figure
bumped into me, sending me sprawling on the floor.

"Hey, look out!" I cried, bewildered, picking myself up.

"Who...?"

It was Albert and he was excited.

"So sorry, mademoiselle," he apologized, helping me up.

"But don't you go out there!"

The whites of his eyes showed, his breath coming in short, agonized gasps, as if from great exertion.

"What is up, Albert? What are you doing here at this hour?" Papa was at our side, Mother following.

That day, being an official holiday in the Seychelles, Albert was not expected at our place in the morning.

"Bonjour, Sir!" replied Albert. "Let us go into the house! Let no one step outside. It is too dangerous!"

"Come on, Albert!" snapped Papa. "Will you tell us something? What are you talking about? What is going on out there?"

"Trouble, Sir, big trouble!" gasped the still-breathless Creole, as we trooped into the living room.

"What is that noise, Albert? We thought they were firecrackers!" Even as I said that, some more explosions sounded. They seemed much closer now.

"Firecrackers?" Albert rolled his eyes, "No, little girl! That is fighting going on out there! The streets are full of corpses!"

"What?" Papa caught him by the shoulder. "Corpses? What is the fighting about, Albert?"

"Yes, who is fighting whom?"

"Oh dear!" wailed Mother. "What is going to happen now? Why did we have to come to such a place?"
"Relax, Aarti's mother!" said Papa. "This has nothing to do with us. We are strangers, foreigners. Let us wait and see.

"Maybe it is a coup!" I suggested, remembering all that I had heard and read about such political upheavals in distant nations. But here it was, happening right at our doorstep. How exciting! If only Rita had been here! I couldn't wait to talk to her.

"The mademoiselle is right, Sir," Albert nodded. "It looks like a coup d'etat! Some people...many people are not happy with the Government..."

"But that is normal," said Papa. "Why a coup, then? I am sure you know more than you are letting on, Albert."

"It is dangerous to talk, Sir," replied our chauffeur shaking his head. "There are spies everywhere! One has to be very careful, these days."

"Why? Are you too involved?"

"Who, me? No! God forbid!"

"What will happen now, Papa? Are we in danger?" I asked anxiously.

"Please don't worry, little mademoiselle," reassured Albert, patting my head. "No harm will come to you. This is only a quarrel between the President and his enemies. It has been simmering or some time now."

"Nothing uncommon in the Seychelles, eh?" mused Papa. "From what I know, there have been several such incidents here since President Rene took over?"

"That is so, Sir. There have been a few attempts to topple the Government. But they have all failed!"

"You think this one will succeed?" asked Papa, watching
Albert closely, trying to gather as much information as possible.

"Difficult to say, Sir! The Government has a lot of money. And Rene's spies are in every corner of the island. They watch and report everything that goes on here. Still," he shrugged, "let us see!"

"If I remember, President Rene himself came to power through a coup d'etat, some years ago?"

"You are right, Sir. That he did. But that was different. There was no bloodshed then. Nothing much anyway. James Mancham was away at a conference in London when it happened. Anyway, there is no love lost now, between Mancham's Democrats and Rene's goons. They were friends once upon a time, mind you!"

"That is common in politics," nodded Papa. "Friends today are rivals tomorrow. It happens all the time!"

"Who will win this time, Albert?" I questioned, anxiously.

"Don't worry your little head about these matters, dear," Albert patted my head. "Leave that to the fighters. Let the Government and its enemies sort it out. We must stay indoors, all of us, until it is over."

"What about your family, Albert?" asked Mother anxiously. "Are they safe?"

"Yes, yes, thank you, madame! Anyway, Jeannie is used to this kind of thing."

"How awful!" Mother clapped her hands to her ears, "Listen to that racket! There must be people dying outside!"

"Nothing we can do about that," shrugged Papa. "Albert is right. We had all better stay indoors today. Did you hear that, Aarti? Don't you try sneaking out of the house!"
"No way, Papa! I don't want to get shot!" I said vehemently, resolving to stay indoors.

We spent the whole day listening to broadcasts on Radio Seychelles. It was noon when the news actually came on the air that there was some kind of disturbance in the capital city. An attempt to take over the radio and TV stations had failed, came the announcement. But there was no formal acknowledgement by the Government that it was a coup attempt.

Finally, the President came on television in the evening. President Rene, a handsome man, talked calmly, notwithstanding what must have been a very real threat to his life and government.

The Government was totally in control of the situation said the President. There was no need to panic. The trouble-makers had beaten a retreat and were being rounded up by Government troops. He had no doubt that this attempt to oust him was funded by certain foreign powers. But, as always, it was doomed to failure, because the people of the Seychelles were with him, with the Party. The people must remember and be ever-vigilant against the designs of the reactionaries, thundered the President.

"He hunts his enemies and destroys them ruthlessly!" scowled Albert. "In Europe, here, everywhere, his spies are spread all over the world!"

"Ah, perhaps you cannot blame him," smiled Papa, "when you consider all the attempts that have been made to
overthrow this Government! After all, survival is the first necessity of politics and politicians!"

A cryptogram!

Only a few days later were we permitted to attend school again.
By then all was normal, on the surface at least. Life went on as usual in the capita).
"Well, what did you find out about the treasure? Did your father tell you anything?"
Rita's question came as quite a shock. I had very nearly forgotten about the Goan gold and the Fiery Cross, the missing hoard of Le Vasseur—La Bouse—in all the excitement of the past days.
"Not really, Rita. In fact, they are all sceptical. They think it is a big joke. Papa and Mother and all...no one seems to realise what a big find this would be...!"
"If it can be found!"
"Naturally."
"I have an idea!" breathed my friend.
"Out with it, then! What are you waiting for?" I urged impatiently. "We must check every little clue, every lead."
"We could ask that man," said Rita, "the treasure hunter."
"Who? Watkins?" I considered for a moment, "Hey, we ought to have thought of that earlier! Sounds like a good idea...but..."
"But what, Aarti? What is the harm in talking to the man at least? He didn't look like a bad sort to me..."
"That is not the point, dummy!" snapped I. "The difficulty is, how on earth do we get to him? We can't very well go looking for a crazy, old treasure-hunter, all by ourselves! If our folks were to find out..."

"You have a point," agreed Rita. "Hmmm...let me think...Hey! I have another idea! Let us ask Albert to take us there again—to that place where Watkins is staying. Maybe he won't mind doing it once."

"Well, we can ask him anyway."

Albert, when we put the proposition to him, hemmed and hawed, citing my father's anger and possible loss of employment as reasons for not undertaking any such venture. Under the combined assault of two eager teenagers though, he finally relented.

"Well then, mademoiselles," sighed the poor man when all his arguments had failed, "if that is how you want it. But remember, we must go to Anse Aux Pins and return quickly, without anyone knowing!"

"Mum is the word!"

The following afternoon found us at Anse Aux Pins. The proprietress of the 'La Retraite' was glad to see us again.

"Welcome, Monsieur Albert," she smiled expansively, "and you too, mademoiselles. It is good to have you here again."

"You are too kind, madame," Albert bowed gallantly.

"But what brings you here, friends?" A guarded look had come into the woman's eyes.

"Well, ...er," Albert glanced quickly at us, "we thought we would check up on Watkins, see how he is doing!"

"How kind of you to think of him!" Madame Duvall was
all smiles. "Poor Ray! He is still not quite well. But he will be happy to see you. It will do him good, I am sure...come in!"

She was apologetic then. "I have to be careful, you see? There is not a few that come and bother that poor man about that treasure of his. And he gets into arguments about it all the time. Does him no good at all!"

"Well...we shan't bother him, madame," assured Albert, not meeting her eyes.

Madame Duvall turned and strode into the house. We trooped along behind her, exchanging glances.

"You sit down here," said the proprietress, guiding us to a cosy looking parlour. "I will send Ray in. I make sure he spends most of the day in bed, you see. He needs the rest. Poor fellow is worried and has worked himself almost to death all these years."

Ray Watkins, shaved and dressed, looked very different from the miserable wretch that we had rescued on the streets of Takamaka. Although wasted by time and labour, the lean features were still handsome.

Watkins smiled when he saw us.

"Ah! There you are, friends! What is up, hey?"

"Hello, Mr. Watkins!" said I. "We thought we would look you up, see how you were doing after your illness."

"Sweet of you to come, chums," he chuckled. "But hey! Ray Watkins is not going out so soon! No way!"

"Naturally!" said Albert. "You must find that treasure, after all the years you have put into it! If anyone deserves to find it, you do, Watkins."

"The treasure! Ah, well..." Watkins lowered himself into
a sofa. He was silent for a while. We refrained from speaking too. Perhaps the veteran treasure hunter was debating whether to open up to us. Then he shrugged.

"The treasure...well..." There was a trace, only a trace—but noticeable nevertheless—of dejection in his words, "It has beaten me all these years. Made a fool out of me. They think I am crazy, out there in the town looking for a treasure that is not there!"

"We don't, Mr. Watkins," I blurted out on an impulse. "We don't think you...you are crazy...or anything of the sort."

"Yes, Mr. Watkins, we believe you," Rita added.

"You are in a minority, then," said the prospector wryly.

"Not many on these islands believe in it anymore."

"Don't you worry about what people say," Rita said. "The heartless world has always ridiculed great men, great minds!"

"Oh, no! I am nothing of the sort," Watkins wagged his head. "I am just a persevering old Englishman trying to prove a theory, a legend, right."

Madame Duvall bustled in at that moment, carrying a tray laden with steaming cups of coffee.

"Hey, you are not worrying yourself about that treasure again, are you, Ray?" She gazed anxiously at her charge handing us our cups meanwhile. Then she smiled at us, "He gets unnecessarily worked up about it, you understand. Well, I try to do the best I can with him. But he is not easy to manage, you may be sure."

Ray Watkins said nothing, but smiled warmly back at the woman.

We wondered at the strange bond between these two. She, a Frenchwoman, a widow with no children, and he, an
Englishman, whose all-consuming passion in life was the

treasure of Oliver Le Vasseur.

No one spoke again, until *Madame* Duvall had gone out

of the room. When she had marched out, I looked up at

Watkins again,

"Mr. Watkins...er...what is so difficult about this treasure,

then? Why hasn't it been found?"

" 'Ray' for my friends," smiled Watkins, "just call me

Ray. Well, as to that...it is just a matter of solving the riddle,

that is all. I daresay the treasure is there, waiting for whoever

can crack the Bouse's puzzle."

"What is that puzzle, Ray?" I probed. "What are the

clues?"

"You really want to know?" Watkins looked at us

thoughtfully for a moment. "Well, I suppose it can't do any

harm, telling you. No danger of anyone getting through that

riddle so fast. Wait a minute..."

Watkins dipped into the lining of a leather vest that he

wore under his jacket. His fingers came up holding a

yellowing, tattered bit of paper.

"Here you are!" announced Watkins, opening the rolled

up scrap and spreading it out on the table before us. I touched

the paper, almost afraid it would crumble at the touch. But

it felt more like soft leather.

On the yellowed square were drawn some figures. Beneath

the figures were some sentences written in a language none

of us could understand.

"What does it say?" Rita spoke for all of us. "And what

do those strange figures mean?"

"Isn't there a map?" I put in, noticing that there was no
real picture or map giving directions. All treasure clues were supposed to have maps. Or so I had presumed.

"No, there is no map!" said Watkins sombrely. "This is all there is to it. Call it what you will. But the clues are all in here. For the right eye and the sharp mind!"

"But what language is this? Greek? Latin?"

"This is Greek, my friend," nodded Ray, his fingers hovering over, but not touching the strange alphabets and numerals that showed on the yellowed parchment.

"What does it say, Watkins?" urged Albert. "There is not much to it. Only a couple of lines. Ought to be easy to decipher."

"I wouldn't still be looking for the treasure, if it had been," snapped Watkins.

"Please read the clue, Ray! Can you read Greek?"

"I can now. I learnt Greek, only to solve the Bouse's riddle. For all his violence Le Vasseur was a learned man, you see! He knew Latin, some of the sciences..."

"No ordinary buccaneer that, eh?" interrupted Albert. "Far from it! Oliver Le Vasseur was no ordinary man..."

"The clue, Ray!" said I. "You were reading it out!"

"Ah, yes! That I was. Well, it says here...'He that undertakes the twelve labours and succeeds, let him seek the eldest of the three sisters, and when the sun is in Cancer, she will lead him to my treasure'."

"The twelve labours?" exclaimed I. "What are those?"

"The twelve labours of Hercules!" said Watkins. "Don't you know about those...well, they went something like this...the slaying of the Nemean lion, the slaying of the nine-headed Hydra, the capture of the Hind of Arcadia and
the wild boar of Mt. Erymanthus, the cleaning of the Augean stables in a single day, the killing of the man-eating birds, the capture of the mad bull of Crete and the man-eating mares of King Diomedes, taking the girdle of the Hippolyte, queen of the Amazons, seizing the three-bodied giant Geryon, the return of the Apples of the Hesperides, and fetching up, from the nether worlds, the three-headed dog Cerberus, guardian of the gates of Hell..."

"But...that is all mythology, Ray! It can't really have anything to do with Le Vasseur's treasure...?"

"Quite!" agreed Watkins. "That clue is probably only allegorical. Anyway, I have been through the twelve labours...at least, what I think he meant by those labours..."

"And what of the 'three sisters'?" asked Albert. "Who were they? Did you find them?"

"La Bouse wrote those lines more than two centuries ago," said Watkins. "The 'three sisters' are obviously long dead and gone!"

"What of the 'sun in Cancer'?" I wondered. "That is obviously an astrological lead...could you crack that?"

"There lies the catch!" frowned Watkins. "I first thought it might refer to a particular time of the year. But that didn't work out. Then I found some markings at Bel Ombre that resembled the sun and crab...Cancer...but no treasure!"

"It is not so simple as it sounds, then," sighed Rita. "No wonder the treasure has not been found all these years! Perhaps he didn't hide it here at all...on the Seychelles...what makes you certain that La Bouse stashed his loot away on one of our islands?"

"It is very likely," analysed Watkins. "La Bouse spent
most of his buccaneering days in the Indian Ocean. And the only refuges for pirates then were the islands of Madagascar, Reunion and the Seychelles group."

"What about Madagascar and Reunion Island then? Has anyone looked there?"

"Madagascar was too well populated already," explained Watkins. "It is not likely La Bouse would have hidden anything there, where someone might stumble on to it..."

"How about Reunion then?" I interjected.

"People have looked there," continued Watkins, "but it is only a remote possibility. After all, that was where he got his loot, when the Portuguese galleon was anchored off a bay in Reunion. Would he hide it right there...that would have been too great a risk!"

"But Le Vasseur did come back to Reunion later, didn't he?" I remembered some of the pirate's history I had read at the archives.

"Only to be hanged! The French captured the Bouse and brought him to Reunion, to be hanged in public. As he walked up to the gallows, goes the tale, our pirate chucked a scrap of paper into the crowd and shouted, 'Find my treasure, he who can!'"

"Suppose there really is no treasure?" suggested Rita, dejectedly.

"A dying man wouldn't lie about a thing like that, girl," said Watkins. "Besides, what happened to all that wealth, then? It is not likely he spent it all. There was not much the pirates could spend on in those days, anyway! You have to take that into account!"

"Ray is right," I agreed. "There is a treasure! And in that
treasure is the sacred Fiery Cross of Goa! We must find it!"

"So you know about that too, do you?"

"Yes," I nodded.

"But without those girls...'the three sisters'...we are not getting anywhere, eh?" interrupted Albert. "Got to find them first."

"That is impossible, Albert! They are long dead, even if they had actually existed at the time that La Bouse buried the treasure."

"How did you find this map...er...these clues anyway, Ray?" wondered Rita. And she had a point.

"I got this cryptogram off a Norwegian sailor," replied Watkins. "Forty years ago that was! He was the skipper of a whaler. Fellow was penniless...wanted to trade this scrap of paper for a few hundred pounds. So I bought it off him?"

"But where did he get it?"

"Said he had been given the cryptogram by an old...a widow...in the Seychelles, when he called here on one of his voyages. He knew it had to do with some treasure. But he wasn't smart enough or keen enough, to try and go after it. So he sold it to me!"

"What happened to that widow? Where is she now? Was she one of the 'three sisters'?"

"I have tried that angle already," Watkins shrugged. "Could find no one of that description alive on the island when I came here first. Nobody had heard about anyone who could have fitted the Norwegian's description. I started to look for the treasure, anyway. I thought perhaps if I went through the twelve labours... well, it has not worked, as you see...I am where I started, forty years gone!"
As he finished, Watkins's shoulders sagged, his head drooped, in consciousness of defeat. My heart went out to the brave man.

"No, Ray!" I said, emphatically. "We are not licked yet! All your years of struggle...they cannot go waste. Let us give it another try! Maybe we will find it after all!"

"You think so?" Watkins looked at us, a flicker of hope kindling in his eyes again. "You really think...but, where do we go from here? I have done everything I thought this cryptogram wanted me to do! Yet I have not been successful. What..."

"Maybe it is something obvious, something right under your nose which you are overlooking!" suggested Rita.

"We are in this with you, Ray," I said, taking Watkins's hand and shaking it. "You are not alone anymore!"

"I am obliged, friends," he smiled wanly. "But it could be dangerous. I ought not to get you children involved in an affair like this!"

"Oh, yes!" Albert clucked like a mother hen. "If your parents get to know about this, they will have my hide! Please, children, don't go getting yourself into any trouble! Leave this business to Watkins, here. Hunting pirates' treasure is no game for kids!"

"We are grown up enough," I snapped. "Besides, we shall see that you don't get blamed, Albert. Please, Albert, be a sport!"

"Well, okay," Albert nodded reluctantly. "But you can't get into something of this kind without your folks knowing. Besides, where are you going to look for the treasure, mademoiselles, and for how long?"
"That, dear Albert, is the million rupee question!"
"Perhaps we should try all the islands, one by one," I suggested.
"Are you crazy?" retorted Rita. "There are near about a hundred islands in the Seychelles archipelago. You would be an old woman before you finished digging up all of those!"
"Anybody got a better idea then?"
Obviously nobody had.
On that inconclusive note our meeting adjourned.

Breakthrough!

Our preoccupation with the treasure was interrupted by my visit to the beach in Beau Vallon, a couple of days later.
Rita and I had spent two days racking our brains over Le Vasseur's puzzle. Understandably, we got nowhere.
"You are not looking too well, child," Papa had said.
"The fresh sea breeze will do you good. I am told the beach at Beau Vallon is an excellent place."
"Yes, yes, so I have heard, too!" Mother agreed happily.
"It is the most popular beach on the Seychelles. We have been here two months already without visiting a beach!"
"I am not too keen on beaches, Mother!" I protested. "I would rather stay back home, or go and meet Rita!"
"No way!" asserted Papa. "To the beach it is. All work and no play is making my little girl dull and unhappy. We are all going to the beach. It will do you good, I am sure."
Reluctantly, I went.
The beach at Beau Vallon was everything it was made out to be. Being the most popular on Mahe, the place was crowded.

I left Papa and Mother chatting excitedly and found a quiet corner for myself. There I sat, chin resting on my knees, watching the breakers roll in and spend themselves in a cloud of spray against the distant coral reefs.

My thoughts drifted back to all the possibilities that Rita and I had discussed. Then I tried to shrug them off, to still my wandering mind, to let it luxuriate in the tranquillity of the beach.

It would soon be dusk. The sun travelled farther and farther down, its dying rays lighting up the edges of the mountains in the distance. That was Silhouette Island. Its granite mountains, eerie and mysterious, rose towering up from the sea. It was obvious why the island had got its name. The looming profile of the island was etched against the darkening sky.

On one side, I could hear Papa and Mother still chatting animatedly. If they noticed my abstraction, they did not bother me about it.

"What are you watching, Aarti?" Mother's voice drifted up to me. I did not turn around.

"Are you watching the sunset? Beautiful...isn't it?" I heard Papa exclaim.

"How do you like Silhouette Island, dear? Against the setting sun...lovely..." Mother continued, "Those peaks...how grand they look...like three sisters..."

I nodded, only half-attentive.

"Now, now...Aarti's mother...three sisters? How poetic! I
haven't seen this facet of yours in all these years," teased Papa.

"Yes, Mother. It is a wonderful view. Those peaks..."
Suddenly I straightened, sat bolt upright, "What was that you said, Mother...?"

"I was only saying," she laughed, "that those mountains...they resemble...three sisters, don't they?"

For a moment I sat rigid, my mind trying to register the import of what she was saying. Then I was on my feet, running towards them.

"You said it, Mother!" I shouted. "You did! You said it! I have solved it!"

My parents stared at me, startled and alarmed at my reaction.

"Eureka! I know it! I found it!" I ran around them in circles, fist punching the air, oblivious to the fact that my screams were attracting the other people on the beach.

"The three sisters! That is it! The three sisters!" Suddenly I rushed to Mother and hugged her. "You are great, Mother! Fabulous!"

"What is the matter, Aarti?" Papa said at last, trying to get over his shock at my strange behaviour. "What has happened? Is something the matter, child?"

"Of course, it is, Papa!" I was still shouting, not knowing whether to laugh or cry, so great was my joy. "Of course, it is! Mother has solved the riddle! The three sisters...that is it!"

"What are you talking about, girl?" Mother was still amazed at my excitement. "What did I say...?"

Then, as I realized that a curious crowd had collected to
watch my antics, I quietened down, collapsing on the sand at my parents' side.

"Let us go home, Papa!" I urged. "Let us get back!"

I could not wait to tell the others the startling news. Rita...Albert...Ray...the suddenness of the discovery was overwhelming.

It had been so obvious. Why had this not occurred to anyone before? Not even to poor Ray Watkins...forty years! The sheer simplicity of the clue had protected it from curious minds all these years. Even now, it was only a possibility...No! This was it, I was certain! I could feel it in my bones!

* * * *

At school, the following day, I pulled Rita aside at the first opportunity.

"What is it, Aarti?" she queried, noticing my excitement. "Has something happened?"

"You bet!" I lowered my voice to a whisper. "The clue, Rita...the clue to the missing treasure..."

"Yes, yes!" I had her interested now. "What of the treasure? Have you found something?"

"Not the treasure, silly! The clue...remember the 'three sisters'? That was what that cryptogram said, wasn't it...'He...no...let him seek the eldest of the three sisters, and...and when the sun is in Cancer...she will lead him to my treasure!' Wasn't that the clue?"

"Yes, yes!" Rita nodded excitedly. "So it was. Out with it, I am dying to hear the name!"
"Well..." I put on a mysterious air. "I found the 'three sisters'!"

"You did? Wonderful! Where...how did you find them?"

"On Beau Vallon beach, last evening..."

Quickly, as clearly and precisely as I could, I told Rita of the events of the previous evening, of my discovery at the beach. She was incredulous at first. Slowly, however, comprehension began to dawn, and she nodded.

"My God, Aarti! I can't believe it! To think...to think that we have had it there, under our noses, all these years..."

Albert was less credulous. He shook his head at first, when we let him in on the secret.

"You think no one would have noticed...no one would have found the cache all these years, if it had been there...on Silhouette?" he scowled. "I doubt it! The three sisters are most likely dead and gone; and the treasure with them!"

"Okay! Okay!" said I. "Take it easy, Albert. Wait until we hear what Ray has to say about this. He ought to know! Let him decide."

Even Ray Watkins, when we told him, was sceptical to begin with. Then he was silent for a while, lost in thought. But I saw the gradual change in his eyes, the growing certainty.

"Yes, my dear friend!" Ray stood up and gripped my shoulders, so tight that they hurt. I could almost feel his agitation. "This is it, friends. This is it! I am certain! There cannot be any doubt about it!"

"Oh, Ray!" I was delirious with joy. "I am so happy you think so!"

"But, Watkins," Albert was still doubtful, "Silhouette has
been searched already. Anyway, those mountains...the three sisters...sounds improbable!"

"But why?" demanded Watkins. "The three sisters are those three peaks, undoubtedly, and the highest, the eldest, no doubt is Mt. Dauban. As for searching Silhouette, there has been no organized search there so far, Albert. Just stray attempts, that is all!"

"The only way to find out is to go and look," I interrupted. "It is worth a try, anyway!"

"That it is," agreed Watkins, "that it is!"

"What of the 'sun'...and 'Cancer', then?" demanded Albert. "You haven't forgotten that bit of the Bouse's riddle, have you?"

"Certainly not," snapped Watkins. "Maybe we shall crack that one too, once we are on the island."

"Can we go along too, please?"

"No way!" snapped Albert. "That is impossible!"

"Yes, dear friend. This could be dangerous," Watkins was apologetic. "Besides, it might take weeks, even months. How can you stay away from home that long? It is not the same with me, you understand? I have no one, nothing...no other mission in life..."

"But, it is not fair, Ray!" I moaned. "After all, I cracked that puzzle...it is not fair!"

"Well..." Watkins shrugged, not knowing what to say. His dilemma was understandable.

"Wait a minute!" said Rita. "Maybe there is a way out! We could go to Silhouette Island after all. Only for a couple of days, perhaps...still, it is worth a shot!"

"Really? How is that, Rita?"
"Father keeps visiting Silhouette," explained Rita. "He makes a couple of trips a month, at least, to take supplies to the Island Lodge there. Maybe he will take us along, if he has not already made a trip this month..."

"Wonderful!" I clapped. "If only he would! But will he let us...let us go treasure hunting..."

"We will see about that," replied my chum. "Let me talk him into taking us there first."

"Yes," agreed Watkins. "We shall cross bridges when we come to them. The important thing is to get you there on the island!"

"Are you coming too, Albert?"

"Well...er..." Albert squirmed. "I don't know...I am not sure..."

"Of course you are coming, Albert," I decided the issue for him.

**Mysterious exit**

"What is it, Albert? Why so glum?"

Our chauffeur had been unnaturally quiet, even disconsolate, that morning. I wondered at his sudden taciturnity.

"There is some bad news, mademoiselle."

"Bad news, Albert? Why, what has happened?" I was alarmed. "I hope all is well with your family?"

"No...No...it is not the family! Jeannie and the children are fine, doing quite nicely, thank you! But...you remember Victor...?"
"Victor? Ah yes. Of course! Your friend...he is the proprietor of 'The Aldabra', isn't he? What happened to him, Albert?"

"He has gone, mademoiselle. Disappeared!"

'!Disappeared?' I was shocked. "But, how is that possible? A strong man like Victor? How could that happen...have you..."

"It was after the trouble started, mademoiselle...you remember?"

"You mean the shooting...the attempted coup?"

How could I forget those chilling three days, when the whole island had been in the grip of violence and fear. The shootings, the bombings, then the police searches, people being arrested and carried away...it was all too frightening for me to forget in such a hurry.

"Was Victor...is he..." I hesitated, afraid to give word to the awful thought.

"No...he is not dead," Albert shook his head with vehemence, "not as far as we know, at least. Well, anyway, his body was not among the corpses they got and they did not take him alive...he wouldn't have let them do that, I know for a certainty!"

"Then...what...where could he have gone?"

"That is the mystery, mademoiselle. He has vanished without trace. No one knows, or those who know are not talking...they are afraid!"

"Well, so long as the President's spies have not got him, he should be well, eh? Maybe he will turn up after things quieten down here?"

"Perhaps he will...at that..." Albert agreed. "But the police
are watching his place, day and night. 'The Aldabra' has been closed, ever since Victor disappeared."

"Let us pray for him, Albert," I tried to console the dejected Creole. "There is little else you or anyone else can do in these circumstances, is there?"

"Ah, you are right, mademoiselle," nodded my unhappy chauffeur and companion. "But he was a good friend. I miss him!"

"Have faith, Albert," I urged, "have faith in the Lord. Perhaps you will meet Victor soon!"

Our conversation was interrupted by Rita's arrival. She was excited.

"What is it, Rita? What is the news?"

"Good news, Aarti!" exulted my friend. "Daddy has agreed to take us to Silhouette Island. And he is to go there in a couple of days' time."

"Great! Things couldn't have worked out better. I will have to tell Papa and Mother now."

"Will they object?"

"Not if we are only visiting the island and if Uncle Seebsagar is taking us!" Then, as a sudden thought occurred to me, "Albert, remember, not a word to them about the treasure, right? Mother will raise hell, if she learns that is what we are going there for!"

"I shall not utter a word, mademoiselle," Albert said solemnly. "Cross my heart! On the contrary I shall offer to go along, so that the little mademoiselle keeps out of trouble!"

"Brilliant!" I exclaimed. "You are wonderful, Albert!"

"Let us inform Ray now," reminded Rita. "We shall have
to tell him, so that he can make preparations for our journey."

So, that evening, we drove up to the 'La Retraite'. Ray Watkins was waiting, impatient for news from us.

"Quiet!" Watkins put a cautioning finger to his lips. "Madame Duvall knows nothing of our plans yet. We had better be careful. If she learns what we are up to, she will not let me hear the last of it! The woman thinks I am still too feeble to stir out of here."

Fortunately, the formidable proprietress of the guest house did not interrupt our discussions.

"It is agreed, then, that we meet on the island?" Watkins looked at each one of us in turn. We nodded. "I shall leave immediately. I know poor Madame Duvall will be worried sick. But there is no other way!"

"We shall reach the island tomorrow or the day after," said I, "whenever Rita's father decides to go. But where do we meet?"

"Yes," said Rita, "we shall need to fix a rendezvous!"

"Okay!" nodded Watkins. "Albert, you know the tombs, the Arab tombs some way down South of Anse Lascars? That is the place! We will meet there. Wait for me, if I am not around when you arrive. Don't try looking for me, though. You might get lost!"

On that note we parted.

**Silhouette Island**

A day later, as we piled into Uncle Seebsagar's motor boat at the ferry pier at Victoria, I was tense with anticipation.
We should soon be on the island and then the real job would begin.

It was not without some difficulty that I was able to persuade Mother and Papa to let me go with Rita on Uncle Seebsagar's boat. But Albert's offering to go along and be my guardian angel had done the trick.

Although we knew that our search might take several days, we could carry no provisions or equipment. That would have let the cat out of the bag. We had, therefore, to trust Watkins's wisdom and foresight.

An hour and a half after leaving the jetty, we sighted the granite mountains of Silhouette in the distance. The closer we approached, the stronger was the air of mystery that enveloped the island. Tall and grey rose the three peaks, the 'three sisters' as we had identified them, more forbidding than inviting.

It took us another half-hour to reach the jetty at Anse la Passe. The place was not too crowded when we arrived, although we spotted several small boats and a few schooners at the jetty. There could not have been many tourists on the island, if this was any indication. Well, that was all to the good, as far as we were concerned.

"Here we are!" announced Rita's father, as we walked ashore. "You are now on Silhouette Island. Now, what would you like to do? I am going to be busy for a couple of hours, children. I am sure you wouldn't want to be bored with my business. Now, Albert, I shall leave you to show the children around. Take them to visit some of the tourist attractions here, while I am gone."

"Will do, monsieur," nodded Albert.
My mind was racing. We had to get away for a reasonably long period if we were to have any chance at all, of looking for that treasure. A couple of hours...? I was almost frantic.

"Oh, Father!" Rita pouted. "Can't we stay on for a day here? We would love to explore the place, now that we are here."

"Stay on?" Mr. Seebsagar raised a bushy eyebrow, "Oh, no! I have to get you back home, children, or your mothers will be really angry!"

"Be a sport, Father! Please!" Rita pleaded. "After all, we have never been here before. And this is such a beautiful place! Besides, you have lots of friends here, don't you? Couldn't you make arrangements for our stay?"

"Hmm..." Uncle Seebsagar seemed to vacillate and I knew the battle was won. He shrugged, "Well, okay, kids. But just for a day, remember! I shall be back tomorrow. Be ready to leave then. And Albert, you are responsible for the children, mind you!"

"Yes, Sir. Of course!" Albert nodded enthusiastically. And then, with a wink at us, "I shan't let these little ones out of my sight, Sir! That I swear!"

"The owner of the 'Island Lodge' is my friend. I have to give him most of these supplies. I will talk to him about your stay and board. Okay?"

"Oh, Father! You are wonderful!" Rita hugged and kissed her father.

"Easy, child, easy! That is quite all right. Come along now, all of you!"

Mr. Seebsagar's acquaintance at the 'Island Lodge' was only too glad to help. He welcomed us eagerly.
"They will be comfortable here, Mr. Seebsagar," he said. "Not to worry, there is not much to see on this island. But if they want to stay and watch the peaks here, well...that is fine!"

"Can we go and have a look around now, Father?" urged Rita when we had settled, or pretended to settle, into our rooms at the lodge. Watkins would be waiting.

"Okay, okay!" said Uncle Seebsagar, "I don't want you children getting in my way, anyway. Run along now."

Albert led the way to our rendezvous. He struck out in a southerly direction. We passed the mausoleum of the Dauban family. They had, according to Albert, once owned this island.

We continued on, past the small settlement of Anse Lascars. We had trudged only a few hundred metres beyond it when Albert threw up a hand, signalling a halt.

"Hold on there!" He shot a quick look around.

"Where are we, Albert?"

"This must be the place," said Rita. "Look at those structures. They look like some kind of tombs."

"You are right, mademoiselle," agreed Albert. "This, if I remember, is indeed the graveyard of the Moslems."

"The Arab tombs, you mean!" exclaimed I. "We are at the rendezvous then. But where is Ray?"

Indeed, there was no sign of the man. This place was eerie and desolate. Not a sound did we hear, not even the breeze from the ocean.

Something 'clinked' on the rock. We jumped as one, all of us turning to look. It was Watkins.

If we had not known that we were to meet Watkins there,
it would have been difficult recognizing him. The transformation from waif to adventurer was complete.

Dressed in khaki shorts and shirt, a large hat pulled low over his forehead, freshly shaven and groomed, the years seemed to have fallen off him. He looked fit. In Watkins's eyes, as he stepped nimbly over the stones scattered all over the Arab graveyard, was an extraordinary light.

"There you are!" called Watkins. "I have been ready and waiting for you for some time now. All set, everyone?"

"Aye aye, Sir!" I mocked a salute, "Privates Aarti and Rita reporting, Sir!"

"And Sergeant Albert!" added our worthy chaperon.

"Ah, good!" Watkins nodded his satisfaction. "That is exactly what I need for the task on hand. A disciplined band behind me. Come then, let us move!"

"Where to, Ray?" I could not help asking.

"Theirs not to reason why, theirs but to do and die!" bantered Rita.

"Right!" said Watkins, as he led us away from that unpleasant spot. "But I will tell you anyway. Listen!"

We gathered about Watkins, all ears.

"First," continued he, "we go south-west from here, until we get to Grande Barbe..."

"What is that?" I interrupted.

"The ghost village," said Watkins. "Grande Barbe is a deserted village! No one has been living there, for as far back as I can remember!"

"Sounds like an awful place," Rita scowled. "Do we have to go there?"

"Well, yes! This part of the island is crowded, you see?
You have tourists poking around most of the time, even in the hills on this side. There is always the chance that we will bump into someone. And we want to stay clear of curious cats, right?"

"Right!" All of us nodded.

"Well, at the village we rest and then strike northwards, towards the mountains. The chances of running into anyone on that side of the island are almost negligible. Mt. Dauban is almost due north, from the ghost village."

"Mt. Dauban? What is that?"

"Remember the 'three sisters'? What did Vasseur's clue say—'let him seek the eldest of the three sisters'..."

"Oh, yes, I get it!" I remembered now. Mt. Dauban was the highest of the three peaks on Silhouette Island. Or, as the pirate had put it, the 'eldest of the three sisters'.

"Let us hope that is what he meant!" moaned Albert.

"Oh, Albert, don't sound sceptical so soon!" I chided.

"We have only just begun. Think of what lies ahead!"

"That is what frightens me, mademoiselle," the Creole retorted.

"Well, you are in it now, up to the neck! And no way can you go back without us, is there?"

"That is the pity of it! Monsieur Sahai will skin me alive if anything happens to you girls!"

"Relax, Albert!" Watkins put a hand on the Creole's shoulder. "I know my way around. And I have been in this business for almost forty years, remember? I know what I am doing!"

"I hope so!" Albert's eyes sent up a silent prayer.
The ghost village

The deserted village of Grande Barbe was, if anything, even more weird than Watkins had described it to be. A few old, dilapidated houses on the verge of collapse, were all that was left of what must once have been a living, if not a thriving, settlement.

To add to the ghostly air, a breeze whistled through the now desolate street. Hinges creaked in the wind. Something crashed, making us all jump. Probably a wall or a roof falling, contributing to the decay of the village. Not even a mongrel howled in that settlement. It was, to all appearances, as dead as could be.

The jungle, the rain-fed vegetation of the island, creeping inexorably up and engulfing walls was all that lived in this uncanny place.

"Do we have to stay here long?" Rita echoed everyone's apprehensions. "What an awful place!"

"No," said Watkins. "But we shall need all the rest we can get before we tackle the mountains tomorrow."

"But there is nothing here!" protested Albert. "How do we..."

"Not to worry! I have provisions and everything else that we will need."

"What happened to this place?" I wondered. "Where did all the people go?"

"They were probably pirates!" ventured Rita. "They must have left the place to attack some ship and never returned to their homes here!"

"But where do we stay, if we are going to spend the night
here?" queried Rita. "Not in any of these tumbledown cottages, eh?"

"As matter of fact, yes!" said Watkins. "I have scouted around a bit, and selected one that will do. The place is not too far gone, yet."

But Watkins's find was only relatively acceptable. The roof of the house, which must have been a pleasant little cottage once, had not yet caved in. The door was still on its hinges, and could be shut and latched. The windows had fallen off their frames but that hardly mattered. We had, so to speak, a roof over our heads for the night. Besides, the interior of the cottage was not yet overgrown with grass or creepers.

"This place gives me the creeps!" said Albert as we tried to put the place into some semblance of order.

"Amen to that!" I said. "But we should be out of here soon, if that is any consolation."

It had been late afternoon when we left Rita's father at the 'Island Lodge' and started on our adventure. It was now almost night.

"I have food for all of us," announced Watkins. But none of us had too good an appetite that night, what with the unpleasantness of our abode and nervous anticipation of what the morrow might bring.

"One of us ought to stand guard while the rest sleep," suggested Albert. "You and I could take turns, Watkins. Let the girls sleep."

"No way!" I snapped. "We are not babies. Everything has to be shared, fair and square!"

"There is no need for anyone to stay awake," said Watkins,
dismissing the suggestion. "Not likely that anyone will disturb us, or come looking for us here. This place has a pretty mean reputation, see? That is an advantage!"

"Nevertheless, I am staying up!" proclaimed Albert. "I could never sleep here. This place gives me the shivers!"

"Suit yourself!" smiled Watkins, as we prepared our impromptu mattresses for the night.

We sat chatting for the next hour or so. Sleeping in this ghost village was going to be no easy job, I realised.

Sudden, loud snores punctuated our conversation.

"It is Albert!" exclaimed Rita. "Look! He is fast asleep."

"So much for burning the midnight oil!" quipped Watkins. And so, on that droll note, we slept.

**Reunion**

Suddenly, I was awake. It was still dark outside. That much I gathered from the pitch black square that formed the windows of the house. No sound, save the shrill noise of insects, interrupted the night.

What had awakened me? Had it been a sound?

Nothing. I shrugged and was about to turn in again, when I heard it—the sound of feet.

Yes. It was the soft tramping of the feet that had broken the silence. I could hear the sound fairly distinctly now, at regular intervals.

There was someone outside. And he, or they, were on the move. But who would be walking through a ghost village at this time of night?
Watkins had said that no one was likely to follow us here. I glanced at the sleeping treasure hunter, debating momentarily, whether to wake him. No, let him rest.

Rita stirred restlessly.

The sound was not quite audible. It was not one man, but several, walking out there, I concluded. I had to find out who they were.

"Rita!" I shook her gently. My friend moaned softly.

"Wake up, Rita!" I whispered. "Rita! Here...It is me, Aarti..."

"What...what is it?" She sat up, rubbing her sleep drugged eyes. "What is the matter, Aarti? Is it morning already?"

"Shhh!" I put a finger to my lips. "Softly, girl! No, it is still dark outside. Listen, can't you hear noises outside?"

"Noises?" She was now wide awake. She listened for an instant and nodded, "Yes, you are right, Aarti. But...who could it be at this hour? And in this place?"

"We shall have to find out, Rita," said I, hoarsely. "Let us take a look. Come on! But be careful...not a sound! Let us not wake these two sleeping beauties!"

"There, that window! You take that one. I will look here."

We crept silently to our respective windows, and peered outside. It was almost pitch dark on the street. I could see nothing moving.

My eyes strained, trying to pierce the blanket of the night. Then I saw them. Shadowy forms moving in the darkness.

"Rita!" I beckoned to her. "Quick! Over here!"

She was at my side in an instant, and looking over my shoulder.

"Who are they? Who are these people?"
"Shhh! Not so loud. We don't want them to see us!"
Suddenly, a match flared. We started, taken aback by the sudden illumination.
"I can see them!" In the brief, flickering light of the match, I could see two forms. There were two men and they were talking softly. Both carried weapons. This much I gathered before the match sputtered out.
"They are armed!" said I, turning to Rita.
"Perhaps they are soldiers."
"Soldiers? But what would they be doing on this island and in a place like this? There is nothing to fight or guard here. No one!"
"Unless they are hiding!"
"Hiding..." I stopped in mid-sentence as a sudden, startling thought struck me. "Wait a minute...are they...they could be running from the army...the police..."
"Yes, yes!" Rita nodded. "That could be it! If they are hiding from someone...the Government maybe...they could be dangerous."
"I say, we had better wake Ray. He will know what to do."
"What are you girls talking about?" We jumped. It was Watkins's voice. He was sitting up, gazing at us, "Why are you girls up at this time of the night? Anything happen?"
"Yes, Ray," I whispered. "There are people outside. You said this is a deserted village. And that no one would follow us here! But we just heard voices out there in the street, and saw somebody."
"They were carrying weapons too," Rita added.
"Weapons, eh?" Ray was at the window in a flash, trying
to peer into the night. But the sounds had died out. There was no one there now.

"They have gone, Ray. Looks like they are not out there any more!"

"I can't see or hear a soul,\" breathed the Englishman. "Who could they have been?"

"Treasure hunters, perhaps!\" ventured Rita. "Maybe they are looking for the Bouse's treasure too, like us!"

"That is a possibility,\" I agreed.

"Not likely,\" Watkins shook his head, his brow furrowed in thought. "I wonder...no, it is unlikely that anyone else is looking for the treasure, here on Silhouette. In fact, after my unsuccessful forty years' digging at Bel Ombre, most people have lost their stomach for any more effort. Folks are beginning to doubt that story...about the Portuguese hoard!"

"Is that so? In that case...who could those people have been?"

"Maybe Albert knows,\" suggested Rita.

"Who speaks of Albert?\" Our guardian was sitting up, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes.

"Ah, Albert! So you are awake at last!"

"You were going to stay up all night, Albert,\" I reminded.

"Oh?\" he growled. "There is no one here and nothing to watch out for. Why waste time looking out for ghosts, I thought, and turned in!"

"That is just what we were talking about, Albert,\" said Watkins. "These girls heard someone out there. They saw the men too."

"Saw somebody!\" Albert sat bolt upright, wide awake now. "But that is quite impossible! You know it, Watkins."
This village was abandoned years ago. No one lives here!"
"So what? What if someone is looking for the treasure, like we are?"
We were enjoying Albert's consternation.
"Well..."
The door burst open. We turned, all as one. For an instant none of us could move, so paralysed were we by the shock of that sudden interruption.
Watkins was the first to recover. He tried to get up.
"Freeze, buster! Don't move!"
The barked command came from one of the two men who had stepped into the room. Both carried automatic rifles. The weapons were pointed unwaveringly at us.
In the faint, unsteady light of the lantern that Watkins had lighted for the night, we could not see them clearly.
"Hands over your heads and don't make a false move!"
The taller of the two was speaking. He was broad, very broad—almost a giant. Their faces were quite indistinct in the eerie light.
Then, momentarily, as the lantern flared, stirred by a faint breeze, the other man's face was thrown into relief. A terrible gash ran down the fellow's right cheek, from brow almost to his chin.
"What is this?" Watkins managed to speak at last. "Who are you chaps? And what do you want with us?"
"Yes...we are not doing anyone any..."
As Albert spoke, the giant turned to face him. And then his jaw, clothed in a heavy beard, fell open in astonishment.
"Albert!"
The exclamation seemed to galvanize Albert into motion.
He was on his feet instantly trying to make out the other man's features. He could barely see who it was.

"Who...who are you...?"

"Albert!" the gruff voice repeated, "it is me...Victor!"

Victor! Then memory came rushing back. Of course, I had been wondering at the vaguely familiar features, and that voice—Victor! the proprietor of 'The Aldabra'. But what was he doing here...

"The devil!" ejaculated Albert, losing his fear of the rifles. He was grabbing the man's shirt, trying to recognize the face, quite unable to believe this vision.

"Victor! You here? I can't believe it!"

"It is me, Albert!" Victor had one hand on his friend's shoulder.

"What are you doing here, Victor? And in these clothes?"

"Ah, well..." Victor looked down at his battle fatigues. "You know why we are here, friend. After the fighting..."

"Oh, yes, the coup! The coup!" Albert nodded energetically. "So this is where you are holed up! I was worried for your safety, Victor. Thought maybe the police..."

"No chance of that, Albert," snapped the other. "They will never take me alive, I can promise you that! You see this rifle here? I have got at least a dozen of those perishers with this..."

"But you are in terrible danger, friend! They are looking for you...the President's secret police..."

"Let them look! We will give them what they deserve if they happen to come here!"

"But..."

"I say, Albert," Victor was staring at us, "what are these
children doing here? Aren't you the ones that I met at 'The Aldabra'?


"Of course, I do," replied the innkeeper-turned-rebel. "But what are you doing here on this island, and in this God-forsaken village? What have you brought them here for, Albert?"

"Well..." Albert squirmed, glancing from one to the other of us, "as a matter of fact, it was they who brought me here, Victor. Looking for treasure..."

"Treasure?" Victor looked incredulous.

"Yes...La Bouse's lost treasure!"

"Oh, that?" Victor guffawed. "But that is lost, isn't it? Who was that Englishman...Wilkins...was it...who has been hunting for it these past forty years..."


"Hey! You are here too, are you? On this wild-goose chase? Haven't you had enough of treasure-hunting..."

"I have spent all my life on these islands, trying to discover Le Vasseur's secret," said Watkins, his jaw set.

"And you will die trying, eh?" Victor's companion, the man with the scar, spoke for the first time.

"Shut up, Mike!" growled Victor. "There is no need to talk like that! We are all friends, here!"

"Aw, Victor!" protested the man called Mike. "I was just kidding!"

"This, here, is Mike," introduced Victor. "Mad Mike they call him..."
"Where are the rest of your men, Victor?" wondered Albert, suddenly. "You are not just the two of you on this island, are you?"

"My men are around," replied Victor. "Just keeping out of sight, that is all. We are not taking any chances! We were passing by, thought there was a light in here and heard voices. Fancy meeting you lot on Silhouette!"

"Won't you join us, Victor?" invited Watkins. "You could help us track that treasure down. What about it?"

"No way!" Victor chuckled. "That is not my job, folks! You can have all that gold!"

"Hey, Victor," said his companion, Mad Mike, "maybe we should go along with that. It is better than rotting here on this lousy island, doing nothing, hiding for God knows how long!"

"Shut up, Mike!" Victor scowled. "Don't talk that way again, if you value your hide! I don't want any of my men getting funny ideas into their heads, right?"

"Easy, Victor, easy!" said the other hastily. "It was only a suggestion..."

"Well, friends," interrupted Watkins, "shall we all turn in, then? We have a difficult job ahead. We would like to get all the rest we can now!"

"Amen to that!" said Albert.

**On trail**

Morning found us on our feet, trudging north towards Mt. Dauban, the tallest of Silhouette's three mountain peaks.
The rest of the night, after the departure of Victor and his companions, passed without event. Understandably, the rebel leader did not tell us of his camp on the island, only that he would be 'around'. Although I noticed the sullen glances of Mad Mike, I put this down to nothing more than bitterness at the ticking off he had received from his leader.

The going was easy enough, for the first hour or so. We trudged primarily over rocky ground, sparsely covered with vegetation. Hundreds of birds, welcoming the morning, set up a pleasant cacophony all around us. An occasional millipede or scorpion, looking fierce and eager, would scurry over the stones very close to us.

"They are harmless, generally," explained Watkins, "if you don't step on them."

We even saw a few snakes, that hurried sinuously into the sheltering undergrowth at our approach. These too, according to our guide, were quite harmless.

"I am tired," called Albert, after a couple of hours' walking. He was panting, and preparing to lower his bulk on to an inviting rock.

"Already? We have quite a way to go, for all you know," smiled Watkins. "We are not even close to that peak!"

"Look out!" screamed Rita. "There is a scorpion under you!"

Albert jumped, cursing the intruder who sat twitching his curved, wicked-looking sting obstinately on the stone Albert had presumed to occupy.

"That is one reason for not sitting down and relaxing, Albert," chuckled Watkins, and we all laughed.
"Where is the crab that the big sister was to lead us to?" wondered Albert. "We have been walking for ages now, haven't we?"

"No, Albert, not even for a couple of hours. And we are not yet close to the foot of Mt. Dauban, the eldest sister. Wait until we get there...maybe we will find some kind of clue..."

"Holy Mother, make our search short and successful!" prayed Albert, rolling his eyes skywards.

"Amen!" I echoed his sentiments.

It was past noon. The ground had begun to slope gently upwards. The vegetation grew thicker. The sparse bush we had so far encountered had given way to thinly wooded jungle.

"We are in the hills now," announced Watkins, as we took a short breather.

Watkins then extracted a small compass from his pocket and consulted the instrument. "I think we are on the right track," he nodded his satisfaction. "This route should take us straight to Mt. Dauban."

Another hour of trudging and we entered heavy forest. The going was now difficult; not the least because there was hardly a path which we could follow. A narrow jungle trail, overgrown in parts with moss and grass, was all we had to lead us to the mountain peak.

Even the light entering through the overhanging foliage was scanty, so that we had to be very careful. Progress was
rather slow. We walked in a single file, Watkins leading and Albert bringing up the rear, behind Rita and myself.

Each one of us carried a backpack containing the provisions and the tools Watkins had considered necessary for the job on hand.

"This is virgin jungle," explained Watkins. "I doubt very much whether any human being has been in these parts in the recent past. If this is actually where Le Vasseur hid his loot, I dare say he has chosen well. Silhouette has never been very popular with the islanders on Mahe or the tourists..."

"Which is why this forest has escaped their axes and cameras, eh?"

"Right, Aarti, but it is all to the good, as far as we are concerned. There is little chance of meeting anyone here."

"Curses!" muttered Albert. "How much time do we have to spend in here, Watkins?"

"Search me, Albert," smiled Watkins. "I wish I knew. Let us pray that we find out soon!"

"Stop moaning, Albert," said I. "You are supposed to be our guardian, remember? You must set an example in endurance and fortitude!"

"Endurance, my foot!" groaned that worthy trekker. "How did I ever get myself into..."

A sudden crashing in the jungle to our right interrupted Albert's complaint.

"Hush!" whispered Watkins. "There is something in there!"

"Or someone," said Rita. "Maybe it is only a bird or an animal!"
"There are no wild animals here, as far as I know...nothing large...anyway..."

But the puzzle was resolved as a large bird streaked out of the foliage, its tail plumes trailing behind the dark body.

"A flycatcher!" exclaimed Watkins.

"What was that? I have never seen one before," I said.

"It is lovely!"

"It is, it is!" agreed Watkins. "That, friends, is the famous and rare Paradise flycatcher, found only on the Seychelles."

"But," said I, remembering something I had read about the avi-fauna of the archipelago, "this bird is only found on La Digue...?"

"Right you are. That is the only island where they have been seen so far. I wonder how this one got here?"

We resumed our trek, slightly cheered by this chance encounter with the rare and beautiful bird.

"My map is useless now," Watkins said. We were deep inside the jungle, there was no doubt. "From here on, we are running blind."

"But there is only this trail," said Albert. "We better stick to this. No point going and getting lost in the woods. Remember, Watkins, I am responsible for the mademoiselles’ safety!"

"They are in good hands then," retorted Watkins, and everyone chuckled. It lightened the atmosphere which was beginning to seem strained and anxious from the hours of fruitless exertion.

"We are surely on the mountain now," Rita commented. It was almost night. The patches of light, visible all day through the overhanging foliage were now gone.
"No doubt about that," nodded our leader. "We have been climbing steadily since noon. I think it is time for a halt."

"But," protested Albert, "where do we rest? We can't very well sleep out here in the jungle, in the open...it is dangerous!"

"There is no other place, Albert. It is not safe to leave this track, if you ask me!"

"Ray is right," said I. "This is as good a place as any to spend the night. We have food with us and I am sure there is a stream close by. We have seen and heard so many on our way up."

"Quite," agreed Watkins. "Let us camp here. Take those packs off and make the beds, you girls. Albert, go look for a stream and get me some water. I will do the cooking."

"We ought to be doing that," offered Rita.

"Thanks, but I am used to this sort of thing. I have spent days and weeks out in the open like this fending for myself. Gets to be a habit, you know."

"What are you giving us for supper? We are all quite hungry," said Mary. "Ah, well!" chuckled Watkins. "That is a secret. Be patient and you will find out!"

Watkins's 'surprise' for dinner was a soup that all of us thought tasted excellent.

"What was that, Ray?" I wondered.

"Chicken. You may thank Madame Duvall," Watkins explained. "I filched all these provisions we are using from her larder!"

The main course for dinner was fryat. Large, St. Jacques...
bananas, oranges and passion fruit. It was one of the best meals I had ever had on the island.

"Why so gloomy, Albert?" Our normally talkative chauffeur, now turned unwilling treasure hunter, had been uncharacteristically quiet for the greater part of the afternoon and evening.

"Poor Albert! He needs something to lift his spirits," observed Watkins. "You girls think of something to cheer him up, while I make some coffee. Right?"

"I get it!" exclaimed Rita, jumping to her feet. "Let us dance the sega, Rita—you and me!"

"Great idea!" agreed Watkins.

As Rita took hold of my hands and tried to put me through the paces of this unique Creole dance, Albert sat up and nodded approvingly.

"Good going, girls!" cheered Watkins. "That is great!"

Soon Albert and Watkins were clapping in rhythm as Rita and I shuffled back and forth on the rough, uneven ground, simulating the steps that had helped the African slaves, ancestors of the Creoles, relax at the end of a crushing day's labour in the cane fields on the Indian Ocean islands.

As the two of us collapsed in an exhausted heap a little later, our companions applauded loud and long.

"Magnifique!" Albert was grinning from ear to ear, all his reticence forgotten. "You dance the sega well, mademoiselles! Where did you learn to dance like that?

"Comes with practice," Rita giggled, as I gave her a broad wink.

"We had better turn in now," Watkins had taken the compass and map out and was studying these intently.
"We have a hard day’s climbing to do tomorrow. I would like to start early, girls."
"The earlier the better," I zipped myself into the sleeping bag and was fast asleep in seconds.

'The sun is in Cancer'

Light had only begun to touch the sky visible through the forest canopy overhead, when we rolled out of our bags and prepared for the day ahead.
When Rita, Albert and I returned, fresh from splashing the water of a nearby stream over our limbs and faces, Watkins had coffee and a breakfast of fruits ready.
"What could La Bouse have meant by 'the sun is in Cancer'?' I wondered as we resumed the trek. "Now that we are on the 'eldest' of the 'three sisters', we shall have to crack that clue too, won't we?"
"I am trying, I am trying," nodded Watkins. "I spent the night trying to figure that one out, Aarti."
"Did he mean a particular time of the year... 'the sun is in Cancer'...?"
"Possible, but not likely," said Watkins. "I am banking on the theory that what he meant was not an astrological configuration, but something different, like the 'three sisters'. A clue meant to throw all but the most persistent off the track!"
"What do we do then?"
"Keep searching, what else!"
The gradient became noticeably steeper and our climb
tougher. The path we were now following looked like it had not been used for ages.

At noon we found the first of the caves. The vegetation broke suddenly, when we were least expecting it. We had just negotiated a particularly difficult jumble of rocks, when the tree cover ended abruptly.

There, in front of us, was the yawning mouth of a cave in the granite rock-face, looking dark and forbidding.

"Holy Mother!" ejaculated Albert, giving word to everyone's surprise.

"A cave!" Rita and I exclaimed together, stating the obvious.

"We are not going in there," protested Albert, as Watkins ducked into the opening.

"Of course, we are!" retorted the prospector. "We leave nothing to chance, no stone unturned, if there is a possibility that we will find something. Follow me. But easy does it. The floor is tricky in here!"

Although it was broad daylight, the sun did not penetrate the interior of the cave. It was pitch dark inside and we hesitated, wondering what sombre secrets we might find in those forbidding depths.

"Here you are!" said Watkins, switching on a torch that he had with him. "Come along."

The beam from the torch was powerful. It lit up the interior of the cave. Nevertheless all we could make out were the rocky walls. The shaft of light lost itself in the far recesses of the cave.

"Easy," cautioned Watkins. "Watch your step, folks! The floor is uneven. All we need now is a sprained ankle!"
We stepped forward gingerly, one after the other, Albert
"What is that?" I pointed to a sharp protuberance rising from the floor of the cave, that the torch had caught in its beam.
"A stalagmite!" Watkins answered, raising the beam towards the ceiling of the cave. "And there is a stalactite too!"
Indeed, directly above the protuberance on the floor was a pointed structure hanging down. As we went further into the cave, more of these accretions on the ceiling and floor came into view.
Presently Watkins began examining the sides of the cave closely, feeling the rock, peering at the jagged, gleaming surface in the torchlight.
"Any clues, Ray?"
"Nothing!" Watkins shook his head. Disappointment was obvious in his words, "Not a thing!"
The cave ended abruptly in a blank, smooth wall. The torch revealed nothing; no aperture, not even a crevice, that might take us further in—a dead end.
A sudden shout outside surprised us. It was Albert.
"I have found another," he exulted, as we emerged from the murky interior of the first cave. "Up there! It is even bigger!"
"Let us take a look," said Watkins, leading the way up to the second cave.
This cave was, if anything, even gloomier than the first one and perceptibly damp. The same, musty odour that we had encountered in the first one was here, but stronger.
Watkins had to flash his torch almost vertically up for the light to touch the ceiling. The stalactites and stalagmites grew here in greater profusion.

Albert, who had been walking ahead, suddenly dropped to his knees, uttering a cry of surprise.

"Holy Mother!" exclaimed the Creole, crouching down on his knees, examining the portion of the floor that had been illuminated by the beam from the torch.

"What is that?" We crowded around him, our hearts pounding.

"Here, shine the torch on this spot, if you please," urged Albert, his fingers feeling over the cold rock. Suddenly they stopped, pointing. "There, do you see that?"

All of us were on our knees now, unmindful of the cold, damp floor. We peered at the spot he was indicating.

It was unmistakable. Clearly drawn, nay etched, on the smooth surface was the likeness of a crab.

"A crab!" ejaculated Rita, giving voice to everyone's thoughts. "What does that mean?"

"A crab...A crab..." Watkins's brow furrowed in thought.

"Is that a clue?" Albert was scraping at the floor, cleaning the area around the picture.

"But there is nothing about...about a crab..."

"By thunder, I have it!" Watkins looked like the sky had fallen on him. "I have it, friends. I have it! The crab...this is what we have been looking for!"

"The crab...how...why..."

"Remember the clue?" There was a strange light in the veteran prospector's eyes. "'When the sun is in Cancer'...this is 'Cancer', friends! A crab! It is the astrological
representation for the sign Cancer in the zodiac—the crab!"

"But the sun..." I reminded him. "What about the reference to the sun? How do you get over that? What does the sun have to do with this drawing of a crab?"

"Beats me," agreed Watkins. "I haven't the faintest idea! Nevertheless, let us take a look around. Perhaps there is something else, some other clue."

But there was nothing. For over a half hour we went over the floor and sides of that cave, trying to cover every inch, probing with our fingers, looking for likely crevices, a soft spot where we might dig, where something could have been hidden. Nothing.

"That is it, then," Watkins shrugged, trying to hide the disappointment he felt. I could see the man's shoulders sag, the dejection that he tried bravely to swallow. Poor Watkins! More than anyone else, he deserved to find the treasure. He had given all his life to that elusive hoard.

"What do we do now?" I queried. "That was a false lead obviously."

"We will go on, what else! We can't give up, after all this effort."

"Of course, we can't! But we are running out of clues, Ray."

"Maybe, maybe not. I have been at this forty years or more, remember? If I had wanted to give up, I would have done so long ago and returned to England."

"I understand, Ray...but," I looked anxiously at Rita, "we have already been gone two days. I am sure our folks must be looking for us now."

"Yes," agreed Rita vehemently. "They must be frantic."
Most probably Papa has got the police out looking for us!"

"Another day and we give up and go back," said Watkins. "I know I cannot expect you friends to spend too much time on this job. As for me I have lived, and shall die, looking for Le Vasseur's treasure!"

"Perhaps there are more of these caves, Ray. Let us look in them too."

The next cave was smaller. In fact, it was drier and less inhospitable than the ones we had checked on earlier. But, as we half feared, we found nothing inside this cave either—no drawings, no clues.

"I say, let us spend the night here," suggested Albert. "It is better than sleeping out in the open, with God knows what kind of trees and animals you have out there!"

"You are right," nodded Watkins. "We will camp here for the evening. Perhaps we can even get a fire going in here. This place is not too cold or damp."

The half-light of dusk had already crept over the sky outside. The chirping of insects, the screeching of birds invisible in the luxuriant vegetation around, rose in volume as the day ended.

As Albert went out into the jungle to gather twigs for a fire, Rita and I tried to clean up the floor of the cave, as best as we could:

Remarkably, this cave had no stalactites or stalagmites inside. There was a considerable layer of dirt covering the floor, probably because there had been no water dripping into this cave to wash it away.

By the time we had a fair-sized area swept and cleaned, Albert returned with the firewood. Watkins was busy
consulting his maps and notes. He would mutter under his breath from time to time, then shake his head, as if dismissing an idea.

"Here you are, girls," announced Albert, relieving himself of his collection. "Let us have a fire and some dinner."

Rita and I got a fire going in minutes. Watkins had taught us how to build it.

"We are having fish tonight," said Rita, as she set to cleaning the dried fish we were carrying in our provisions.

"Wonderful!" Albert smacked his lips. "I am famished. Hurry it up, will you, girls? We have had a hard day climbing this hill; haven't we?"

Neither of us girls was an exceptionally good cook, and we had to make do with the implements and meagre provisions available in our packs. Nevertheless, the fish tasted good. We had bananas and some passion fruit. All in all, we were not doing too badly, out here in the wilderness.

"Aren't you turning in, Ray?" Watkins was still seated on a rock, slightly away from the fire, lost in thought. The flickering light cast shadows on his face, lending a strange, indefinable strength to the Englishman's lean, gaunt features.

"Go on," he muttered, "go to sleep, all of you. You need to rest! I will sleep in a while, don't worry!"

We decided, if we could find nothing on the following day, we would turn back. We were all unhappy at the thought of abandoning the search, after having got so far. But there was nothing to it. Our parents, Rita's and mine, would be out of their minds with anxiety.
I slept badly that night. I dreamt of pirates and ships, of lost treasures and treasure hunts, guns and rebels.

Search ends

"Wake up, Aarti! Wake up!" My eyes struggled open. I blinked at the sudden light. It was morning and Rita, all ready to move on, was shaking me by the shoulders. "Time to leave already," said my friend. "You have been sleeping like a baby, dear!"

"Look at him," Rita pointed to where Albert was still stretched out, lost to the world. His soft snores were audible. "One would imagine he was at home in bed."

I laughed, rubbing the sleep out of my eyes. Watkins, as usual, was already up and ready to hit the trail. Albert stirred. A sudden shaft of light had fallen on the sleeping Creole's face.

There was an aperture in the ceiling of the cave through which the sunlight streamed in, a narrow sliver of light only.

Albert stirred again uncomfortably, as the thin shaft of light hit his eyes. He sat up then, blinking. "Good morning, Albert!" I called. "See? The sun himself wakes you up! Isn't that wonderful?"

"Wonderful, my foot!" grumbled Albert. "I could sleep for a week, after all that climbing!"

"You can do that when we get back home, Albert. For now, it is time to hit the road, or rather, the mountain!"

"I ought to be driving my car," complained our Creole
guardian, as he rolled up his sleeping bag, "not crawling up hills like a lizard or a caterpillar!"

"Think of the treasure!" I reminded him. "It is all for a noble cause."

"If there is a treasure, why haven't we found it yet?"

Rita and I laughed. Poor Albert! He was the most reluctant treasure hunter one could think of.

"We get going in five minutes," called Watkins. He was boiling coffee.

"Hey, look!"

The sudden shout from Albert took us all by surprise. He was crouched low over the floor at the very spot where his sleeping bag had been laid out.

"Look at this!" Albert shouted again. "Here is another one of those..."

We scrambled to look. An instant later all of us were kneeling by his side, seeing what the Creole had noticed. It was another drawing of a crab. But the remarkable fact was that the sliver of light which came in through the ceiling of the cave and had awakened Albert, fell directly over this etching on the rock. In fact, Albert had probably noticed it only due to this fact. Albert's sleeping bag had scrubbed the mud off the spot, so that the rock and the picture on it, gleamed in the sunlight.

"Remarkable!" said Watkins.

"Magnifique!" agreed Rita.

"Cancer!" I intoned. "Another drawing of Cancer!"

Without a word, Watkins got to his feet and walked away from the spot. He sat down on a rock some distance away, but his eyes were riveted on the spot we were all examining.
Then I saw his eyes move towards the ceiling of the cavern, to the tiny aperture that admitted the thin, illuminating beam. From one to the other, Watkins's glance shifted to the ceiling and then the picture on the floor. Not a word did he utter. The ageing treasure hunter's face reflected intense concentration.

"What is it, Ray? What are you thinking about?"
"I can't believe this!" He spoke in a hoarse voice, a whisper, almost as if afraid to articulate the thought.
"You can't believe what, Ray?"
"Cancer!" he gasped. "The sun...and Cancer!"

In one bound Watkins was at the spot again, anxiously examining the floor of the cave. His fingers felt the rocks, his feverish excitement plain to see.

"The pickaxes! The shovels!" shouted Watkins. "Get them out! Get them out!"
"What are you talking about, Ray? What do you want to do?"
"You see this?" He pointed to the figure etched on the rock, then the ceiling, "And do you see that? The sun coming in through that vent?"
"Yes...but..." Then it hit me, the truth. I was nonplussed. "My God!"
"Yes...'the sun is in Cancer'," breathed Watkins. "This is it! Remember the clue, 'the sun is in Cancer'? This must be the place!"

"Holy Mother!" ejaculated Albert, looking as if the skies had fallen on him, as Rita and I crowded about Watkins. "Holy Mother! To think that I have been sleeping over that very spot all this while!"
"What a coincidence!" I exclaimed. "If Albert had not been sleeping there, if he hadn't seen the drawing..."

"Not coincidence, friends," Watkins shook his head. "I would say design. It was meant to be this way. The sun falling on Cancer...but we are wasting time! Let us get to

"Insm l¹teuto τ/jtsw sri azuoS sj ziriT"

We first tried to scrape away some of the earth surrounding the spot. Unlike the other caves we had searched, the floor of this one was not all rock.

"You girls move away," said Watkins, when we had cleared a reasonable portion of the cavern floor. "Albert, pick up one of those axes and let us get to work now."

Then, like men possessed, Watkins and Albert wielded the pickaxes. The blades rose and fell, rose and fell, in a steady, unrelenting rhythm. Rita and I watched, hypnotized by the sight.

"You could carry away some of this dirt, girls!" suggested Watkins.

"Right you are. Come on, Rita! To work!"

We kept at it for what seemed an interminable period. It was slow going, for the floor was hard-packed and frequently the pickaxes bounced off solid rock.

"It is loose," exclaimed Albert. "I saw it move!"

"You are right," Watkins said, signalling to him to stop. "Wait a minute. Let me see."

Watkins got down on his knees again and examined the spot. "You are right, Albert. This rock is loose. Come on, let us try and get it out! Just a little more to go!"

The pickaxes went to work again, throwing up dirt, trying
to get under the large rock. When they could get sufficient purchase under the boulder, for it was nothing less, the men heaved and strained, until sweat poured off their faces.

"Phew! That is some rock!" gasped Watkins, stopping to mop his face. Albert did likewise.

"This La Bouse, he was a careful man!" Albert panted, trying to wedge his pickaxe under the rock.

"There, that is it! Heave ho, Albert!"

Both men now had their axes wedged well under the boulder. We could see their sinews tightening, the strain showed on their faces, as they tried to lever the rock upward and out to reveal what was lying beneath it.

"It is moving, Albert! It is moving!"
"Huh...yes...there...it...gives..."
"Quick girls, come here! Push!"

The rock was almost free of the surrounding earth and stone—half in, half out of the hollow that it obviously covered. In a flash, Rita and I had joined the action, struggling with the boulder.

"Heave, Aarti! Heave!"

For what seemed like an eternity the stone refused to budge, mocking our combined efforts. Then, with a suddenness that had myself and Rita stumbling forward, the large rock 'whooshed' out of the hollow.

"Victory!" shouted I, picking myself up from the dirt.

"We have done it!" Rita was already on her feet, her arms raised in triumph. "We have done it!"

"There is definitely something hidden here, under this rock." Watkins mopped the sweat off his brow, "To work, Albert! Let us get her!"
"Aye aye, Sir!"

And the pickaxes started rising and falling again. Dirt and pebbles flew in the frenzy of their effort. We girls stood watching, our breath ragged with the effort of prising out that makeshift lid, our eyes riveted on the hollow.

When the small 'clink' came, our hearts stopped, benumbed for an instant.

"That is it!" said Watkins, hoarse with emotion. "There is something here. Easy, Albert, easy does it. We don't want to damage anything."

But Albert was already on his knees by the depression in the cavern floor, scraping away at the mud with his fingers. I joined in and then Rita. Like people possessed we worked, not caring if our fingers or palms were skinned and bruised in the effort.

"I have it!" Albert stopped digging. His fingers had felt something odd, a foreign body buried in that floor. We could all see it. Something flat and broad, yet unrecognizable for the mud and rust caking its surface.

"Here it is!" exulted Albert, displaying the piece about a foot and a half long and three inches wide. What could it be?

Watkins took the find gingerly from Albert's hands. He turned it over, examining the mud encrusted object carefully. We crowded around the prospector, anxious to know the secret of this discovery.

"That doesn't look like treasure though," Albert chipped in. His eyes rolled in anticipation nevertheless.

Very gently, carefully, Watkins scraped the mud off the object. When it was almost free of the accretions, he turned
the strange, flat piece round and round in his hands, his brows furrowed in thought. Then the weather-beaten features brightened, and his eyes widened in surprise.

"I get it!" Watkins almost yelled. "I get it. It is a sword!"

"A sword?" I intoned. "What kind of..."

"This is a pirate's sword!" exulted Watkins, brandishing it like a weapon of the kind he described. "See how the stem curves? Yes, this is...or was...a pirate's cutlass!"

"A cutlass? Wow!" I had read of pirates' cutlasses and boarding axes, their favourite weapons and inseparable.

"Perhaps it is La Bouse's cutlass!" suggested Rita.

"Perhaps!" nodded Watkins. He examined the piece again, now holding it up to the light, now feeling the edges. "But there is no doubting the fact. This is a pirate's weapon."

"The treasure has got to be here then, Ray! Let us look..."

We set to work again. But the pickaxes were replaced by shovels. We did not want to damage anything vital. It was slow and painful work, for the earth was packed tight and hard.


When we had scraped and shovelled for another eternity, before us lay exposed a flat, plain surface. It looked like a
spot, searching for some clue. Then he straightened, snapping his fingers.

"I know...a board...a wooden plank. This must be a piece out of a ship or some kind of boat." He felt the surface again, "You see those markings? I am certain."

"Let us get it out." Almost before Albert finished speaking they were at work again, trying to get the corners loose. Gradually, but inexorably, the wooden board came loose. But it took several more minutes' shovelling before they could get a purchase along the sides.

"Heave, everyone," urged Watkins. Albert and he had wedged the pointed ends of their pickaxes under the plank.

"Over here, on this side," Watkins directed. "Let us all get on one side and raise it, girls. We will push it over...don't want anyone getting hurt...come on...now. Here goes...hee...aa...ve..."

Then, with one mighty teeth-grinding effort, the flat board leapt free, landing with a thud on the far side of the hollow. Then my feet slipped, and I almost fell into the aperture that had been concealed by the wood.

"Look out!" shouted Watkins, as he lunged and held me by the arm, dragging me to safety.

"Holy Mother!" the exclamation burst from Albert's lips. Our eyes widened in amazement. What we were now looking at was a cavity in the cavern floor. It was at least two metres square. The interior was pitch dark.

"Get out of the way, Albert!" snapped Watkins. "You are blocking that ray of light!" Indeed he was.

As Albert moved, the shaft of light that had first led us to this spot, pierced the darkness of the orifice.
"Jesus Christ!" the hoarse, tremulous words ripped out of Watkins's throat.
We stared, incredulous at the vision lying revealed a few feet below where we stood.
The sudden illumination had cleared the gloom that cloaked the opening. At our feet, carved into the floor of the cave, was a large, man-made pit. It was as deep as it was wide, all of two metres.
But what riveted our attention were the contents of that cavity—four large chests with dome-shaped lids, occupied the centre of the floor.
"Holy Mother!" Albert gasped.

A setback

A long moment passed. None of us moved. So paralysing was the effect of this revelation that no one could think of saying anything to fit the occasion, to do something. It was Rita, finally, who broke the stillness of the sombre cavern.
"The treasure!" The two words, spoken in a hushed whisper, galvanized Watkins into action.
"God Almighty!" shouted the ageing adventurer. "God Almighty! We have done it! We have found it!"
An instant later he was inside the pit and on his knees by the chests. His fingers rose, hesitantly, to caress the heavy wood. For all their age, the two centuries or more that they had lain buried here, the boxes showed little sign of wear other than the dulling of paint and a thin layer of dirt clothing each one.
"They are locked," said Watkins, feeling all around the boxes, "Here, let me try this."
Slipping his long hunting knife out of the sheath at his waist, Watkins inserted the point under the lid of one of the chests. He struggled for a while, trying to prise open the lid. It did not give. The lock was still intact.
"You will have to smash the locks." Albert passed a pickaxe down to Watkins, "Here, use this."
"Here goes," and Watkins swung the heavy iron implement in an arc. The lock splintered under the impact, slivers of metal even flying up to us at ground level.
"You have done it, Ray!" I shouted. "It is open."
"Let us have a look," Albert was down inside the pit, beside Watkins. Rita and I were on our knees outside the pit, peering in. Our eyes were getting used gradually, to the gloom inside.
No one spoke, as Watkins tried the lid. We hardly dared breathe, so tense was the moment. At first the lid did not budge, shut as it had been for centuries, probably. Then, gradually, the hinges creaked and the lid began to rise. A few moments more and it was done. The lid swung back on its hinges revealing the contents.
"Holy Smoke!" Watkins's words were no more than a hushed whisper.
"Holy Mother!"
"The treasure!" exclaimed Rita and I in one voice.
Time stood still, as our eyes gazed unbelievingly at the vision before us. This was the treasure.
Even in the dull, shadowy light of that cavern, the truth was inescapable. This was La Bouse's treasure!
Feverishly now, Watkins and Albert were working at the lids of the three remaining chests. Within minutes they were all open to our gaze.

If we had any doubt about the authenticity of those stories, none remained now. There was gold, silver, gems and pearls. The chests were filled to the brim with priceless things. Nothing had been touched by human hands since the day the pirate had buried his treasure here.

Watkins was running his dirt-caked fingers over the gold and jewels, a strange look in his eyes. Albert plunged his fist into a chest and his fingers came up holding gems, jewellery. He cackled like a madman. None of us, in that moment, was quite in his or her senses.

Rita and I could only gape from our perch on the floor of the cavern. Not that we minded. The mere sight of that bounty was enough to fill and benumb one's senses.

"Look at this!" said Albert suddenly, as his hands closed around an object in the chest. He held it up. Red and gold it gleamed, catching the thin finger of light. It was a cross.

"The Fiery Cross!" I ejaculated, suddenly remembering. "The sacred Fiery Cross! That is the one!"

"What...what is that?" asked Albert as he blinked uncomprehendingly up at us.

"You are right, girl!" Watkins took the cross out of Albert's grasp examining it. "This has to be the 'sacred Fiery Cross of Goa' that was lost in the pirates' attack on the 'Vierge du Cap'! The outrage that shook the Christian world!"

"What do we do with all this?" Rita's words, like cold water thrown on our heads, brought us back to terra firma.

"We will have to get down to business now." Watkins
gestured to Albert, "We have to lift all these boxes out."
"They are heavy," protested Albert. "How are we going to do that?"
"Good question," nodded Watkins. "Let us see now. How do we go about it...hmm...I have an idea! Yes! Albert, you climb up there, outside this pit. One of you girls can help me lift these chests out and hand them up."

Albert and I exchanged places. With much pulling and pushing, Watkins and I managed to lift one of the chests high enough for our two companions on top to lay hold of it. They heaved and we pushed upwards for all we were worth.

When at last, we managed to manoeuvre the treasure chest on to the floor of the cave, everyone was sweating from the effort.

"Good work, friends!" applauded Watkins, as we took hold of the next one. This one, if anything, was even heavier than the first.

And so it went, one after another, until we had contrived to lift all the treasure chests out of the tomb where they had lain hidden, if not forgotten, these countless years.

Once the boxes were out of the pit we opened them again and began to revel in the untold wealth stuffed inside. Watkins was of the opinion that we ought to catalogue everything first, before we carried it all away.

"That will be wasting time here," said Albert. "Besides, we have to return to Mahe in a hurry. Now that the job is over, there is no point sticking around here. The girls' parents will be wild with worry, Watkins."

"You are right, Albert."
"What do we do then? We have no means of carrying these boxes back down this mountain; no, not so much weight!"

"We could leave it here and come back with help," I suggested. "After all, it is unlikely that anyone will come this way. No one knows about this treasure being here yet, and there is nothing else to attract people to this spot."

"No way!" snapped Watkins. "I am not letting this stuff out of my sight for a moment. Most of my life I have been searching for this...and now...no, no chances!"

"I have an idea. Let Albert return with us to the Island Lodge. You wait here with the treasure. We will get back to Mahe immediately and tell Rita's father. Uncle Seebsagar ought to be able to arrange to cart this load out of here."

"Don't bother, mates. This will do nicely. We will take over now!"

The harsh, grating tones, spoken from the mouth of the cave, made us all jump in alarm. Who...

There were three men. They were dressed in faded battle fatigues. Each held an automatic rifle across his body. The weapons seemed to point casually, in our direction.

"Mad Mike!" Albert's startled voice broke the silence. Indeed, it was Mad Mike, the rebel who had accompanied Victor when they met us at the ghost village. But Victor was nowhere in sight. The two men with Mad Mike were strangers. A particularly vicious looking trio they were.

"Thanks, folks," grinned Mad Mike and the scar on his cheek gleamed evilly. "You have been too kind. We will do the carting away now. What do you say, boys?"

"Yeah!" answered one of his companions.
"Bully, Mike! We are rich!" chuckled the third. Almost involuntarily, my glance fell on Watkins's face. There I saw consternation, sudden despair and the slow, gathering anger. I saw the muscles tense, his fists clench, as if ready to act, to do something desperate.

"No, Ray!" I shouted. "Don't do it! Let them take the treasure."

"Yeah...Oh, yeah!" growled Mike, his rifle swinging around to cover the prospector. "Don't try it, buster. I will blow you to bits, so help me. Take it nice and easy, folks! No one is going to get hurt. You let us take these trinkets away and you can walk out of this place unhurt. That is a deal, eh?"

"They have got no choice, Mike," cackled one of his cronies. "Finders keepers, huh?"

"We found it, you ruffians!" yelled Rita, unable to restrain her indignation.

"No, kid. We have found it now. So it is ours, see?"

"You will not get away with this, Mike," warned Watkins. "They will get you."

"Wait till Victor hears of this, you scoundrel!" snapped Albert. "He will give you what you deserve!"

"Victor! Ha!" Mad Mike roared with laughter. "Tell him, boys. Tell him about Victor...what we did to that sucker!"

"You brutes! What have you done to Victor?"

"When we left him he wasn't interested in anything particular, was he, boys? Not with a couple of bullets in his head!"

The rogues laughed again, enjoying the thought of their former leader's fate.
"You...you killed Victor...?" Tears of despair stung at my eyes, "You villains!"
"Time is a-wasting, boys," barked Mad Mike suddenly. "You...Hal, Pierre! Get hold of the boxes. Let us get out of this place."
"What do we do with them, boss?" The bandit called Hal pointed at us. "We can't let them go free!"
"Maybe we ought to shut them all up in that pit," suggested Pierre grinning evilly. "That will do them good. Likely someone will come along and discover their bones after a couple of hundred years! If not, well...too bad!"
"You are stupid!" cursed Mike. "We are not leaving anyone here. These guys can carry some of the stuff for us, see? And the girls...they are no danger, anyway. Maybe we will let them loose when we are clear and safe!"
"You will never get away with this outrage, Mad Mike!" declared Watkins, who had been silent all this while, as he tried to wrestle with his growing frustration. "The police, the army, they will all be after you!"
"We will see about that," Mad Mike strode up to bend over the chests. He dipped into one, his eyes gleaming. As the man straightened, I saw in his fist the cross, the sacred Fiery Cross of Goa!
"Whooee!" whistled the villain. "Look at this, will you? It is solid gold, no less. And look at them stones. They are worth millions, I bet!"
Slinging his automatic across his back, Mike turned the crucifix over and over in his palms, feeling the texture of the precious gems encrusting the gold. His gloating eyes did not leave the cross for an instant.
"Hey, this will do nicely for a dagger," said Mike, feeling the pointed bottom end of the cross. "Here, don't I look dashing? Like a pirate? Haw, haw..." He stuck the crucifix into the cartridge-belt at his waist, as if it were a knife.

"You fool, that is a cross!" shouted Watkins. "What are you doing with it?"

"What is the difference, buddy?" mocked Mad Mike. "We have got to sell the whole lot anyway. Rest easy!"

"Not until you are all behind bars!"

Mad Mike did not deign to reply. Instead he turned to his men, chuckling, and gestured towards the treasure chests.

"Okay, then! That is enough talk. Get moving, you lot!"

And so we set out, back down the mountain, through the very same jungle that had seen us hopeful and cheerful, so short a while ago.

The rebels did not bother to tie us up. They were all armed with rifles, and it was unlikely that any of us would start an argument with those terrible weapons.

Mad Mike led the procession. Behind him trudged Watkins and Albert, carrying between them two of the chests. Mad Mike's men had rigged a rough, impromptu sling of ropes and bamboo. The ends of the pole rested on Watkins and Albert's shoulders, with the chests slung from ropes thereon, between the two men. Hal and Pierre, the bandits, followed carrying the remaining two boxes between them. Rita and I brought up the rear. Our shoulders were free of any burden, but our shoulders slumped in defeat.

A more cruel fate I could not imagine. To have found La Bouse's treasure after so much effort and then to be cheated out of it by these villains! My heart went out to Watkins,
the indefatigable prospector. Poor man! How he had struggled for this moment! Could destiny play a harsher joke than this upon anyone?

As our group moved downhill, Mad Mike and his men hummed occasionally, a Creole song. Understandably, none of us felt like joining in.

Albert kept muttering under his breath, sometimes mouthing bitter curses, wishing all the retribution of God on our tormentors. Watkins, on his part, said nothing. I glanced from time to time at the Englishman. He walked doggedly, his eyes focussed on the path ahead.

Forty years, even longer, and every penny that he had ever owned, had this man spent, looking for Le Vasseur's hoard. And now to lose it all in one fell stroke, as soon as he had found it...a lesser man would probably have gone out of his senses with the shock and anguish. But not Watkins. He struggled gamely on.

God alone knew what thoughts tormented that brave soul. Notwithstanding the weight that we were carrying, we made much better time going down, than we had on the way up the mountain. Moreover, the bandits were in a hurry. All thought of revolution was gone. All they were intent on, from what I could gather, was to decamp with the booty before anyone got wind of it and stopped them.

But, in that dense jungle, even our captors had to halt for the night, despite their urgency. The path became almost invisible after sundown and there was every chance of losing one's way or spraining an ankle.

Mad Mike ordered a night halt at a small clearing, close to a mountain stream. When a fire was lit, the four treasure
chests were placed in a cluster close to it, so that no one should have access to it without his knowing. It was plain, from the occasional glances I caught him casting at his companions, that he did not trust them either.

"Put the girls together over there," indicated Mike, "and seat these fellers here, close to the fire. You, Hal, keep an eye on these four...don't take your eyes off them for an instant!"

"But, Mike, what can they do?" protested the rebel so engaged. "This treasure here is too heavy for anyone to carry away like that."

"Quit jawing!" rasped Mike, throwing a baleful glare at his follower. "I give the orders around here! Keep your mouth shut and your eyes open. That is a fortune there, and I am taking no chances!"

"All right, all right!" Hal sat down on a rock, so placed that he could keep us girls and our male comrades under his eye at the same time. "Don't you lot try anything funny!" warned the rebel. "This weapon is loaded and it is likely to go off..."

"No chance of their leaving," chuckled Mike. "They know better than that, eh, Watkins?"

Watkins said not a word. His stony look revealed nothing of the storm that was probably raging inside that brave heart.

Oh, how my legs ached! In their anxiety to escape with the booty, our captors had hurried along, regardless of the difficult route or the weight. Poor Albert! Poor Ray! I could imagine their plight. Carrying that load for so long was no child's play.
The thin trickle of water in the stream looked inviting after the day's exertion. I was thirsty, I realized.

"Can I have a drink of water?" I caught Hal's eye.

"No! Stay put!" Then he shrugged, "Oh, hell! What difference does it make anyway? Go on, drink. But don't you get any fancy ideas into that head of yours!"

"I am thirsty, that is all," I said, getting up to walk to the stream. My muscles screamed in protest at the effort.

I limped across to the water, got down on my knees by the clear stream. I had only just begun to drink, cupping the water in my palms and carrying it to my lips, when I heard the sound.

It was a human voice. Yes, there was no doubt about that. I shot a glance over my shoulder at Hal. His eyes were on the others.

There it was again. Someone was speaking. I tried my best not to make any sudden, unnatural movement. As I lifted my palms to drink, my eyes were on the jungle ahead of me, across the stream.

But I could see nothing. It was pitch dark there. Nothing stirred in the vegetation, not even a breeze.

"Hush! Aarti!" There was no doubting the fact. Someone was speaking out there, someone hidden in the jungle. And he was speaking to me.

"Shh...Aarti..." I strained my ears, trying to catch every word that I could. "It is me...Victor...Victor...I am here..."

Victor! For a moment my heart stopped beating, my limbs froze in astonishment. Victor, here? But that was impossible...

But the voice continued speaking to me.
"Listen, Aarti...quickly! There is not much time...I know what happened. My men got me. They left me for dead. But I didn't...they took my weapons..."

So, that was it! Mad Mike had boasted about cutting his leader down. But he had not succeeded. I could not help heaving a sigh of relief.

"Quick, Aarti...before that fellow gets suspicious," Victor's voice hurried on, "I know where these guys will go. I will be with you...don't worry...I shall stay out of sight...pass the word to the others, to Watkins and Albert if you can...Ciao!"

I started to speak but caught myself in time. If Hal or his companions heard...they would not spare Victor, if he fell into their clutches again.

As suddenly as it had started, the voice stopped speaking. The forest was still. Try as I might, I could hear nothing more. Victor was gone.

I waited an instant longer, then got to my feet and limped back to where Rita was seated alone. She glanced up at me without a word and then went back to contemplating her toes.

I had to tell her somehow, but not now. Hal was still alert, his eyes darting between us and the men seated close to the fire. Perhaps an opportunity would come soon.

My chance came when Mad Mike went off into the bushes. Pierre began to cook dinner over the fire. With their leader temporarily out of sight, Hal and Pierre started to talk in low tones. Hal kept looking at us occasionally, but I knew that his attention was elsewhere.

"Rita!" I murmured urgently. "Rita! Here, listen!"

She nodded, very sensibly not looking up.
"Victor was here, Rita," I continued. "He talked to me. He was hidden in the bushes somewhere out there. I could only hear his voice. He said that he would join us later...perhaps we will be able to surprise these fellows...just be prepared..."

Rita nodded again wordlessly. Her attention apparently was riveted on her feet. She showed no sign of surprise, made no sudden movements that would attract attention.

"He has asked us to tell the others, Albert and Ray, somehow. We will all have to be ready when the time comes...to make our move!"

Suddenly Rita looked me straight in the eye and I knew she had gathered my message. The problem now was how to convey it to Albert and Watkins. They were kept away from us all the time, whether walking or resting.

Even as I finished speaking, Mad Mike came back into the firelight, extinguishing any hope of further conversation.

"You kids better get some rest, hey!" called the bandit. "We have another hard day ahead tomorrow. And there is not going to be any rest for anyone then, eh?"

Our trek resumed early the following morning. Watkins and Albert led with their burden, while the rebels, Pierre and Hal, walked behind. Rita and I walked hand in hand with Mad Mike bringing up the rear.

Now that we were nearing the beach and the chances of escaping with the booty became almost a certainty, the villain wanted to take no chances. His automatic was held ready in his fist, pointing at us.

Not that anyone of us, even Watkins, entertained the
faintest thoughts of escape against such odds. At any rate, while there was life there was hope. Perhaps...

"Shut up, kid, and hurry up," barked Mad Mike, and I realised with a start that I had been muttering to myself in my distraction.

The desperadoes were maintaining a killing pace. Mid-morning saw us out of the heavy jungle. But the going was still difficult, because of the tricky terrain. My feet hurt. My body ached. From time to time I glanced at Rita.

Was that a tear, hesitating to fall, at the corner of her eye? Poor girl! Her features were haggard. Fear and exhaustion showed quite plainly there. But then I looked the same, probably.

Suddenly, without warning, Watkins fell. His knees buckled, and the weight of the pole and the heavy chest slung thereon forced him flat on the ground.

"Watkins!" shouted Albert, dropping his end of the pole and rushing to Watkins's aid.

"Ray!" an instant later Rita and I had also reached his side. Hal and Pierre were still trying to set their load carefully down. Mad Mike was barking at us to move back.

As we went to help Watkins to his feet, I saw him turn and wink at me.

"Tell me, quick!" hissed the prospector.

I could not have been more surprised if he had punched me in the face. But there was no time for celebration. Hastily, in as few words as I could, I told Watkins and Albert.

"He is here!" I breathed. "Victor is here. He talked to me. Asked us to be ready..."

By now our captors had recovered from the shock.
"Back! Did you hear? Get back!" roared Mad Mike. Watkins had regained his feet.

"Okay, okay," he said apologetically. "I slipped, that is all!"

"Another mistake like that and it is curtains, buddy!" warned the rebel, his scar gleaming evilly as he scowled.

All this had happened in less than a couple of minutes. But our companions now knew about Victor. And they would be on guard, ready when the moment came.

But what could Victor do? I racked my brain, trying to figure out his likely plan. Victor was unarmed. The three rogues had taken his weapons away. He had told me so himself. As for us, all we had were the pickaxes, which were now out of reach. We would be shot down before we could even make a break for it.

Wait a minute! My glance lit upon Watkins's knife, still slung at his waist. Our captors had forgotten to take that away from him. Or they probably thought it useless, against their automatics. Nevertheless, it was a half-chance, a ray of hope.

And then, for no apparent reason, my eyes fell on the object gleaming dully at Mad Mike's waist. It was the sacred Fiery Cross, still lodged where the rascal had stuck it, irreverently, a day earlier.

How many had fought and lost their lives for that bejewelled cross...the Archbishop, the crew of the Portuguese galleon, the pirate, Le Vasseur, himself...how many more would the cross claim, before being returned to its abode?
A cross to kill!

In spite of the outlaws' urgency, it was late afternoon when we finally managed to reach the plains. As we hurried across the now open ground, I glanced back involuntarily at the sombre mountain we had just left behind. Brooding and dark, Mt. Dauban seemed only reluctantly to have released the human beings who had ventured up into her mysterious reaches.

It soon became apparent that we were heading in the direction opposite to which we had reached the mountain. The bandits, understandably, would prefer to leave the island without attracting attention.

Soon we were on a dirt road running parallel to the coastline. When we had trudged some way, the road dipped suddenly and led straight towards the beach.

The beach, at this point, was hardly that. It was more of a rocky, muddy stretch, strewn with the occasional scrub or seaweeds.

"There it is!" announced Hal triumphantly, as the sea came into view.

"We made it," shouted Pierre, and the two bandits laughed their pleasure.

"The boat!" called Mad Mike. "Let us get this stuff over into the boat. Easy does it...I don't want anything spilling over, you guys! Be very careful, now!"

Bobbing gently on the deep green waves of the Indian Ocean, lashed to a sturdy clutch of weeds on shore, was a small craft with an outboard motor.

At that moment my heart sank. This, surely, was the end
of the road. Within minutes these villains would have loaded the treasure into the boat and would be gone. There was no hope of rescue now.

I looked despairingly around. There was no one, nothing in sight but the bleak landscape and the ocean, as far as eye could see. Victor had said he would be here, that he had a plan. Obviously, he had not made it in time. Perhaps, and this was the final blow, the brave rebel's strength had given out and he could not keep pace, injured as he was.

"Quick, you guys!" Mad Mike was barking orders, directing the loading of the treasure into the motorboat, "Move those bones, you lot. I haven't all day, see?"

I looked at Albert and Watkins. They were like beaten men, their shoulders slumped, carrying out the ruffian's orders silently.

Hal and Pierre were loading the first of the treasure chests into the boat. Their automatics had been thrown on the beach. Close behind were Watkins and Albert, arms hanging listlessly by their sides. My hapless friends did not even glance at one another.

Mad Mike stood by a cluster of rocks and weeds, directing the operations. His automatic hung loosely at his hip. I gazed despairingly at Rita. We were standing a few feet away from Mad Mike, watching the operation.

And then Rita started to sob. Head leaning on my shoulders, the girl broke down uncontrollably.

"Rita!" I breathed, trying to soothe her. I knew that I was not too far from tears myself. "It is all right, Rita. Don't you weep!"

Mike glanced at us momentarily. Then he looked away
again, not wanting to take his eyes off the bounty that would soon be gone with him, from this island where it had remained for two centuries.

What happened next caught even me, forewarned as I had been, by surprise. I was trying to quieten Rita down, wrestling with my own tears, when the unthinkable happened.

A huge form, in green, mud-spattered clothes, came hurtling out of the moss-covered rocks where Mike was standing. Victor!

With a terrible, blood-curdling yell the man launched himself at Mike. Caught off-guard, Mike went down under the assault, dragging Victor down with him. Victor's forearm was around the other's throat, holding it in a vice-like grip.

Things were happening very fast. At the very instant that the two men went down wrestling, I saw Watkins and Albert throw themselves at their captors.

Down they went, kicking and pummelling each other. Albert was giving a good account of himself, making the bandit, Pierre, fight for his dear life. But it was another story with Watkins. The ageing prospector, already exhausted by the effort of the trek, not to speak of the weight they had been carrying, was beginning to tire under Hal's blows.

Suddenly Hal managed to free an arm and his fingers closed around one of the automatics lying in the dirt. The barrel swung around, lining on Watkins, who was trying to pick himself up.

"Ray!" I screamed.

Desperately, Watkins whipped the hunting knife out of its sheath. Summoning up the last reserves of his strength,
the ageing Englishman stabbed upwards. Caught full in chest by the wicked blade, Hal stumbled backwards. A terrible cry issued from his lips.

Then Rita tugged at my arm, pointing to where Victor and his adversary were struggling on the rocks. For all his strength, Victor was losing the battle, weakened as he was by loss of blood and this great effort. With a mighty heave Mad Mike threw his opponent off. He reared to his feet, hands closing around the rifle at his hip.

"I will get you, Victor!" growled the rebel, stepping back from his fallen foe. "I will get you all. No one is going to stop me leaving this place with that loot. No one!"

Mike swivelled around then, pointing his automatic threateningly at the other men.

"Move back, I said. I will blast the next man that moves!"

Slowly, Albert and Watkins let go of Pierre, whom they had been trying to subdue. They backed off raising their hands.

"You, on your knees, get down!" barked Mike. "Get hold of your rifle, Pierre. Quick! And 'give' it to him if anyone tries anything funny!"

"They got Hal, Mike!" shouted Pierre, picking up one of the fallen automatics and covering his tormentors.

"Down! On your knees, I said!" Mike threatened. "Get down on your hands and knees or I will blow you to bits!"

Watkins and Albert dropped to their knees. "Quick, Mike!" yelled Pierre. "Let us move it, Mike!"

"The treasure!" Mike pointed to the three chests still lying on the beach. "Get them into the boat, you blokes. And no tricks, remember!"
As a beaten Watkins and Albert rose to do his bidding, Mike turned to Victor, sprawled on the rocks, blood oozing from several wounds. The brave giant made an effort to rise, but the strain was too much. He groaned in agony.

"Leave it be, Victor," Mad Mike snarled triumphantly. "So, it is curtains for the hero, eh? You could have joined us. But you were the honest sort...the hero...well, goodbye, Victor. I am sorry! But I can't let you live, see?"

Mike's face contorted in anticipation. I saw his finger whitening on the trigger. And then the despair, the frustration, all the pain and outrage of the past twenty-four hours exploded inside me.

As if through a red mist, my eyes sighted the cross lying half-buried in the mud where it had fallen during Mike's titanic struggle with Victor. Begrimed and aged, the yellow metal still gleamed dully.

I can never explain to this day, what came over me in that instant. Weakened as I was by the toils of the three days on the island, my legs somehow found the energy to propel me towards that glistening object. In one motion, before I was conscious of it and before Mike or anyone else could even begin to guess at my intent, the cross was in my hands. I flung it with all the strength I could muster.

In the split second before the ruffian's finger could squeeze the trigger of his automatic, the cross had buried itself in his throat. A frightful gurgle issued from the man's mouth. His legs crumpled and the rifle fell from lifeless fingers.

For several moments no one moved, so paralysing was the effect of my action. Then Watkins and Albert acted. Before Pierre could comprehend the fact that his leader had
been actually cut down, they had pounced upon him.

I was on my knees, bleary-eyed. I had actually killed a man with my own hands. I looked down at my fingers, disbelievingly. Rita was at my side, her arms around me, laughing and crying all at once.

"Bravo, girl!" I heard the soft, hoarse whisper from Victor. The large-hearted innkeeper was smiling wanly.

* * *

Some time later, three men, two girls and a prisoner all crowded into a small motor boat, left the island. The boat barely managed to accommodate all of us after we first loaded the treasure chests in it.

We left behind the bodies of the dead rebels in shallow graves, quickly dug with the pickaxes and shovels we carried. Although Victor had wanted to leave them as they had fallen, Watkins would not hear of it. Even such men, he had decided, needed decent burials, whatever their crimes.

As our boat chugged farther and farther away from the island, I gazed up at the dark, brooding heights of Mt. Dauban, visible quite plainly. Smaller and smaller became the silhouette of the isle, scene of our recent travails, until Albert, piloting the boat, manoeuvred the craft around the northern coastline of the island. He had set the course for the jetty at Anse La Passe.

Ray Watkins gazed wonderingly down at the object in his hands. It was the blood-smeared, red and gold Fiery Cross of Goa.
A priceless treasure seized by pirate from aboard a Portuguese galleon! Le Vasseur, a terror on the sea, outwitted the Captain, the Archbishop and a posse of the King's best soldiers.

Over two centuries—

For forty years, Watkins hunted for the treasure and is now helped by Aarti and Rita who are equally determined in the pursuit. Their search takes them into the isles of Seychelles. The adventures of the teenagers, brimming with daring and energy, find their climax in the recovery of the Fiery Cross of Goa!