

Chapter 2

What could it mean? I had left Alvarez in command. He was my most loyal subordinate. It was absolutely beyond the pale of possibility that Alvarez should desert me. No, there was some other explanation. Something occurred to place my second officer, Porfirio Johnson, in command. I was sure of it but why speculate? The futility of conjecture was only too palpable. The Coldwater had abandoned us in midocean. Doubtless none of us would survive to know why.

The young man at the wheel of the power boat had turned her nose about as it became evident that the ship intended passing over us, and now he still held her in futile pursuit of the Coldwater.

"Bring her about, Snider," I directed, "and hold her due east. We can't catch the Coldwater, and we can't cross the Atlantic in this. Our only hope lies in making the nearest land, which, unless I am mistaken, is the Scilly Islands, off the southwest coast of England. Ever heard of England, Snider?"

"There's a part of the United States of North America that used to be known to the ancients as New England," he replied. "Is that where you mean, sir?"

"No, Snider," I replied. "The England I refer to was an island off the continent of Europe. It was the seat of a very powerful kingdom that flourished over two hundred years ago. A part of the United States of North America and all of the Federated States of Canada once belonged to this ancient England."

"Europe," breathed one of the men, his voice tense with excitement. "My grandfather used to tell me stories of the world beyond thirty. He had been a great student, and he had read much from forbidden books."

"In which I resemble your grandfather," I said, "for I, too, have read more even than naval officers are supposed to read, and, as you men know, we are permitted a greater latitude in the study of geography and history than men of other professions.

"Among the books and papers of Admiral Porter Turck, who lived two hundred years ago, and from whom I am descended, many volumes still exist, and are in my possession, which deal with the history and geography of ancient Europe. Usually I bring several of these books with me upon a cruise, and this time, among others, I have maps of Europe and her surrounding waters. I was studying them as we came away from the Coldwater this morning, and luckily I have them with me."

"You are going to try to make Europe, sir?" asked Taylor, the young man who had last spoken.

"It is the nearest land," I replied. "I have always wanted to explore the forgotten lands of the Eastern Hemisphere. Here's our chance. To remain at sea is to perish. None of us ever will see home again. Let us make the best of it, and enjoy while we do live that which is forbidden the balance of our race--the adventure and the mystery which lie beyond thirty."

Taylor and Delcarte seized the spirit of my mood but Snider, I think, was a trifle sceptical.

"It is treason, sir," I replied, "but there is no law which compels us to visit punishment upon ourselves. Could we return to Pan-America, I should be the first to insist that we face it. But we know that's not possible. Even if this craft would carry us so far, we haven't enough water or food for more than three days.

"We are doomed, Snider, to die far from home and without ever again looking upon the face of another fellow countryman than those who sit here now in this boat. Isn't that punishment sufficient for even the most exacting judge?"

Even Snider had to admit that it was.

"Very well, then, let us live while we live, and enjoy to the fullest whatever of adventure or pleasure each new day brings, since any day may be our last, and we shall be dead for a considerable while."

I could see that Snider was still fearful, but Taylor and Delcarte responded with a hearty, "Aye, aye, sir!"

They were of different mold. Both were sons of naval officers. They represented the aristocracy of birth, and they dared to think for themselves.

Snider was in the minority, and so we continued toward the east. Beyond thirty, and separated from my ship, my authority ceased. I held leadership, if I was to hold it at all, by virtue of personal qualifications only, but I did not doubt my ability to remain the director of our destinies in so far as they were amenable to human agencies. I have always led. While my brain and brawn remain unimpaired I shall continue always to lead. Following is an art which Turcks do not easily learn.

It was not until the third day that we raised land, dead ahead, which I took, from my map, to be the isles of Scilly. But such a gale was blowing that I did not dare attempt to land, and so we passed to the north of them, skirted Land's End, and entered the English Channel.

I think that up to that moment I had never experienced such a thrill as passed through me when I realized that I was navigating these historic waters. The lifelong dreams that I never had dared hope to see fulfilled were at last a reality-- but under what forlorn circumstances!

Never could I return to my native land. To the end of my days I must remain in exile. Yet even these thoughts failed to dampen my ardor.

My eyes scanned the waters. To the north I could see the rockbound coast of Cornwall. Mine were the first American eyes to rest upon it for more than two hundred years. In vain, I searched for some sign of ancient commerce that, if history is to be believed, must have dotted the bosom of the Channel with white sails and blackened the heavens with the smoke of countless funnels, but as far as eye could reach the tossing waters of the Channel were empty and deserted.

Toward midnight the wind and sea abated, so that shortly after dawn I determined to make inshore in an attempt to effect a landing, for we were sadly in need of fresh water and food.

According to my observations, we were just off Ram Head, and it was my intention to enter Plymouth Bay and visit Plymouth. From my map it appeared that this city lay back from the coast a short distance, and there was another city given as Devonport, which appeared to lie at the mouth of the river Tamar.

However, I knew that it would make little difference which city we entered, as the English people were famed of old for their hospitality toward visiting mariners. As we approached the mouth of the bay I looked for the fishing craft which I expected to see emerging thus early in the day for their labors. But even after we rounded Ram Head and were well within the waters of the bay I saw no vessel. Neither was there buoy nor light nor any other mark to show larger ships the channel, and I wondered much at this.

The coast was densely overgrown, nor was any building or sign of man apparent from the water. Up the bay and into the River Tamar we motored through a solitude as unbroken as that which rested upon the waters of the Channel. For all we could see, there was no indication that man had ever set his foot upon this silent coast.

I was nonplused, and then, for the first time, there crept over me an intuition of the truth.

Here was no sign of war. As far as this portion of the Devon coast was concerned, that seemed to have been over for many years, but neither were there any people. Yet I could not find it within myself to believe that I should find no inhabitants in

England. Reasoning thus, I discovered that it was improbable that a state of war still existed, and that the people all had been drawn from this portion of England to some other, where they might better defend themselves against an invader.

But what of their ancient coast defenses? What was there here in Plymouth Bay to prevent an enemy landing in force and marching where they wished? Nothing. I could not believe that any enlightened military nation, such as the ancient English are reputed to have been, would have voluntarily so deserted an exposed coast and an excellent harbor to the mercies of an enemy.

I found myself becoming more and more deeply involved in quandary. The puzzle which confronted me I could not unravel. We had landed, and I now stood upon the spot where, according to my map, a large city should rear its spires and chimneys. There was nothing but rough, broken ground covered densely with weeds and brambles, and tall, rank, grass.

Had a city ever stood there, no sign of it remained. The roughness and unevenness of the ground suggested something of a great mass of debris hidden by the accumulation of centuries of undergrowth.

I drew the short cutlass with which both officers and men of the navy are, as you know, armed out of courtesy to the traditions and memories of the past, and with its point dug into the loam about the roots of the vegetation growing at my feet.

The blade entered the soil for a matter of seven inches, when it struck upon something stonelike. Digging about the obstacle, I presently loosened it, and when I had withdrawn it from its sepulcher I found the thing to be an ancient brick of clay, baked in an oven.

Delcarte we had left in charge of the boat; but Snider and Taylor were with me, and following my example, each engaged in the fascinating sport of prospecting for antiques. Each of us uncovered a great number of these bricks, until we commenced to weary of the monotony of it, when Snider suddenly gave an exclamation of excitement, and, as I turned to look, he held up a human skull for my inspection.

I took it from him and examined it. Directly in the center of the forehead was a small round hole. The gentleman had evidently come to his end defending his country from an invader.

Snider again held aloft another trophy of the search--a metal spike and some tarnished and corroded metal ornaments. They had lain close beside the skull.

With the point of his cutlass Snider scraped the dirt and verdigris from the face of the larger ornament.

"An inscription," he said, and handed the thing to me.

They were the spike and ornaments of an ancient German helmet. Before long we had uncovered many other indications that a great battle had been fought upon the ground where we stood. But I was then, and still am, at loss to account for the presence of German soldiers upon the English coast so far from London, which history suggests would have been the natural goal of an invader.

I can only account for it by assuming that either England was temporarily conquered by the Teutons, or that an invasion of so vast proportions was undertaken that German troops were hurled upon the England coast in huge numbers and that landings were necessarily effected at many places simultaneously. Subsequent discoveries tend to strengthen this view.

We dug about for a short time with our cutlasses until I became convinced that a city had stood upon the spot at some time in the past, and that beneath our feet, crumbled and dead, lay ancient Devonport.

I could not repress a sigh at the thought of the havoc war had wrought in this part of England, at least. Farther east, nearer London, we should find things very different. There would be the civilization that two centuries must have wrought upon our English cousins as they had upon us. There would be mighty cities, cultivated fields, happy people. There we would be welcomed as long-lost brothers. There would we find a great nation anxious to learn of the world beyond their side of thirty, as I had been anxious to learn of that which lay beyond our side of the dead line.

I turned back toward the boat.

"Come, men!" I said. "We will go up the river and fill our casks with fresh water, search for food and fuel, and then tomorrow be in readiness to push on toward the east. I am going to London."