

CHAPTER XXXIX

They Fall In With Strangers

After quitting the Parki, we had much calm weather, varied by light breezes. And sailing smoothly over a sea, so recently one sheet of foam, I could not avoid bethinking me, how fortunate it was, that the gale had overtaken us in the brigantine, and not in the Chamois. For deservedly high as the whale-shallop ranks as a sea boat; still, in a severe storm, the larger your craft the greater your sense of security. Wherefore, the thousand reckless souls tenanted a line-of-battle ship scoff at the most awful hurricanes; though, in reality, they may be less safe in their wooden-walled Troy, than those who contend with the gale in a clipper.

But not only did I congratulate myself upon salvation from the past, but upon the prospect for the future. For storms happening so seldom in these seas, one just blown over is almost a sure guarantee of very many weeks' calm weather to come.

Now sun followed sun; and no land. And at length it almost seemed as if we must have sailed past the remotest presumable westerly limit of the chain of islands we sought; a lurking suspicion which I sedulously kept to myself. However, I could not but nourish a latent faith that all would yet be well.

On the ninth day my forebodings were over. In the gray of the dawn, perched upon the peak of our sail, a noddy was seen fast asleep. This freak was true to the nature of that curious fowl, whose name is significant of its drowsiness. Its plumage was snow-white, its bill and legs blood-red; the latter looking like little pantalettes. In a sly attempt at catching the bird, Samoa captured three tail-feathers; the alarmed creature flying away with a scream, and leaving its quills in his hand.

Sailing on, we gradually broke in upon immense low-sailing flights of other aquatic fowls, mostly of those species which are seldom found far from land: terns, frigate-birds, mollymeaux, reef-pigeons, boobies, gulls, and the like. They darkened the air; their wings making overhead an incessant rustling like the simultaneous turning over of ten thousand leaves. The smaller sort skimmed the sea like pebbles sent skipping from the shore. Over these, flew myriads of birds of broader wing. While high above all, soared in air the daring "Diver," or sea-kite, the power of whose vision is truly wonderful. It perceives the little flying-fish in the water, at a height which can not be less than four hundred feet. Spirally wheeling and screaming as it goes, the sea-kite, bill foremost, darts downward, swoops into the water, and for a moment altogether disappearing, emerges at last; its prey firmly trussed in its claws. But bearing it aloft, the bold bandit is quickly assailed by other birds of prey, that strive to wrest from him his booty. And snatched from his talons, you see the fish falling through the air, till again caught

up in the very act of descent, by the fleetest of its pursuers.

Leaving these sights astern, we presently picked up the slimy husk of a cocoanut, all over green barnacles. And shortly after, passed two or three limbs of trees, and the solitary trunk of a palm; which, upon sailing nearer, seemed but very recently started on its endless voyage. As noon came on; the dark purple land-haze, which had been dimly descried resting upon the western horizon, was very nearly obscured. Nevertheless, behind that dim drapery we doubted not bright boughs were waving.

We were now in high spirits. Samoa between times humming to himself some heathenish ditty, and Jarl ten times more intent on his silence than ever; yet his eye full of expectation and gazing broad off from our bow. Of a sudden, shading his face with his hand, he gazed fixedly for an instant, and then springing to his feet, uttered the long-drawn sound--"Sail ho!"

Just tipping the furthest edge of the sky was a little speck, dancing into view every time we rose upon the swells. It looked like one of many birds; for half intercepting our view, fell showers of plumage: a flight of milk-white noddies flying downward to the sea.

But soon the birds are seen no more. Yet there remains the speck; plainly a sail; but too small for a ship. Was it a boat after a whale? The vessel to which it belonged far astern, and shrouded by

the haze? So it seemed.

Quietly, however, we waited the stranger's nearer approach; confident, that for some time he would not be able to perceive us, owing to our being in what mariners denominate the "sun-glade," or that part of the ocean upon which the sun's rays flash with peculiar intensity.

As the sail drew nigh, its failing to glisten white led us to doubt whether it was indeed a whale-boat. Presently, it showed yellow; and Samoa declared, that it must be the sail of some island craft. True. The stranger proving a large double-canoe, like those used by the Polynesians in making passages between distant islands.

The Upoluan was now clamorous for a meeting, to which Jarl was averse. Deliberating a moment, I directed the muskets to be loaded; then setting the sail the wind on our quarter--we headed away for the canoe, now sailing at right angles with our previous course.

Here it must be mentioned, that from the various gay cloths and other things provided for barter by the captain of the Parki, I had very strikingly improved my costume; making it free, flowing, and eastern. I looked like an Emir. Nor had my Viking neglected to follow my example; though with some few modifications of his own. With his long tangled hair and harpoon, he looked like the sea-god, that boards ships, for the first time crossing the Equator. For tatoed

Samoa, he yet sported both kilt and turban, reminding one of a tawny leopard, though his spots were all in one place. Besides this raiment of ours, against emergencies we had provided our boat with divers nankeens and silks.

But now into full view comes a yoke of huge clumsy prows, shaggy with carving, and driving through the water with considerable velocity; the immense sprawling sail holding the wind like a bag. She seemed full of men; and from the dissonant cries borne over to us, and the canoe's widely yawing, it was plain that we had occasioned no small sensation. They seemed undetermined what course to pursue: whether to court a meeting, or avoid it; whether to regard us as friends or foes.

As we came still nearer, distinctly beholding their faces, we loudly hailed them, inviting them to furl their sails, and allow us to board them. But no answer was returned; their confusion increasing. And now, within less than two ships'-lengths, they swept right across our bow, gazing at us with blended curiosity and fear.

Their craft was about thirty feet long, consisting of a pair of parallel canoes, very narrow, and at the distance of a yard or so, lengthwise, united by stout cross-timbers, lashed across the four gunwales. Upon these timbers was a raised plat-form or dais, quite dry; and astern an arched cabin or tent; behind which, were two broad-bladed paddles terminating in rude shark-tails, by which the craft was steered.

The yard, spreading a yellow sail, was a crooked bough, supported obliquely in the crotch of a mast, to which the green bark was still clinging. Here and there were little tufts of moss. The high, beaked prow of that canoe in which the mast was placed, resembled a rude altar; and all round it was suspended a great variety of fruits, including scores of cocoanuts, unhusked. This prow was railed off, forming a sort of chancel within.

The foremost beam, crossing the gunwales, extended some twelve feet beyond the side of the dais; and at regular intervals hereupon, stout cords were fastened, which, leading up to the head of the mast, answered the purpose of shrouds. The breeze was now streaming fresh; and, as if to force down into the water the windward side of the craft, five men stood upon this long beam, grasping five shrouds. Yet they failed to counterbalance the pressure of the sail; and owing to the opposite inclination of the twin canoes, these living statues were elevated high above the water; their appearance rendered still more striking by their eager attitudes, and the apparent peril of their position, as the mad spray from the bow dashed over them. Suddenly, the Islanders threw their craft into the wind; while, for ourselves, we lay on our oars, fearful of alarming them by now coming nearer. But hailing them again, we said we were friends; and had friendly gifts for them, if they would peaceably permit us to approach. This understood, there ensued a mighty clamor; insomuch, that I bade Jarl and Samoa out oars, and row very gently toward the

strangers. Whereupon, amid a storm of vociferations, some of them hurried to the furthest side of their dais; standing with arms arched over their heads, as if for a dive; others menacing us with clubs and spears; and one, an old man with a bamboo trellis on his head forming a sort of arbor for his hair, planted himself full before the tent, stretching behind him a wide plaited sling.

Upon this hostile display, Samoa dropped his oar, and brought his piece to bear upon the old man, who, by his attitude, seemed to menace us with the fate of the great braggart of Gath. But I quickly knocked down the muzzle of his musket, and forbade the slightest token of hostility; enjoining it upon my companions, nevertheless, to keep well on their guard.

We now ceased rowing, and after a few minutes' uproar in the canoe, they ran to the steering-paddles, and forcing round their craft before the wind, rapidly ran away from us. With all haste we set our sail, and pulling also at our oars, soon overtook them, determined upon coming into closer communion.