

CHAPTER XIII. THE ISLAND AND THE WRECK.

All hands were filled with joy. It was betrayed in their alacrity and easy faces: Johnson smiling broadly at the wheel, Nares studying the sketch chart of the island with an eye at peace, and the hands clustered forward, eagerly talking and pointing: so manifest was our escape, so wonderful the attraction of a single foot of earth after so many suns had set and risen on an empty sea. To add to the relief, besides, by one of those malicious coincidences which suggest for fate the image of an underbred and grinning schoolboy, we had no sooner worn ship than the wind began to abate.

For myself, however, I did but exchange anxieties. I was no sooner out of one fear than I fell upon another; no sooner secure that I should myself make the intended haven, than I began to be convinced that Trent was there before me. I climbed into the rigging, stood on the board, and eagerly scanned that ring of coral reef and bursting breaker, and the blue lagoon which they enclosed. The two islets within began to show plainly--Middle Brooks and Lower Brooks Island, the Directory named them: two low, bush-covered, rolling strips of sand, each with glittering beaches, each perhaps a mile or a mile and a half in length, running east and west, and divided by a narrow channel. Over these, innumerable as maggots, there hovered, chattered, screamed and clanged, millions of twinkling sea-birds: white and black; the black by far the largest. With singular scintillations, this vortex of winged life swayed

to and fro in the strong sunshine, whirled continually through itself, and would now and again burst asunder and scatter as wide as the lagoon: so that I was irresistibly reminded of what I had read of nebular convulsions. A thin cloud overspread the area of the reef and the adjacent sea--the dust, as I could not but fancy, of earlier explosions. And a little apart, there was yet another focus of centrifugal and centripetal flight, where, hard by the deafening line of breakers, her sails (all but the tattered topsail) snugly furled down, and the red rag that marks Old England on the seas beating, union down, at the main--the Flying Scud, the fruit of so many toilers, a recollection in so many lives of men, whose tall spars had been mirrored in the remotest corners of the sea--lay stationary at last and forever, in the first stage of naval dissolution. Towards her, the taut Norah Creina, vulture-wise, wriggled to windward: come from so far to pick her bones. And, look as I pleased, there was no other presence of man or of man's handiwork; no Honolulu schooner lay there crowded with armed rivals, no smoke rose from the fire at which I fancied Trent cooking a meal of sea-birds. It seemed, after all, we were in time, and I drew a mighty breath.

I had not arrived at this reviving certainty before the breakers were already close aboard, the leadsman at his station, and the captain posted in the fore cross-trees to con us through the coral lumps of the lagoon. All circumstances were in our favour, the light behind, the sun low, the wind still fresh and steady, and the tide about the turn. A moment later we shot at racing speed betwixt two pier heads of broken water; the lead began to be cast, the captain to bawl down his anxious

directions, the schooner to tack and dodge among the scattered dangers of the lagoon; and at one bell in the first dog watch, we had come to our anchor off the north-east end of Middle Brooks Island, in five fathoms water. The sails were gasketted and covered, the boats emptied of the miscellaneous stores and odds and ends of sea-furniture, that accumulate in the course of a voyage, the kedge sent ashore, and the decks tidied down: a good three-quarters of an hour's work, during which I raged about the deck like a man with a strong toothache. The transition from the wild sea to the comparative immobility of the lagoon had wrought strange distress among my nerves: I could not hold still whether in hand or foot; the slowness of the men, tired as dogs after our rough experience outside, irritated me like something personal; and the irrational screaming of the sea-birds saddened me like a dirge. It was a relief when, with Nares, and a couple of hands, I might drop into the boat and move off at last for the Flying Scud.

"She looks kind of pitiful, don't she?" observed the captain, nodding towards the wreck, from which we were separated by some half a mile. "Looks as if she didn't like her berth, and Captain Trent had used her badly. Give her ginger, boys!" he added to the hands, "and you can all have shore liberty to-night to see the birds and paint the town red."

We all laughed at the pleasantry, and the boat skimmed the faster over the rippling face of the lagoon. The Flying Scud would have seemed small enough beside the wharves of San Francisco, but she was some thrice the size of the Norah Creina, which had been so long our continent; and

as we craned up at her wall-sides, she impressed us with a mountain magnitude. She lay head to the reef, where the huge blue wall of the rollers was for ever ranging up and crumbling down; and to gain her starboard side, we must pass below the stern. The rudder was hard aport, and we could read the legend:

FLYING SCUD

HULL

On the other side, about the break of the poop, some half a fathom of rope ladder trailed over the rail, and by this we made our entrance.

She was a roomy ship inside, with a raised poop standing some three feet higher than the deck, and a small forward house, for the men's bunks and the galley, just abaft the foremast. There was one boat on the house, and another and larger one, in beds on deck, on either hand of it. She had been painted white, with tropical economy, outside and in; and we found, later on, that the stanchions of the rail, hoops of the scuttle but, etc., were picked out with green. At that time, however, when we first stepped aboard, all was hidden under the droppings of innumerable sea-birds.

The birds themselves gyrated and screamed meanwhile among the rigging; and when we looked into the galley, their outrush drove us back.

Savage-looking fowl they were, savagely beaked, and some of the black

ones great as eagles. Half-buried in the slush, we were aware of a litter of kegs in the waist; and these, on being somewhat cleaned, proved to be water beakers and quarter casks of mess beef with some colonial brand, doubtless collected there before the Tempest hove in sight, and while Trent and his men had no better expectation than to strike for Honolulu in the boats. Nothing else was notable on deck, save where the loose topsail had played some havoc with the rigging, and there hung, and swayed, and sang in the declining wind, a raffle of intorted cordage.

With a shyness that was almost awe, Nares and I descended the companion. The stair turned upon itself and landed us just forward of a thwart-ship bulkhead that cut the poop in two. The fore part formed a kind of miscellaneous store-room, with a double-bunked division for the cook (as Nares supposed) and second mate. The after part contained, in the midst, the main cabin, running in a kind of bow into the curvature of the stern; on the port side, a pantry opening forward and a stateroom for the mate; and on the starboard, the captain's berth and water-closet. Into these we did but glance: the main cabin holding us. It was dark, for the sea-birds had obscured the skylight with their droppings; it smelt rank and fusty; and it was beset with a loud swarm of flies that beat continually in our faces. Supposing them close attendants upon man and his broken meat, I marvelled how they had found their way to Midway reef; it was sure at least some vessel must have brought them, and that long ago, for they had multiplied exceedingly. Part of the floor was strewn with a confusion of clothes, books, nautical instruments, odds

and ends of finery, and such trash as might be expected from the turning out of several seamen's chests, upon a sudden emergency and after a long cruise. It was strange in that dim cabin, quivering with the near thunder of the breakers and pierced with the screaming of the fowls, to turn over so many things that other men had coveted, and prized, and worn on their warm bodies--frayed old underclothing, pyjamas of strange design, duck suits in every stage of rustiness, oil skins, pilot coats, bottles of scent, embroidered shirts, jackets of Ponjee silk--clothes for the night watch at sea or the day ashore in the hotel verandah; and mingled among these, books, cigars, fancy pipes, quantities of tobacco, many keys, a rusty pistol, and a sprinkling of cheap curiosities--Benares brass, Chinese jars and pictures, and bottles of odd shells in cotton, each designed no doubt for somebody at home--perhaps in Hull, of which Trent had been a native and his ship a citizen.

Thence we turned our attention to the table, which stood spread, as if for a meal, with stout ship's crockery and the remains of food--a pot of marmalade, dregs of coffee in the mugs, unrecognisable remains of foods, bread, some toast, and a tin of condensed milk. The table-cloth, originally of a red colour, was stained a dark brown at the captain's end, apparently with coffee; at the other end, it had been folded back, and a pen and ink-pot stood on the bare table. Stools were here and there about the table, irregularly placed, as though the meal had been finished and the men smoking and chatting; and one of the stools lay on the floor, broken.

"See! they were writing up the log," said Nares, pointing to the ink-bottle. "Caught napping, as usual. I wonder if there ever was a captain yet, that lost a ship with his log-book up to date? He generally has about a month to fill up on a clean break, like Charles Dickens and his serial novels.--What a regular, lime-juicer spread!" he added contemptuously. "Marmalade--and toast for the old man! Nasty, slovenly pigs!"

There was something in this criticism of the absent that jarred upon my feelings. I had no love indeed for Captain Trent or any of his vanished gang; but the desertion and decay of this once habitable cabin struck me hard: the death of man's handiwork is melancholy like the death of man himself; and I was impressed with an involuntary and irrational sense of tragedy in my surroundings.

"This sickens me," I said. "Let's go on deck and breathe."

The captain nodded. "It IS kind of lonely, isn't it?" he said. "But I can't go up till I get the code signals. I want to run up 'Got Left' or something, just to brighten up this island home. Captain Trent hasn't been here yet, but he'll drop in before long; and it'll cheer him up to see a signal on the brig."

"Isn't there some official expression we could use?" I asked, vastly taken by the fancy. "'Sold for the benefit of the underwriters: for

further particulars, apply to J. Pinkerton, Montana Block, S.F."

"Well," returned Nares, "I won't say but what an old navy quartermaster might telegraph all that, if you gave him a day to do it in and a pound of tobacco for himself. But it's above my register. I must try something short and sweet: KB, urgent signal, 'Heave all aback'; or LM, urgent, 'The berth you're now in is not safe'; or what do you say to PQH?--'Tell my owners the ship answers remarkably well.'"

"It's premature," I replied; "but it seems calculated to give pain to Trent. PQH for me."

The flags were found in Trent's cabin, neatly stored behind a lettered grating; Nares chose what he required and (I following) returned on deck, where the sun had already dipped, and the dusk was coming.

"Here! don't touch that, you fool!" shouted the captain to one of the hands, who was drinking from the scuttle but. "That water's rotten!"

"Beg pardon, sir," replied the man. "Tastes quite sweet."

"Let me see," returned Nares, and he took the dipper and held it to his lips. "Yes, it's all right," he said. "Must have rotted and come sweet again. Queer, isn't it, Mr. Dodd? Though I've known the same on a Cape Horner."

There was something in his intonation that made me look him in the face; he stood a little on tiptoe to look right and left about the ship, like a man filled with curiosity, and his whole expression and bearing testified to some suppressed excitement.

"You don't believe what you're saying!" I broke out.

"O, I don't know but what I do!" he replied, laying a hand upon me soothingly. "The thing's very possible. Only, I'm bothered about something else."

And with that he called a hand, gave him the code flags, and stepped himself to the main signal halliards, which vibrated under the weight of the ensign overhead. A minute later, the American colours, which we had brought in the boat, replaced the English red, and PQH was fluttering at the fore.

"Now, then," said Nares, who had watched the breaking out of his signal with the old-maidish particularity of an American sailor, "out with those handspikes, and let's see what water there is in the lagoon."

The bars were shoved home; the barbarous cacophony of the clanking pump rose in the waist; and streams of ill-smelling water gushed on deck and made valleys in the slab guano. Nares leaned on the rail, watching the steady stream of bilge as though he found some interest in it.

"What is it that bothers you?" I asked.

"Well, I'll tell you one thing shortly," he replied. "But here's another. Do you see those boats there, one on the house and two on the beds? Well, where is the boat Trent lowered when he lost the hands?"

"Got it aboard again, I suppose," said I.

"Well, if you'll tell me why!" returned the captain.

"Then it must have been another," I suggested.

"She might have carried another on the main hatch, I won't deny," admitted Nares; "but I can't see what she wanted with it, unless it was for the old man to go out and play the accordion in, on moonlight nights."

"It can't much matter, anyway," I reflected.

"O, I don't suppose it does," said he, glancing over his shoulder at the spouting of the scuppers.

"And how long are we to keep up this racket?" I asked. "We're simply pumping up the lagoon. Captain Trent himself said she had settled down and was full forward."

"Did he?" said Nares, with a significant dryness. And almost as he spoke the pumps sucked, and sucked again, and the men threw down their bars. "There, what do you make of that?" he asked. "Now, I'll tell, Mr. Dodd," he went on, lowering his voice, but not shifting from his easy attitude against the rail, "this ship is as sound as the *Norah Creina*. I had a guess of it before we came aboard, and now I know."

"It's not possible!" I cried. "What do you make of Trent?"

"I don't make anything of Trent; I don't know whether he's a liar or only an old wife; I simply tell you what's the fact," said Nares. "And I'll tell you something more," he added: "I've taken the ground myself in deep-water vessels; I know what I'm saying; and I say that, when she first struck and before she bedded down, seven or eight hours' work would have got this hooker off, and there's no man that ever went two years to sea but must have known it."

I could only utter an exclamation.

Nares raised his finger warningly. "Don't let THEM get hold of it," said he. "Think what you like, but say nothing."

I glanced round; the dusk was melting into early night; the twinkle of a lantern marked the schooner's position in the distance; and our men,

free from further labour, stood grouped together in the waist, their faces illuminated by their glowing pipes.

"Why didn't Trent get her off?" inquired the captain. "Why did he want to buy her back in 'Frisco for these fabulous sums, when he might have sailed her into the bay himself?"

"Perhaps he never knew her value until then," I suggested.

"I wish we knew her value now," exclaimed Nares. "However, I don't want to depress you; I'm sorry for you, Mr. Dodd; I know how bothering it must be to you; and the best I can say's this: I haven't taken much time getting down, and now I'm here I mean to work this thing in proper style. I just want to put your mind at rest: you shall have no trouble with me."

There was something trusty and friendly in his voice; and I found myself gripping hands with him, in that hard, short shake that means so much with English-speaking people.

"We'll do, old fellow," said he. "We've shaken down into pretty good friends, you and me; and you won't find me working the business any the less hard for that. And now let's scoot for supper."

After supper, with the idle curiosity of the seafarer, we pulled ashore in a fine moonlight, and landed on Middle Brook's Island. A flat beach

surrounded it upon all sides; and the midst was occupied by a thicket of bushes, the highest of them scarcely five feet high, in which the sea-fowl lived. Through this we tried at first to strike; but it were easier to cross Trafalgar Square on a day of demonstration than to invade these haunts of sleeping sea-birds. The nests sank, and the eggs burst under footing; wings beat in our faces, beaks menaced our eyes, our minds were confounded with the screeching, and the coil spread over the island and mounted high into the air.

"I guess we'll saunter round the beach," said Nares, when we had made good our retreat.

The hands were all busy after sea-birds' eggs, so there were none to follow us. Our way lay on the crisp sand by the margin of the water: on one side, the thicket from which we had been dislodged; on the other, the face of the lagoon, barred with a broad path of moonlight, and beyond that, the line, alternately dark and shining, alternately hove high and fallen prone, of the external breakers. The beach was strewn with bits of wreck and drift: some redwood and spruce logs, no less than two lower masts of junks, and the stern-post of a European ship; all of which we looked on with a shade of serious concern, speaking of the dangers of the sea and the hard case of castaways. In this sober vein we made the greater part of the circuit of the island; had a near view of its neighbour from the southern end; walked the whole length of the westerly side in the shadow of the thicket; and came forth again into

the moonlight at the opposite extremity.

On our right, at the distance of about half a mile, the schooner lay faintly heaving at her anchors. About half a mile down the beach, at a spot still hidden from us by the thicket, an upboiling of the birds showed where the men were still (with sailor-like insatiability) collecting eggs. And right before us, in a small indentation of the sand, we were aware of a boat lying high and dry, and right side up.

Nares crouched back into the shadow of the bushes.

"What the devil's this?" he whispered.

"Trent," I suggested, with a beating heart.

"We were damned fools to come ashore unarmed," said he. "But I've got to know where I stand." In the shadow, his face looked conspicuously white, and his voice betrayed a strong excitement. He took his boat's whistle from his pocket. "In case I might want to play a tune," said he, grimly, and thrusting it between his teeth, advanced into the moonlit open; which we crossed with rapid steps, looking guiltily about us as we went. Not a leaf stirred; and the boat, when we came up to it, offered convincing proof of long desertion. She was an eighteen-foot whaleboat of the ordinary type, equipped with oars and thole-pins. Two or three quarter-casks lay on the bilge amidships, one of which must have been broached, and now stank horribly; and these, upon examination, proved to

bear the same New Zealand brand as the beef on board the wreck.

"Well, here's the boat," said I; "here's one of your difficulties cleared away."

"H'm," said he. There was a little water in the bilge, and here he stooped and tasted it.

"Fresh," he said. "Only rain-water."

"You don't object to that?" I asked.

"No," said he.

"Well, then, what ails you?" I cried.

"In plain United States, Mr. Dodd," he returned, "a whaleboat, five ash sweeps, and a barrel of stinking pork."

"Or, in other words, the whole thing?" I commented.

"Well, it's this way," he condescended to explain. "I've no use for a fourth boat at all; but a boat of this model tops the business. I don't say the type's not common in these waters; it's as common as dirt; the traders carry them for surf-boats. But the Flying Scud? a deep-water tramp, who was lime-juicing around between big ports, Calcutta and

Rangoon and 'Frisco and the Canton River? No, I don't see it."

We were leaning over the gunwale of the boat as we spoke. The captain stood nearest the bow, and he was idly playing with the trailing painter, when a thought arrested him. He hauled the line in hand over hand, and stared, and remained staring, at the end.

"Anything wrong with it?" I asked.

"Do you know, Mr. Dodd," said he, in a queer voice, "this painter's been cut? A sailor always seizes a rope's end, but this is sliced short off with the cold steel. This won't do at all for the men," he added. "Just stand by till I fix it up more natural."

"Any guess what it all means?" I asked.

"Well, it means one thing," said he. "It means Trent was a liar. I guess the story of the Flying Scud was a sight more picturesque than he gave out."

Half an hour later, the whaleboat was lying astern of the Norah Creina; and Nares and I sought our bunks, silent and half-bewildered by our late discoveries.