



MYSTERY ISLAND

BY PERCY · F · WESTERMAN

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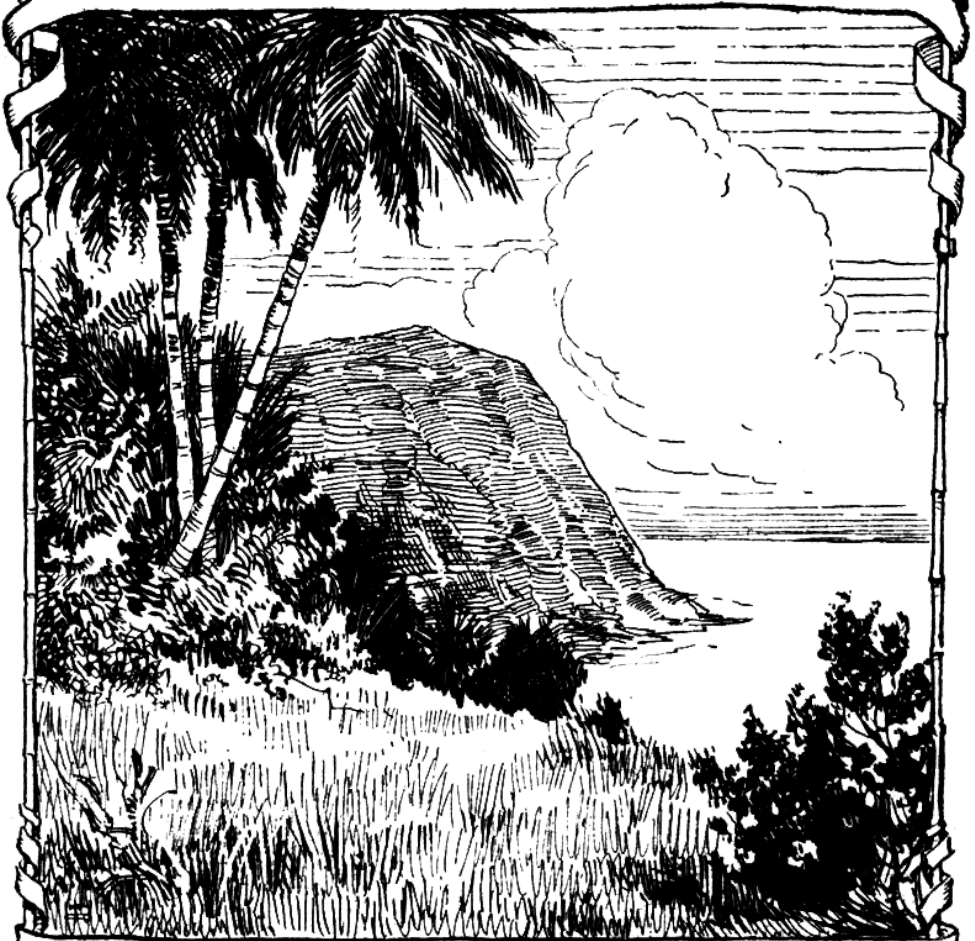
SUDDENLY THE BRUSHWOOD PARTED, AND AN ENORMOUS BOAR, BREAKING FROM COVER,
DASHED STRAIGHT AT THE NEAREST OF THE THREE LADS

(See page 46)

MYSTERY · ISLAND

BY

PERCY · F · WESTERMAN



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THE BIG STORIES

Uniform with this Volume

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THE HEIR OF A HUNDRED KINGS
YOUNG JACK
A THOUSAND MILES AN HOUR
MARTIN OF OLD LONDON
DAN BOLTON'S DISCOVERY
THE RIVER PIRATES

By LAWRENCE R. BOURNE
COPPERNOB BUCKLAND
COPPERNOB: SECOND MATE
THE RADIUM CASKET

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

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CHAPTER THE FIRST

THE RAFT

“**T**HAT lump o’ wreckage is fair getting on your nerves,” declared Joseph Durnford, Chief Officer of the *Cosmos*.

Duncan McFail, master mariner, with thirty years’ sea service to his credit, lowered his telescope before replying—

“Let me tell you, Mister, nerves didn’t come my way when they were served out. I’m interested, that’s all; and when a thing interests me I always try to get to the bottom of it. Order the whaler away, Mister. Let the ‘prentices take her. They haven’t over-exerted themselves the last forty-eight hours, not by a long chalk.”

“Ay, ay, sir,” rejoined the Chief Officer, more in agreement with the Old Man’s sentiments than with the order.

The *Cosmos*, a full-rigged ship of nearly one thousand five hundred tons, was lying becalmed in the Pacific. She had been thus for nearly two days, and it looked as if she would continue to be so for several hours.

Ever since daybreak the ship had been within two miles of the object that had aroused the captain’s interest. Viewed through a telescope the thing resolved itself into a small raft with a raised object at one end, and a spar broken off short about six feet above the level of the water.

Curiously enough, although both ship and raft maintained their relative positions throughout the greater part of the day—and it was now one bell in the First Dog Watch—the floating timber had not appreciably swung round. Consequently what was on the raft on the other side of the projection was invisible from the ship, a fact that perplexed Captain McFail even more.

“All this fuss over a lump o’ wreckage,” muttered the Chief as he went for’ard to turn out the three apprentices. “Well, there’s one good thing: it’ll work down the callow suet off those idle youngsters!”

A remark which tended to prove that the taciturn Durnford was not favourably inclined towards the lads. When the Chief referred to them as being idle, he did them an injustice; but that was Durnford’s attitude towards every one in the ship over whom he exercised authority. In short, he was a

bully, with this in his favour: although he drove men, he was not lacking in courage, and never ordered a man to do anything which he would hesitate to perform himself.

The *Cosmos* had no auxiliary engine. She depended solely upon the winds to carry her from one port to another. She was three months out of London River, of which time seventeen days had been taken up between 'Frisco and Yokohama—and Yokohama was still very many miles away.

At the Chief Officer's leather-lunged order two of the apprentices dropped what they were doing and dashed out of the cuddy.

Both were sixteen years of age and on their first voyage. There the similarity ended, for Brian Curtiss was tall, sparely-built, and dark-featured; while Chris Alderson was six inches shorter, heavily framed, with thick limbs, a fair complexion and flaxen hair.

The third apprentice, Alec Bainbridge, was in point of age and service their senior. It was his second voyage on the *Cosmos*, but it would not have been had Joe Durnford been Chief Officer on the previous run, if he, Alec, had had a say in the matter.

Alec Bainbridge in appearance was midway between Curtiss and Alderson as far as height was concerned. Muscular and well-proportioned, he lacked the impulsiveness of Curtiss and the deliberate slowness of Alderson, who rarely hurried over anything except at the bull-voiced behests of the Chief Officer and the crisp orders of the choleric Old Man.

Bainbridge believed in the axiom, "Look before you leap;" yet, on the other hand, when once he made up his mind his judgment was rarely at fault.

Brian had been writing a letter—although he had not the faintest idea of how long it would be before he had an opportunity of sending it home—when the Chief ordered the apprentices on deck. Chris was busily engaged in carving the hull of a model of the *Cosmos*. Both dropped what they were doing at once, and went on deck in their shirt-sleeves.

Not so Alec Bainbridge. He was engaged in taking to pieces and cleaning his telescope. All that remained to be done was to refix the object-lens. That would take too long, but experience had taught him the folly of leaving lenses about. They are apt to disappear mysteriously and finally, especially as an object-lens serves as a most handy burning-glass when there are pipes to be lighted, matches are scarce, and there is no fire in the galley.

Slipping on his coat, Alec placed the lens carefully in his pocket-book, replacing the latter in the inside breast-pocket. Then, again profiting by

experience, he put half a dozen hard biscuits into one side pocket and a slab of chocolate into the other.

This done, he followed his chums to where the whaler hung in davits.

“Shall I take this gear out, sir?” he asked, pointing to the mast, spars, and sail that were lashed to the boat’s thwarts.

“Take ’em out? What for?” replied the Chief Officer. “You aren’t going in for a regatta, my lad. Extra weight won’t do you any harm. Now listen. See yon bit o’ wreckage?”

“Yes, sir,” replied Alec. He had seen it off and on for the last eight hours.

“Pull over to it and examine it. It’s not more’n two miles off; so if you’re not back within an hour, look out for squalls!”

“Ay, ay, sir,” replied the lad. “May we take Peter?”

Peter was the ship’s dog. He belonged to no one in particular, but every one on board had part interest in him. Rough though the men were, they never once willingly harmed the animal. Even the Old Man and Chief Officer Durnford, hard-bitten, brass-bound sailormen both, regarded Peter tolerantly, but Alec, Brian, and Chris seemed to be special objects of Peter’s canine devotion.

It would be difficult to determine Peter’s breed. Jephson, the cook, who professed to be an authority on dogs, declared that the ship’s mascot was partly Newfoundland, partly retriever, with a clash of sheep-dog and collie in his composition. At any rate, Peter in being was a massive, shaggy animal, standing three feet to his fore shoulders from the ground and tipping the scale at six stone.

In spite of his nondescript ancestry and the disreputable circumstances under which he first came on board at West India Dock, Peter’s heart was in the right place. He had all the good points of a dog’s character and few, if any, of the bad.

“No, you can’t,” replied the Chief Officer in reply to Alec’s request. “It’s a boat you’re taking away, not a bloomin’ menagerie.”

Peter, who had been eagerly looking from Durnford to Alec, and no doubt taking in every word of the conversation, realised at once that his luck was out.

Standing on his hind legs and placing his paws on Alec’s shoulders, Peter gave the apprentice a hearty and decidedly moist lick. Then, with his

long bushy tail between his legs, he walked dejectedly for'ard.

Durnford was on the point of relenting and calling the dog back when the Old Man raised his voice, demanding to know what "those lazy blighters were hanging on to the slack for?"

"Off with you!" ordered the Chief Officer, realising that the reprimand reflected upon him. "If that boat's not away within a couple of minutes, look out for squalls!"

Meanwhile, some of the hands had come aft to assist in swinging out and lowering the boat. She was now ready to take the water. Brian and Chris each took an oar, sitting on opposite sides of the tarpaulined spars and mast, while Alec, shipping the rudder, sat on the stern-bench.

"Lower away!"

The falls *cheeped* in the blocks. The whaler with her crew bumped lightly upon the surface of the tranquil water. The disengaging gear was slipped and, bending to the heavy ash oars, the rowers "gave way."

"No need to break blood-vessels," remarked Chris, when the boat was out of earshot distance from the *Cosmos*. "I say, doesn't the old hooker look topping."

The three chums were genuinely fond and proud of their ship, notwithstanding the more-than-strict attitude of the Chief Officer. It took more than that to quench their enthusiasm.

At Alderson's remark, Alec turned his head. The sight that met his gaze justified his chum's spontaneous praise.

Like a painted ship upon a painted ocean, the *Cosmos* lay, her canvas hanging idly from her yards. She was close-hauled on the port tack, with yards braced taut. So calm was the surface of the water that her reflection was almost perfect. It was a picture that few seamen see nowadays: a full-rigged ship with canvas spread and lying motionless on a glassy sea.

"Twenty-three sails set," commented Chris. "My word, when the breeze springs up we'll have some work to do!"

"Well, we're lucky so far," rejoined Alec. "It's a wonder to me the Old Man didn't set us on blacking down the rigging."

"You needn't wonder any longer, then," said Brian, as he leant over the side and sprinkled water over the loom of his oar. "I heard Durnford tell the

Old Man that if the calm held we were to start on that job directly we got back—the nigger-driver.”

“Keep it up, lads!” urged Alec. “An hour’s the limit.”

“Rather be pulling this boat than slapping tar on the rigging,” declared Curtiss. “How much further, Alec?”

“ ‘Nother half-mile. Put your backs into it, lads.”

As the whaler closed on the object of their investigations, Alec noticed that it was a raft of sorts. Not the generally accepted idea, but a triangular affair, composed of three lengths of massive spars lashed in triangular form, with a piece of lumber of smaller scantling fixed parallel to one side of the triangle. Over this was a rough platform, composed of one large grating and a few planks. A sort of low breastwork had been fixed to the platform, but this had disappeared with the exception of one side. It was this that had prevented Captain McFail from taking a comprehensive view of the raft.

“Way ‘nough!” ordered Alec.

His chums boated their oars. Chris, who had been rowing stroke, went for’ard with the boat-hook. Alec put the helm over. The whaler, describing a graceful curve, ranged alongside the raft. Then, for the first time, the three lads saw what was on the farther side of the projection which had aroused the Old Man’s curiosity.

Lashed to the stump of the shattered mast was what appeared to be the body of a man.

CHAPTER THE SECOND

DISASTER

IT had been a man once—this shrunken relic of humanity. Most of the flesh had already disappeared from the skull; what remained had been blackened by long exposure to the tropical sun and the salt-laden breezes. Beneath the frayed sleeves of a tattered shirt projected the clenched and skeleton-like hands. The feet were encased in ancient canvas shoes, through which projected the toes of the luckless seaman. For seaman he evidently had been, judging by the serge trousers and leather belt. In a sheath attached to the latter was a bone-handled knife. Round the waist of the corpse was a rope that, bent to the remains of the mast, was knotted over the man's chest by means of a reef-knot.

Curiously enough the man's head had not fallen forward on his chest. It remained erect and immovable, the sightless eyes staring—that was the impression they gave—straight at the crew of the whaler. Each seemed to be the object of the dead man's gaze.

"I say!" exclaimed Chris in awe-struck tones. "What's to be done?"

"Done?" echoed Alec sharply, for the "thing" was beginning to get on his nerves. "Done—carry out orders, of course. Take a turn with the painter there. Make sure you are making fast to something secure. The raft looks a bit rotten. That's right."

Stepping over the thwarts to the bows, Alec leapt nimbly to the raft. It dipped under his weight, but promptly recovered its trim. There was plenty of buoyancy left in spite of its long immersion.

The others followed with decided reluctance. Theirs was a distasteful job, and the best way to do it, they decided, was to hurry up and get it done.

"See what's in his pockets, Alec," suggested Curtiss.

"Look yourself," replied his chum with asperity.

Without hesitation, Brian turned out the man's trousers pockets. Both were empty.

"Doesn't help us much," he remarked. "Now for that chest."

He pointed to a small mahogany sea-chest placed against the raised breastwork. At each end were “beckets” of tarred rope, through which lashings had been rove to secure the chest to the raft.

The hinges were stiff with rust. The lid creaked as Curtiss threw it back. Within were two files, a hatchet, a small saw, a ball of tarred twine, an old clay pipe, and an empty tobacco-pouch. The tools were red with rust, the twine and pouch sodden with salt water.

“Not much there,” commented Chris.

“No; it makes me wonder why the fellow went to the trouble to lash the chest to the raft. No; don’t touch them. They aren’t worth taking away.”

“Perhaps some one’s been here before us,” suggested Alec. “I shouldn’t be surprised if there hadn’t been two men, survivors from some wrecked craft. They quarrelled over something—perhaps money, brought off in the sea-chest—and one murdered the other.”

“Then what’s happened to the other chap?” asked Curtiss. “If he had been rescued, the people who picked him up must have known he had killed the other fellow.”

Alec shook his head.

“Probably he was almost starved to death, and threw himself off the raft to end it all. There’s no sign of any food or fresh water. Goodness knows. Stranger things happen at sea. Well, let’s be getting back, or Durnford’ll make it hot for us.”

“I say——” began Chris.

“What?” asked his chum.

“This poor fellow—we can’t leave him like this,” continued Alderson slowly.

“‘Spouse not,” agreed Alec. “We ought, by rights, to ask the Old Man for instructions.”

“We can semaphore,” remarked Brian, “but it’s too far off for us to read the reply. We haven’t a telescope. And it’s no use for the Old Man to hoist a signal. There’s no wind.”

“That’s a fact,” agreed Alec. “The best thing we can do is to row back to the ship. It’ll mean another pull to the raft and back for us, but I don’t mind that, if only—— Look out, you fellows!”

He pointed hurriedly in the direction of the *Cosmos*. From no great distance, apparently, came a shrill, hissing sound. It was the all-too-brief warning of the approach of the dangerous white squall.

Often with a velocity of a mile a minute, the white squall hurls itself out of a clear and hitherto peaceful sky. Unaccompanied by rain or clouds, the white squall is heralded only by the shriek of the wind, the noise travelling five times as quickly as the actual blast of air.

The others heard the sound. Instinctively the three looked in the direction of the ship. Even as they did so they saw the *Cosmos*, taken aback by the furious squall, heel over on her beam-ends.

For a few long-drawn-out seconds they could see the storm-lashed water foaming and flying in sheets over the capsized hull. Then, with appalling suddenness, the ship disappeared from sight. The last glimpse the lads had of her was her fore-rigged t'gallant sail and her main skysail as, in her plunge to the bed of the Pacific, the ill-fated vessel temporarily recovered from her heel.

Already the rapidly-advancing line of foam-flecked water was bearing down upon the raft. Alec, the first to be alive to the imminent peril, grasped his chums and shouted.



THEY SAW THE *COSMOS*, TAKEN ABACK BY THE FURIOUS SQUALL,
HEEL OVER ON HER BEAM-ENDS.

“Into the boat with you! Look nippy, there!”

The three leapt into the whaler. Brian was about to cast off the painter when Alec yelled to him to belay.

“Out oars and get to lee’ard of the raft!” he ordered. “Look alive. It’s our only chance.”

Curtis and Alderson obeyed promptly. Already three months in the *Cosmos* had installed into them a sense of discipline. Instinctively they realised that Alec’s orders, by virtue of his seniority, had to be carried out smartly; yet as they urged the heavy whaler into the position to lee’ard of the raft, they wondered at their chum’s seemingly cold-blooded indifference to the fate of their shipmates, many of whom might well be struggling for dear life in the angry sea. Surely, they thought, Alec ought to have made an attempt to row to the rescue of possible survivors.

But the senior apprentice had already thought out the situation. To attempt to pull the heavy whaler dead in the eye of the squall would have been an impossible task. Even fully manned the boat would not have been able to make headway. With only two oars she would be swept to lee’ard

like a cork, with the additional and almost certain risk of being thrown broadside on and swamped by the furious waves.

On the other hand, by riding to lee'ard of the heavy raft the whaler's drift would be tremendously reduced; while the raft itself would act as a floating breakwater. And since white squalls are rarely of long duration, there might be a fair chance of pulling to the scene of the *Cosmos*' disappearance in the ensuing calm and picking up any survivors.

Suddenly the vanguard of the squall swept down upon the boat. The whaler was blown quite thirty feet to lee'ard before the painter took up the strain. Fortunately the rope was almost new and therefore sound, and had been properly bent to the raft. As it was, the painter tautened like a bow-string with a jerk that shook the boat from stem to stern.

Crouching in the bottom-boards, the three lads had momentary glimpses of the triangular raft lifting and dipping as wave after wave swept over it. Spray dashed in heavy clouds completely over the whaler, but of green water hardly a drop came inboard.

The noise of the wind and the thunder of the now menacing waves upon the raft was terrific. It was impossible for any one to hear a word. Not that any of the three members of the whaler's crew spoke. All they could do was to keep as far beneath the plunging gunwales as possible, and hang on like grim death to prevent themselves being thrown violently against thwarts and side-benches each time the sorely-tried painter tautened with a disconcerting jerk.

In about three-quarters of an hour the wind dropped almost as suddenly as it had sprung up, and before long the sea subsided considerably, although there was what seamen term "a tidy lop on."

The raft still held, but the mast and its grisly burden had vanished. The remainder of the low breastwork had also been swept away, but the sea-chest remained, held fast by its securing lashings.

"Cast off!" ordered Alec.

The painter was unbent and the oars were manned. This time Alec relieved Chris, who in turn took the tiller.

Although the sea was still considerably agitated, the whaler rode the waves like a duck. But the search for survivors was unsuccessful. Beyond a couple of gratings, a chicken-coop, and a brass-treaded ladder, there was hardly any wreckage.

So suddenly had the *Cosmos* capsized that the watch below had not had the ghost of a chance, while those on deck had no doubt been trapped under the press of canvas and taken down by the sinking ship.

The three chums were the sole survivors. They were in a desperate plight. Far from land, well away from the recognised steamer tracks, almost without water and provisions, their position was hazardous in the extreme.

But, as ever, grit will tell.

CHAPTER THE THIRD

THE SOLE SURVIVORS

NEVERTHELESS, the chums were somewhat despondent. In the circumstances, it was natural to be so. Suddenly cut off from their floating home—which was no longer floating—their shipmates gone beyond recall, the shock was much like a blow between the eyes.

Their own precarious position was for the present lost sight of. As they rested on their oars after the prolonged but fruitless search for possible survivors, they forgot all about the discomforts they had endured. The hot-tempered Old Man and the nigger-driving Chief Officer were, as such, forgotten. They remembered the pair only as shipmates set in authority.

“Poor old Peter, too,” remarked Curtiss. “If only Durnford had let him come with us!”

“Perhaps it’s as well,” rejoined Alec. “He was a fine dog, but——”

“But what?” asked Chris, noticing his chum’s reluctance to complete the sentence.

“He’d want food and water,” added the senior apprentice, becoming alive to present conditions. “We’ve precious little of either.”

“But we’ll be picked up before very long,” declared Brian optimistically.

“Or we may not,” said Alec. “I’ve been thinking things out. Where the nearest land is, goodness only knows. The Old Man never gave any of us a chance to look at a chart. Our best plan is to make either westward or to the sou’-west. We’re bound to strike some of the islands sooner or later, even if we don’t get picked up.”

“Right-oh!” agreed Brian.

“Not so fast, old son,” objected the eldest of the three. “It will be dark in an hour. There’s going to be a stiff breeze very soon, unless I’m much mistaken. Our best plan is to get back to the raft and lie to lee’ard of it till daybreak. Night sailing’s all very well when you know what the boat will stand. We don’t.”

Owing to the loss of the mast and part of the breastwork from the raft, it was a difficult matter to locate its position. Resuming the oars, for the wind had now quite died away, the lads rowed for nearly a mile in the direction they supposed the raft to be, eventually discovering her to be well on the starboard bow.

“Might have missed it easily,” remarked Brian, as the whaler’s helm was altered to the required bearing. “Where’s the stiff breeze you talked about?”

“It’ll come, never you fear,” replied Alec. “More than we want, perhaps. In any case, if it doesn’t, we don’t want to tire ourselves out at the oars.”

Again the whaler brought up alongside the raft, although the latter presented a different appearance owing to the disappearance of its lifeless burden.

“Hold her alongside, Chris!” exclaimed Alec. “We may as well have that sea-chest. It may come in handy.”

The lashings of the chest were cast loose. Not without considerable effort the chest with its contents was lifted over the whaler’s gunwale and placed abaft the mast-thwart. This done, the boat was allowed to ride to the raft by means of the painter, although, owing to the total absence of wind, the former showed a decided tendency to lie alongside the floating breakwater.

“Now let’s see what food and water we have,” suggested Alec. “Try the breaker first.”

The barrel containing the boat’s supply of water was hauled from its place under the stern-bench. Normally it was supposed to contain ten gallons of drinking-water; but, as Alec had suspected, the person responsible for the task of replenishing the breaker had grossly neglected his duty.

The barrel contained about half a gallon of decidedly musty-smelling water, which had probably been there for weeks. In the heat of the tropics, the teak-staves had shrunk so badly that most of the precious liquid had escaped. Of the remainder, it seemed doubtful whether it would be fit to drink.

There was also a box of biscuits which was supposed to be air-tight. Ripping open the tin-lined case, the lads discovered that the contents were green with mildew and reduced to a repulsive-looking paste.

“Ditch them,” suggested Brian, as the reek of the mouldering provisions assailed his nostrils.

“Better not,” cautioned Alec. “We may be glad of them yet.”

A further search produced a boat’s lantern with a dozen candles; a small liquid compass from which some of the spirit had escaped, leaving a “bubble” which seriously affected the efficiency of the instrument; and a small tin box containing four doubtful-looking matches.

It was the old tale. The boats had passed the Board of Trade inspector before the *Cosmos* left England. The ship’s officers should have taken care that they were kept in an efficient condition. They had not; also pilferers had been busy. The result was that when they were badly wanted most of the essentials were either missing or damaged to such a degree as to be practically useless.

“Are you hungry?” asked Brian. “I am.”

“Tighten your belt, my lad,” was Alec’s advice, although it took a lot of will-power on his part not to produce the chocolate and biscuits.

It was not selfishness—far from it. But the senior apprentice, now fully alive to the responsibilities of his position, knew that the scanty store at that moment in his pockets represented all the three lads were likely to get for a long time. Carefully doled out, the chocolate and biscuits might keep them going for a week. It seemed hopeless to think of being able to eat the mouldy tack in the biscuit-box.

And water?

Without being boiled the liquid in the breaker was worse than useless. It was positively dangerous.

Alec’s eyes roamed in the direction of the baler. Fortunately, in contrast to the rest of the gear, it was almost new and galvanised as well. If only it would rain!

Darkness was now setting in. The short tropical twilight was almost done.

“How about turning in?” suggested Chris. “Any anchor watch, Cap’n?” he added, with a feeble attempt at humour.

“No,” replied Alec. “It’s rest we want. We’ll be safe enough riding to the raft. Get the mainsail spread, lads. It’s going to be hard lying to-night.”

Before very long, the truth of his words became apparent. With only the small jib to mitigate the hardness of the bottom-boards, the three lads

stretched themselves down to sleep. Above the mainsail was stretched to ward off the night dews.

At first sleep seemed out of the question. They were hungry, tired, and weary; but the tragic events of the last few hours, combined with the hardness of their bed, banished sleep from their eyes.

After about an hour, during which hardly a word was spoken, Alec sat up, used one of the scanty stock of matches and lit the lantern. Then, producing the chocolate, he carefully divided one small bar into three equal portions.

“My word, Alec! Where did you get that?” asked Brian.

“No questions, no stories,” replied Alec. “Eat your supper, there’s a good little boy.”

“Well, how much have you got, anyway?” asked Chris.

“A pound less than three ounces,” answered his chum. “And a few biscuits. We’ll have to go slow.”

“I was thinking about water,” continued Chris. “I suppose we couldn’t light a fire on the raft, and boil the water from the breaker? Say just enough to fill the baler?”

“I’d boil the lot if we had anything to store it in,” declared Alec. “It’s useless putting it back into the breaker.”

“The air-tanks?” suggested Alderson, referring to the eight buoyancy tanks under the side benches of the boat.

“They’re copper,” protested his chum. “Ten to one they’re smothered with verdigris. Hello! I don’t think we’ll need the fire after all,” he added, as heavy rain-drops began to patter down upon the stretched sail. “Get the baler handy, lads. Every drop’s precious.”

Soon the rain descended in torrents. In spite of the sail being spread bent-wise over both gunwales, an alarming quantity of water found its way into the bottom of the boat. All hands set to work to bail, using their caps, since the article specially supplied for that operation was being put to a better purpose. In fact, in less than forty minutes each one had drunk as much fresh water as he wanted, and still the baler was full to overflowing.

About midnight the rain ceased. Contrary to expectation the wind did not spring up. An uncanny silence pervaded everything.

Notwithstanding the protection afforded by the sail, the lads' clothes were saturated. The bottom-boards were covered with dirty water. Sleeping, for the present, was out of the question. As cheerfully as the circumstances permitted, the crew of the whaler sat up and waited for day.

Suddenly the stillness of the pitch-dark night was broken by a long-drawn-out moan. It sounded unreal, unearthly. Although distinct, the sound seemed to come from a considerable distance. It was not the cry of a human being. No sound like that ever issued from the throat of man, woman, or child.

The chums glanced apprehensively at each other. In the feeble rays of the lantern their features looked drawn. No one spoke. In the ensuing silence they could feel their hearts thumping violently.

Again the despairing wail was repeated.

"Is it a seabird?" asked Brian.

"Or a dog?" suggested Chris.

Alec sprang to his feet, bumping his head against the canvas.

"It's Peter!" he declared.

CHAPTER THE FOURTH

ALEC'S VIGIL

“**B**ELIEVE you’re right,” said Brian.
“Believe! I know I am this time,” rejoined his Then raising his voice he called, “Peter! Peter!”

There was a brief silence. Probably three or four seconds elapsed before the sound could travel to and fro. Then the call was answered, not by the previous sort of mournful wail, but by the deep-voiced bark that the chums had no hesitation in recognising as Peter’s.

Feverishly they set to work to dismantle the rough and ready tent and to take to the oars. Just as they were on the point of casting off the painter, Chris, in his slow, deliberate style, made a suggestion.

“Hadn’t we better leave the lantern on the raft? We’ll never be able to find it again if we don’t have a light to guide us back.”

“Rather,” agreed Alec. “Keep her alongside a minute.”

Lantern in hand, the senior apprentice jumped on to the raft and wedged the light between two planks.

“Give way!” he ordered, as he regained the boat. “We’ve only the sound to steer by.”

Brian and Chris bent to their oars. The whaler started on her vague quest, Alec, the while, shouting encouragement to the animal and calling it by name.

For quite ten minutes the search gave no promise of success. The dog’s barks seemed more and more elusive. Already the light on the raft seemed ever so far away.

“Lay on your oars,” cautioned Alec, “and listen!”

“Sound comes from over there!” declared Brian, pointing away on the starboard bow.

“Seems to me it’s from there,” said Chris, indicating a position on the starboard quarter.

"I believe you're right," asserted Alec. "Stroke ahead, we'll swing her round."

Gradually the dog's bark sounded nearer and nearer. By this time the boat's bows were pointing almost in the direction of the light on the raft.

"See anything?" enquired Brian anxiously, as Alec peered through the darkness.

"Want the eyes of a cat to see through this," protested the coxswain. "Keep her going; we can't be far off. We'll have Peter aboard in a jiffy."

In his own mind Alec felt none too sure about it. The dog's barks were becoming feebler. It seemed little short of a miracle that the animal, powerful though he was, could keep afloat for all that length of time.

Then, "Way 'nough!" shouted Alec. "In bow! We're almost on top of him."

The warning was followed by a decided jar as the whaler's forefoot bumped against what proved to be a large grating, part of which dipped below the surface. On it was a dark confused mass, that on closer acquaintance proved to be the body of a man with Peter, now feebly delirious with joy, crouching by his side.

But the animal made no effort to leave the frail structure until the chums had, by dint of great exertion, lifted the body into the boat. Then, and only then, did Peter suffer himself to be hauled into safety, when, after a determined effort to lick Alec's face, he flopped literally down and out.

"It's the Old Man!" exclaimed Brian. "Is he alive?"

"Can't say," replied Alec. "You stand by and keep the light on the raft in sight. If we lose it, we're in a fix. Now, Chris, bear a hand."

Within the narrow limits of the stern-sheets two of them set to work to attempt to resuscitate the captain of the ill-fated *Cosmos*. But all efforts were fruitless. Captain Duncan McFail had no further use for his Extra Master's ticket.

When at length the boat regained the raft any vestige of doubt became a certainty. The Old Man had not been drowned. Apparently he had succeeded in getting clear when the ship was thrown on her beam ends, and was swimming strongly when the grating, which had been carried down to a great depth by the sinking vessel, had suddenly shot to the surface, dealing him a terrific blow on the head as it did so. Almost as certain was the

conjecture that Peter, swimming to the grating, had prevented the captain's body rolling off; but his devoted effort had been in vain.

As for Peter, he made a rapid recovery, and when Alec had given him a little of the scanty stock of water, the dog, refusing the mouldy biscuit, curled up and went to sleep until daybreak.

With dawn came a steady northerly breeze. It was too good to be wasted, especially as it was favourable for a westerly course.

But before setting sail, the captain's body had to be committed to the deep. It was a melancholy task. The Old Man's gold watch, on which was an inscription to the effect that it had been presented by the Dutch Government to Chief Officer Duncan McFail for his great gallantry in rescuing the crew of the *Draak* in the North Sea in January, 1913, they kept. Although ruined by immersion in salt water, the watch was a certificate of courage. If possible, it would be handed over to the captain's widow, should Alec and his chums win through.

There was nothing else either of value or utility, for with the exception of a bunch of keys, the Old Man's other pockets were empty.

Setting sail by daylight was a simple task. Originally the whaler had been yawl-rigged, but for some reason the mizzen had been done away with, and in place of the powerful but unhandy dipping lug, a loose-footed standing lug had been substituted. This, together with a moderate-sized jib, made quite a handy working rig, especially as there were only three people in the boat to tend sheet and take the helm.

Soon the whaler was bowling along at a steady five knots, with the foam hissing at her bows and a long, straight wake astern.

The chums revelled in the situation. Hunger, thirst, the loss of their comrades, were all but forgotten—dispersed, like a bad dream when day dawns, by the strong, exhilarating, salt-laden breeze.

Throughout the day the breeze held. No peak showed above the horizon. Sea and sky met in an unbroken circle. Not a bird was to be seen—an indication that gave no promise of land.

Just before sunset Alec served out the second meal that day—a piece of chocolate and one biscuit divided into four equal pieces; for, by common consent, it was resolved that Peter should share in the meagre fare. After that each member of the crew was given about half a pint of water.

“I reckon we’re seventy miles nearer somewhere than we were this morning,” remarked Brian.

“Unless we’re plugging against a strong current,” rejoined Alec. “We’ve no means of telling that. Wish we had a chart. Well, look lively, lads. We’ll knock down a reef. It’s better to be safe than sorry, and if it does come on to blow in the night, we’ll be prepared.”

Accordingly canvas was reduced. Then, using two precious matches, they lighted a candle and placed it in the binnacle of the crazy compass.

“You two turn in,” suggested Alec. “Brian, you’ll relieve me at eight bells, or as near to it as we can guess.”

Brian and Chris needed no second invitation. They were tired out, for during the day the heat of the sun, as its rays beat down upon the open boat, rendered sleep impossible. Within a couple of minutes both were in a dead slumber.

Left to himself, Alec prepared for a lonely vigil. Yet there was Peter to share his long trick. The dog insisted on sitting at the helmsman’s feet and resting his massive head on Alec’s knees. With Peter in the boat there was little chance of approaching land without the dog giving timely warning. In the *Cosmos* the animal hardly ever looked over the side unless a landfall was expected. Then, long before the look-out raised the shout of “Land ahead!” Peter would be standing with his forepaws on the bulwarks, sniffing appreciatively at the as yet invisible shore.



ONCE A HUGE ALBATROSS SWOOPED DOWN.

As the darkness set in the stars shone brilliantly. Alec was already too old a hand in a boat to strain his eyes needlessly by peering at the dimly illuminated compass. All that was necessary was to take the bearing ahead of a star low down on the horizon, and keep the pinprick of light in line with the boat's forestay. Occasionally a glance at the compass served to correct any material difference in the course.

The wind still held, though diminishing in force. All around the boat the surface of the dark water was dotted with momentary flashes of phosphorescent light as fish, both large and small, played the part of attendants upon the three argonauts.

Once a huge albatross swooped down, its long curved beak stretched enquiringly in the direction of the boat. Peter gave a low growl. The bird, disappointed of a meal, disappeared with a resentful flapping of its enormous wings.

Slowly the hours passed. Alec made no attempt to arouse his relief. Both his chums were sleeping so soundly that he had not the heart to wake them. He was desperately hungry. The almost irresistible temptation to eat some of

his own biscuits assailed him. After all, prompted the tempter, they are yours. If you hadn't taken the precaution to bring them with you, you would all be hungry. Why not profit by your forethought?

Resolutely thrusting the suggestion aside, Alec carried on. Presently the almost overwhelming pangs of hunger passed, to be followed by a period of utter drowsiness. Again and again his head drooped lower and lower until his chin rested on his chest; then with a disconcerting start he realised that he was within an ace of committing that most unpardonable sin—sleeping on watch.

Once he unwittingly let the boat come up into the wind, and was warned of the fact by the flapping of the canvas—like a succession of pistol-shots. Even then Brian and Chris did not stir in their sleep.

Almost before he realised that his long vigil was nearing completion, grey dawn appeared. In a few minutes it was daylight.

“The last few hours have gone jolly quick,” thought Alec. “Unless I’ve been asleep. It’s time to wake up those lazy hogs! Turn out the hands of the watch, Peter!”

The dog needed no second bidding. A wet mop placed on Brian’s face would not have done the trick more quickly than Peter’s moist tongue. Curtiss sat up with a start, gazed wonderingly at the sky, and then at the wan face of his chum at the helm.

“Why, it’s broad daylight!” he exclaimed. “What’s the game, Alec? Why didn’t you turn me out to stand my trick?”

“Didn’t want to spoil your beauty sleep, my lad. Hello, Chris! Merry and bright and all that?”

“I say——!” began Alderson, labouring under the delusion that he was in his bunk on board the *Cosmos*, and had not fallen in with the rest of the world. Then, none too hastily, he realised his surroundings. With a prodigious yawn, Chris sat up and stretched his arms.

Even as he did so, there was a thud that shook the whaler from stem to stern, and, like the thrust of a rapier, a long slender object penetrated the planking, its point exactly where Chris’s head would have been had he not just shifted his position.

CHAPTER THE FIFTH

SWORDFISH AND SHARK

A MOMENT later the boat commenced to be violently shaken by a succession of disconcerting jolts. To the astonished lads it felt as if they were being “worried” by a gigantic dog-like creature. The whaler was much like a rat in the jaws of a terrier.

Notwithstanding her beam, the boat heeled first to wind’ard and then to lee’ard; while in spite of Alec’s efforts to keep her on her course, she persisted in flying up into the wind.

Abandoning the useless tiller, Alec let the mainsheet fly.

“The axe!” he shouted.

Brian, restraining a desire to ask what was amiss, threw open the lid of the sea-chest and handed his chum the axe.

Clambering in the after-thwarts, Alec leant over the gunwale and rained blow after blow at a large swordfish. It was a difficult matter to get in a direct blow, for the fish was struggling so fiercely that its head was for the most part a foot or so beneath the surface.

Acting under a regrettable misapprehension, the swordfish, measuring quite fifteen feet from the tip of its sharp snout to its tail, had taken the boat for a likely prey. Since swordfishes have been known to drive their “swords” through three inches of tough oak, the elm strakes of the whaler offered but little resistance. The fish’s beak had penetrated almost to the junction with its head. Had it withdrawn the sword, the boat would have filled within a minute, but so blind was its fury that the creature had not the sense to back out.

At length Alec succeeded in getting in a crashing blow. Two more followed in quick succession. Even then the vitality of the creature was astonishing, and it was not until the head of the swordfish was almost split in twain that the fish ceased to move.

But Alec’s work was not yet finished.

“Pass me the saw,” he asked breathlessly. “Keep well over to starboard, both of you.”

His chums did so. Their weight helped to bring the head of the swordfish nearer the surface. Laboriously Alec used the rusty saw until he succeeded in cutting off the horny projection within an inch or so of the outside planking.

Relieved of the side-drag, the whaler once more paid off. Alec gathered in the sheets and steadied the boat on her course.

“Take her, for goodness’ sake,” he exclaimed, for, following a long period of sleeplessness, the strenuous work had well-nigh exhausted him.

Brian took the helm. Alec, too done up to say another word, threw himself down upon the stern-gratings and fell asleep almost at once.

Presently Chris, who had been meditatively contemplating the projecting “sword,” picked up the saw.

“May as well keep that for a souvenir,” he remarked. “The thing that nearly did me in!”

“Don’t shake it too much,” cautioned Brian. “It’ll start a leak if you do.”

Grasping the horn with his left hand, Chris proceeded to saw it through close to the inside planking. So tough was the “sword” and so blunt and rusty was the saw that it took about half an hour before the task was accomplished. But in spite of Brian’s caution, the vibration had caused the piece that remained driven through the side to work loose. A thin trickle of water began to make its way in.

“Give it a tap with the hatchet,” suggested Brian.

“Better not,” objected Chris. “The plank’s slightly split already. I’ll caulk it.”

This operation he carried out by means of a short piece of tarred twine, “unlaid,” and rubbed with candle-grease. The twine was then carefully worked into the split wood with a knife.

“We ought to have got hold of that swordfish, old son,” remarked Chris.

“What for?”

“To eat,” replied the lad gravely. “If we have to eat raw fish—well, then, we just must. The biscuit and chocolate won’t last much longer.”

“It will while Alec’s asleep,” said Brian grimly. “Well, because we haven’t saved that fish there’s no reason why we shouldn’t try for another. Knock up a line, Chris, and see what you can do.”

He fully expected his chum to ask where the hooks were coming from. Chris did nothing of the kind. Already he had been working out that problem.

Calling Peter to him, Chris unbuckled the dog’s collar. Then he filed through the brass ring, straightened it out, and hammered one end until it was flattened to about a quarter of an inch in width. More work with a file produced both a sharp point and an efficient barb. The metal was then bent to fishing-hook shape and attached to a length of tarred twine, while for bait the enthusiast sacrificed a piece of his red handkerchief.

Somewhat sceptically, Brian watched his chum pay out about twenty yards of line, but his sentiments changed to those of admiration and surprise when the line tautened with the weight of a fine fish that, when landed, bore a strong resemblance to the fresh-water pike of British streams, save that it was considerably smaller.

“S’pose it’s good—not poisonous?” asked Brian.

“I’ll risk it,” decided Chris valiantly. “If it doesn’t turn me up within the next few hours, it’ll be all right.”

“Raw?” asked his chum, with a shudder.

“I’ll try sun-curing it first,” replied Chris. “But I’m that hungry——”

“Have another shot,” suggested Brian after a while. “You might catch something that doesn’t look quite so ferocious.”

Again Chris paid out his line. Quite a considerable period elapsed before anything happened; then a succession of jerks and a furious flutter astern announced that another fish had taken the bait.

“A smaller one this time!” exclaimed Chris, as he proceeded to haul in the line. “But he’s more of a sportsman than the other chap. He’s making a good fight for it.”



THE TRIPLE ROW OF TEETH HAD CLOSED WITHIN A COUPLE OF INCHES OF
HIS FINGER-TIPS.

“Play him then,” suggested Brian, “or you’ll lose your precious hook. Hang it! If this one’s anything to go by, your other fish must have been in

the last stages of senile decay. Steady with him!”

The fish was a determined creature. Again and again it turned in circles, breaking off at a tangent. Sometimes it dived; at others it leapt clear of the surface, all in a vain attempt to break away from the remorseless drag of the line.

At length the fish was brought to within a foot or so of the boat’s quarter.

“Wish we had a landing-net,” exclaimed Chris. “Stand by with a running bowline and slip it over its tail.”

Holding the tiller under his arm, Brian quickly made the desired running noose.

“Hold the line and give me the bowline,” said Chris excitedly.

He leant over the side ready to lasso the elusive fish. As he did so, there was a tremendous commotion. The fish, together with the hook, disappeared within the capacious jaw of a huge shark. In fact, Chris narrowly escaped losing one or both hands, for the triple row of teeth had closed within a couple of inches of his finger-tips.

“That was a near one!” exclaimed Brian.

“It was,” agreed Chris, looking very white about the gills. “Who said sharks were cautious, timid brutes? Look, there he is!”

Less than twenty yards away the blunt snout of the shark broke the surface. Its appetite whetted, it had come back for more.

“Wish we had a rifle,” said Brian, as he gathered in the slack of the mainsheet. “Dashed if I like that brute nosing round. Wind’s falling, worse luck!”

Before long it was a flat calm. The sun’s rays beat pitilessly down upon the boat. Alec stirred in his sleep; and although Chris took in the jib and used the canvas to screen his sleeping chum from the torrid glare, it was soon evident that further slumber was out of the question.

Alec sat up. His throat was so parched that he could hardly speak.

“Had any biscuit?” he asked.

“No,” replied Chris. “How could we? It’s in your pocket.”

“My error,” declared the senior lad, as he proceeded to rectify the omission. “Hello! What’s this?”

“Fish of sorts,” replied Brian. “Chris hooked it. He’s going to grill steaks in the sun.”

“Guess I know a better way,” remarked Alec. “We’ll grill them.”

“You’ll set the boat on fire,” expostulated Chris. “The wood’s like tinder in the hot sun. I can hardly bear my hand to touch it.”

“You cut the slices of fish, old son,” rejoined Alec. “I’ll do the rest.”

Placing the baler in the water lying in the bilges, Alec proceeded to cut up one of the trays of the old sea-chest. The chips he piled in the baler, keeping enough in reserve to replenish the fire.

“No; don’t waste matches!” he cautioned, as Chris produced the box. “Keep them for when the sun’s not shining.”

Using the object lens of his telescope as a burning glass, Alec soon had quite a respectable fire going. The fish, as steaks, was not a success, but by cutting the slices into small cubes a fairly satisfactory result was obtained.

For the next three or four hours the crew had perforce to remain inactive, grilling in the pitiless rays of the sun. Bathing was out of the question, for the shark showed no inclination to desert its self-appointed task of sentinel.

Late in the afternoon the welcome breeze sprang up. Again the whaler listed to the wind and leapt through the water, the shark keeping pace with apparent ease. But at sunset the breeze fell away entirely. Perhaps it was as well. The tired crew lowered and stowed canvas, threw themselves down and slept soundly till morning.

“I always thought I liked small boat sailing,” remarked Brian, after another day of discomfort. “I don’t think I’d mind if I never stepped into a boat again.”

“Don’t you believe it,” rejoined Alec. “It’s the conditions not the boat that puts you off. Why, we might have gone down with the old *Cosmos*. As it is, we’re alive, my lad!”

He spoke cheerfully, although he had grave doubts concerning their plight. Water was running low. The chocolate and biscuit would hardly last out another twenty-four hours.

“What’s that?” suddenly exclaimed Chris. “Is it a sail?”

His chums looked in the direction indicated. A point on the starboard bow on the hitherto unbroken horizon was cut by a faint triangular object resembling the peak of a mainsail.

“No,” replied Alec after a brief look. “It’s not a sail. It’s land!”

CHAPTER THE SIXTH

THE ISLAND REEF

FOR once at least Peter had failed to give his customary warning. Possibly the animal's keen instincts had been blunted by semi-starvation. He had suffered acutely from the heat; he had been given only a little water, although his allowance was the same as that shared by the crew. Yet the dog seemed to realise that he did not undergo privation alone—that his human companions were literally and figuratively in the same boat. Whenever the scanty rations were served out, Peter invariably thanked the three chums individually—not before, but after he had had his share—in his characteristic doggy fashion.

“Sure it's land?” asked Brian, rubbing his blood-shot eyes.

“Yes, a mountain peak.”

“How far away?”

“Twenty miles—more, perhaps,” replied Alec. “With luck, if the breeze holds, we ought to make land before sunset.”

“Roll on sunset!” exclaimed Brian.

Gradually the land ahead rose higher and higher. What at first sight looked like the upper part of a fore-and-aft sail resolved itself into a mountain, rising sheer from a fairly large island. In outline the mountain resembled a cube set askew.

Presently palm trees in profusion came in sight, thickly covering the lower part of the land. The plateau, however, seemed destitute of verdure.

“Five miles off,” announced Alec.

“And about two hours to sunset,” supplemented Brian. “We'll do it hands down. How about finishing up the rest of the water to celebrate the event?”

“Better not,” objected Alec. “Don't holler till you're out of the wood, you know.”

“If the wind drops we can pull in,” persisted Brian.

“Perhaps,” rejoined Chris.

“Well, why shouldn’t we?” demanded Curtiss, with a show of truculence.

“You wait,” was Alec’s final word, spoken in a tone that stopped further discussion.

Peter was now getting thoroughly excited. He stood in the bows, his forefeet planted on either side of the stem-head, sniffing appreciatively at the faint odours of the land. Against the wind the three chums could detect no scent, nor could they hear any sounds from shoreward. Peter did both.

Another hour passed. The wind began to lull. The island, though decidedly nearer, was still a long way off. Alec had under-estimated the distance.

“Shall we get the oars out?” asked Brian.

Alec glanced first at the position of the sun and then towards the island.

“Listen!” he exclaimed.

Above the gentle whisper of the evening breeze came a subdued rumble.

“Surf!” declared Chris.

“Yes; on a reef,” added Alec. “And it’s a lee shore for us. Out oars, lads! With luck we’ll find a channel through the reef before dark.”

Twenty minutes of strenuous pulling brought the boat within half a mile of the outer reef, its position marked by an unbroken succession of rollers. Viewed from seaward the rollers did not appear dangerous, but Alec knew from experience that breakers rarely do look so. It is from shore that the formidable character of the breaker becomes apparent.

In addition, the boat was in the grip of a fairly strong current, tending to set her to the northward. It was now nearly sunset.

“It’ll mean another night of it, lads!” declared Alec. “Even if we could see a passage through—which we can’t—we’d pile ourselves up on the reef. We’ll have to wait till daybreak.”

It was hard luck to be within sight of land and to be denied the joys of setting foot on dry ground. Yet his chums realised that Alec was right. No seaman would attempt to work his way through an unknown and uncharted reef during the hours of darkness. Although they were keenly disappointed, they tried to keep up their spirits and make the best of a bad job.

“Boat oars!” ordered Alec briskly.

Then, close hauled on the port tack, the whaler’s bows were turned until her course lay parallel to the general trend of the reef. During the brief period of twilight that remained the helmsman kept a keen watch on shore, noting with satisfaction that, even in the light breeze, the boat was more than holding her own against the adverse current.

Darkness set in. The loom of the high ground was barely discernible in the starlight. The sullen roar of the breakers increased in violence, the sound being magnified in the night air.

No one thought of turning-in. Sleep was out of the question. All they could do was to keep ramping the whaler “full and by,” going about directly there seemed any possibility of sailing beyond the extremities of the reef. So the long night wore on.

With the first streaks of dawn the formidable nature of the breakers became more and more apparent. The light on-shore breeze could not be held accountable for the tremendous masses of water that hurled themselves upon the coral ledges, there to be dissipated in clouds of feathery spray. Not so many miles away a furious storm was raging over part of the Pacific. More than likely its arrival at the island would be a matter of a few hours.

There was no sign of a passage. North and south the breakers thrashed upon the reef with never a patch of still water to indicate a channel into the lagoon.

The shark was still in attendance. By the look of the brute’s small, ferocious eyes, it was evidently under the impression that its long anticipated meal could not be much longer delayed.



THEY WERE NEARING THE CRITICAL SPOT.

“We’ll run down to lee’ard, lads!” suggested Alec. “Keep your weather eye lifting, Brian. You, Chris, get for’ard and look out for submerged patches. We don’t want to strike here, of all places.”

Rounding the north-easterly extremity of the reef, which appeared to conform to the shape of the island, Alec let the boat run before the wind. Although the reef on this side of the island ran parallel to the direction of the breeze, the surf did not diminish on that account. The entrance to the lagoon seemed as elusive as ever.

Presently Alec’s practised eye discovered what appeared to be a patch of smooth water, broad on the port beam. Until it bore from that position the gap was invisible. At any rate, there was some sort of a passage; but once it were attempted there would be no turning back.

His mind made up, Alec put the helm down. Close hauled, the whaler heeled, her bows pointing to the narrow gap. Presently she was in the grip of the rollers. Would she weather the threatening spur of foam-swept coral to starboard?

Brian glanced anxiously at the helmsman, but Alec's set features gave no signs either of fear or indecision. Only once did he speak, and that was to order the others aft, since, owing to the action of the rollers, the rudder failed to get an efficient grip. Without the weight of all hands aft the boat began to show a decided tendency to broach-to—a circumstance that would be fatal to all concerned.

They were nearing the critical spot. The roar of the surf was deafening. Showers of salt spray flung upon the reef to wind'ard drifted completely over the boat. But the danger came not from that direction. Would the whaler weather the spur to lee'ard, which was considerably nearer shore than the opposite point of the coral barrier?

Had the boat possessed a centre-board the solution would have been simple. But she did not. Close hauled, she carried a considerable amount of leeway, and like all keel-less boats, it was impossible to pinch her—that is, to sail too near to the wind—without losing way. Oars were out of the question. Under-manned, the boat would be carried upon the reef without the shadow of a doubt, even if the blades could find a grip in the heaving and agitated water.

A heavier puff struck the sail. Quick to take advantage, Alec luffed smartly, gaining a few yards to wind'ard. That put the matter beyond doubt. The reef to lee'ard bore broad on the starboard beam, then on the quarter with ten yards to spare.

"We're through!" shouted Alec, raising his voice above the noise of the elements. "Pour me out a drink, some one! We can finish the lot now!"

Save for a few catspaws and the slight undulations caused by the foam flying across the reef, the lagoon was as smooth as a mill-pond. Looking over the side, the chums could see the bottom distinctly, although it was quite thirty feet beneath the surface. It was a constantly changing panorama of forest scenery, only that the "trees" were branches of coral, some pink, some green, some violet, with intermediate hues. Here and there patches of weed rose to within a few feet of the surface, the long, vividly-coloured tendrils swaying lazily in the still water. At other places there was nothing but clear white sand, over which fish, as vivid as the coral, swam slowly to and fro, unless menaced by other more powerful members of their tribe.

But the boys' main attention was directed shorewards. There was, they hoped, fresh water; there, bread fruit and coco-nut.

The beach, consisting of a dazzling white strand of coral sand, was deserted. No canoe was to be seen hauled up; no lines of brown nets were hung up to dry; no palm-thatched hut showed between the patches of sago and coco-palms.

“Where are you making for, Alec?” asked Brian.

“For a creek of some sort,” was the reply. “Sand’s all very well, but we’ve got to remember that the reef isn’t a complete breakwater when it comes on to blow. The boat’s too heavy to haul out, and we don’t want her smashed up.”

“We might have a run ashore now,” persisted Curtiss. “We’re hungry. There’s plenty of fruit. We can find the creek, if there is one, later.”

For a brief instant Alec hesitated. He was as hungry and as tired as his companions. Brian’s suggestion was reasonable. But a glance to wind’ard decided him. Already the breakers were increasing in magnitude and violence. Well down on the horizon heavy indigo-coloured clouds were banking up.

“It’ll blow like billy-oh in no time,” he declared. “Out oars again, lads! We must find a snug berth as soon as we jolly well can.”

At first the quest appeared hopeless. The south side of the island lacked a sandy beach. The face of the cube-shaped mountain rose sheer from the sea. But at the south-eastern extremity of the reef, which at this point appeared almost to touch the island, the actual reef had developed into a sort of above-water ledge on which three coco-palms grew. All around this supplementary island—it measured only about a hundred yards in length and about twenty at its greatest breadth—an atoll or coral ring had been formed distinct from the main reef.

“We’ll be safe under the lee of that,” declared Alec, pointing to the detached islet. “Stick it, lads! Another ten minutes and we’ll be on the beach.”

A few strokes brought the whaler abreast of the western end of the ledge. Then Chris, who had been studying the shore of the island, pointed to a narrow creek or gully.

“How’ll that do?” he asked.

“By Jove! Just the very spot,” replied Alec. “Let’s hope it runs a fair distance inland. Easy, lads!”

Soon the boat was within the bold headlands forming the arms of the estuary. The channel was about twenty yards wide and at least ten feet in depth. The banks were steep, and, what was a decided advantage, the creek wound considerably. Each turn in direction meant better protection from on-shore winds.

For nearly three hundred yards, as well as Alec could judge, the creek continued to wind its way until, narrowing abruptly, it ended in a completely sheltered basin with gently shelving banks. At the extreme head of the creek a clear stream gurgled noisily as it leapt from terrace to terrace in a series of cascades.

“Way ‘nough!” ordered the helmsman.

The boat’s forefoot crunched gently against the sand. Peter, with a prodigious leap, was first ashore, followed by Brian and Chris. Then Alec, stopping only to throw out the kedge, swung himself to the beach.

Staggering like drunken men, for after their prolonged voyage in the small boat the ground appeared to be rolling and heaving under their feet, they set off as hard as they could go. Although not a word was spoken, each had the same goal—the fresh-water stream.

Never did water taste more like perfect nectar. They drank long and deep, then let the gushing water play upon their heads and arms, revelling in its coolness as it cleansed their salt-stained skin and acted as salve to their brine-encrusted eyes.

“Call Peter off,” cautioned Chris, “or he’ll burst! You’d better go slow, you fellows, too, or there’ll be trouble.”

The warning was timely. At all times drinking copious draughts of water under a hot sun is injurious. To do so in a half-starved condition was simply asking for trouble.

The dog obeyed. Considering his scanty food he had kept in fair condition. His ribs showed even under his thick coat, but by the way in which he had leapt ashore it was evident that his strength was well maintained.

“Now, grub,” decided Alec.

“What sort?” asked Brian. “You won’t find anything solid in a coconut.”

“Never said I would,” rejoined his chum. “At least, while they’re growing. But there’s taro, that’s as good as bread any day. And unless I’m

mistaken, those are plantains. They're——”

A deep menacing growl from Peter interrupted Alec's words. Instinctively the chums pulled themselves together and followed the direction of the dog's alert look.

He gave one growl only. Then, with bristling hair and bared teeth, he crouched ready for a spring.

In the brushwood something was moving.

CHAPTER THE SEVENTH

THE HURRICANE

“**S**TAND your ground!” hissed Alec, drawing the weapon he possessed—a seaman’s sheath-knife.

Brian did so, but Chris took to his heels.

The brushwood was so dense that the powerful rays of the sun failed to pierce it. In the shadows something glinted. It looked like cold steel. Then, close to it, two eyes flashed menacingly. Nothing else was to be seen but the flickering steel and those distinctly disconcerting eyes.

Facing the menace, Alec was unaware of Chris’s desertion until the lad returned with a pair of oars and the boat-hook. The latter he handed to Alec, thrusting one oar into Brian’s grasp.

They waited, unwilling to force an attack, yet ready to meet it should it materialise.

Meanwhile the dog, quivering with rage, was still crouching for a spring. It needed but one word from Alec to send him with wide-open jaws upon the supposed foe.

Waiting was the worst part of the business. In the brushwood there might be natives armed with bows and poisoned arrows, or with blow pipes capable of sending poisoned darts with unerring aim. Yet, Alec thought, if it were but a native, who by every right belonged to the place, they were not justified in setting a dog at him.

Suddenly the brushwood parted, and an enormous boar, breaking from cover, dashed straight at the nearest of the three lads—who happened to be Brian.

The unexpected apparition was too much for him. Without attempting to meet the onrush with the blade of the oar, Brian leapt aside. He was only just in time. In its wild, impetuous charge, the boar nearly grazed the lad’s leg with one of its glittering tusks. Then, pulling itself up dead, with forepaws driven deep into the yielding ground, the animal turned to repeat the onslaught.

It had reckoned without Peter. The dog had sprung short at the boar's first appearance, but he was not going to repeat the error. Here the sheep-dog part of his breed asserted itself; for whereas a bull-terrier will invariably fly at its antagonist's throat, the sheep-dog goes for that part of its foe's anatomy that careful training throughout countless generations has taught him to do.

So Peter went for the boar's hind leg. His jaw closed like a vice—not to tear, but to hold. The impetus jerked the heavy dog completely off his feet, but his relentless grip was maintained.

The boar, brought to a standstill, tried to turn to bring his principal weapon—those sharp, curved, glittering tusks—into action. But in vain. Peter's teeth were crushing bone and paralysing sinew. The boar rolled over, squealing in rage and agony.

Watching his opportunity, Alec, knife in hand, approached the struggling combatants. Then with one quick thrust he severed the boar's jugular vein.

“Drop him, Peter!” he ordered.

The dog obeyed. In spite of his dubious ancestry, he was a gentleman of the canine world. He had fought many a hard and provoked fight with his own kind, but never once had he not desisted when his antagonist was beaten. The boar, too, was down and out. Peter, panting heavily, trotted up to his master.

“Fresh pork, anyway!” exclaimed Brian. “I suppose you get pork from boar?”

“Sorry I can't tell you,” replied Alec, with well-assumed gravity. “I forgot to pack up my encyclopædia when we set out. My error!”

“It'll take a month of Sundays to eat that,” remarked Chris. “Most of it will be wasted.”

“I'm afraid so,” agreed Alec. “We might be able to cure some of it. Look sharp, you fellows, and get the carcass strung up before the storm breaks. We'll want the jib and main halliard tackle for the job.”

By dint of great exertion they succeeded in tricing up the dead boar to a spar lashed to two conveniently-placed palm trees. Hardly had they done so when, heralded by a low moaning sound, the threatened storm broke.

“Get the boat's gear,” ordered Alec. “There's a hollow in the rock over there. We'll have to look alive if we don't want to get wet shirts. There's rain behind this wind. Don't forget the axe.”

Hurriedly they collected the boat's sails. Already the coco-palms were bending before the now furious wind. The hitherto tranquil creek was ruffled by the undulations setting in from the lagoon.

"Will the boat be safe?" asked Brian.

"Safe as if she were hauled up," declared Alec, as he hurried with the tightly-folded mainsail, held against his chest, lest the canvas should be torn from his grasp by the terrific blast of wind.

The hollow Alec had pointed out was quite a shallow cave in the face of the low cliff and within twenty yards of the cascade from whence they had obtained fresh water. Provided the wind did not back, the place was sheltered enough from the rain. The floor was ankle-deep in dry dust, which bore no signs of having been disturbed either by birds or beasts.

"What's to be done now?" asked Chris.

"Sleep," replied Alec laconically.

There were no dissentients to this suggestion. After nights of broken rest, it was indeed the best thing to be done. Spreading the sails on the ground, they lay down and, notwithstanding the shrieking of the wind and the torrential downpour of rain, they were soon in a deep, dreamless slumber.

Brian was the first to awake. It was now pitch dark. The rain was still falling heavily. The lad stirred uneasily. He was labouring under the delusion that he was still in the boat. To heighten the deception, he found that he was lying in an inch or so of water. His head, pillowed on his arm, was dry. He could hear, as he imagined, the lap of water against the boat's planking.

"She's taken water in," he thought drowsily. "Why haven't the other fellows baled her out?"

Just then a vivid flash of lightning—or rather a succession of flashes—played upon the scene. To Brian's surprise and consternation, his eyes were almost level with what appeared to be a sea of bluish fire. It was the lightning playing upon a sheet of water, the edge of which was actually lapping the floor of the cave.

The sudden glare woke up the other lads. They, too, were surprised to find themselves lying in mud and water, where, when they had first turned in, had been a flat floor of bone-dry dust. In the intense darkness following the lightning they could see nothing, could hear nothing save the ear-splitting roll of the thunder.

Another succession of flashes came within a few seconds. It lasted sufficiently long to enable the bewildered lads to grasp the situation. The heavy rain had swollen the little river to such an extent that, in place of the swift-running stream over which they had leapt with ease, there was an expanse of swirling water stretching for nearly a hundred yards.

“Hang on to the canvas,” cautioned Alec, “or we’ll lose it.”

“How about the boat?” asked Chris.

No one could hazard a guess. In all probability she had been swept from her moorings by the terrific pressure of water.

The level of the flood was rising steadily. It was now up to their ankles, although they had retreated to the furthestmost recesses of the cave, which, in point of fact, was barely three yards in depth.

They realised that they were trapped, though each forbore to express the fact. There was no escape. To attempt to swim was hopeless. No swimmer could stem that furious rush of foaming water. He would be swept into the lagoon and perhaps out to sea, for there was no possible landing at the base of the sheer wall of rock. So far they were safe, for thanks to the shelter of the cave the water covering its floor was comparatively tranquil. But how high would the flood rise?

“Where did you leave the boat-hook, Chris?” asked Alec.

“Brought it along. I’m hanging on to it now,” was the reply.

“Then it’ll be something to hold on to if the water rises,” continued his chum. “We’ll have to cut notches in the rock with the axe. How much longer till daybreak, I wonder?”

It was not long before they were standing knee-deep in water. It was a fearful night. The lightning flashed almost incessantly, the noise of the thunder shook the solid rock. The rain descended with unabated violence.

They were waist-deep now. The water in the cave was no longer quiet. It took the form of a fairly strong eddy or counter-current. For mutual support the lads had to hang on to each other, standing on the folded sails in order to save the canvas from being swept away.

Suddenly the rain stopped. At one moment it had been descending in torrents. At the next it had ceased entirely. With it departed the lightning, although the thunder growled in the distance.

Then, to the intense relief of the now shivering lads, the first streaks of dawn stole over the eastern sky.

With the cessation of the rain the level of the water began to fall. Yet, even then, there was a clear expanse of water. The creek, the low projecting rocks, the stunted palm trees on the small island beyond the inner reef—all had been submerged. The flood was not caused entirely by the rain. An abnormally high tide—or possibly a tidal wave, the result of a subterranean disturbance—had covered the reefs to a depth of nearly twenty feet, whereas, under ordinary conditions, the tidal range was about three feet at springs.

An hour later the boys were able to leave their shelter. The stream was rapidly resuming its former aspect, although the banks of the creek were still submerged.

The steadily receding water had already left the trunks of the palm trees, from which the dead boar had been suspended. But less than half of the carcass remained!

Worse was yet to come, for the whaler had vanished.

CHAPTER THE EIGHTH

WHAT THEY LOST

FOR some moments they appeared to be stunned by the magnitude of their loss. Without the boat they were virtually prisoners on the island. It represented the bulk of their stock-in-trade. True, they had the sails, the boat-hook, and some of the running gear, together with the axe; but everything else had disappeared.

“Well, we’re alive and kicking,” remarked Chris, the first to break silence. “If we’d been in the boat—if we hadn’t made the island in time _____”

“We shouldn’t be here, that’s a dead cert,” added Brian. “We’ve something to be thankful for.”

“But the boat?” asked Alec.

“Perhaps she’s sunk at her anchor,” suggested Chris.

“How could she—with air tanks?” replied Alec. “When the water goes down a bit more we may find the remains of her, but I doubt it. But what’s happened to that?”

And he pointed to the remains of the dead boar.

They went to the spot to investigate. It did not require the services of a Sherlock Holmes to elucidate that mystery. A shark, or sharks, had been at work. During the storm these voracious creatures had swum in from the lagoon to shelter under the lee of the land. The dead boar had attracted their attention, yet the chums could not understand why the whole carcass had not disappeared, but only the greater part of it.

Even that problem was speedily solved, for left in the tough brushwood by the receding waters was an enormous shark. It was the violent thrashing of its tail that attracted the boys’ notice.

“Perhaps that was the brute that followed us in,” suggested Brian.

“Then he’ll not follow us any further,” declared Alec.

“What are you going to do with it?” asked Chris.

“Do? Nothing,” was the reply. “Johnny Shark’s number’s up this time. He won’t last much longer. Hasn’t he a maw?”

There was no denying the fact. Lying on its back, the shark displayed to advantage its enormous mouth as it snapped and opened its jaws in its dying throes. Between the upper and lower triple rows of pointed teeth, there was space enough for a fair-sized sheep when the jaws were fully opened. Closed, they could bite the animal in two almost as cleanly as a pair of scissors shearing through stiff paper.

“Don’t go too close,” cautioned Chris, as Brian began to force his way through the brushwood.

“I’m not,” replied his chum. “I’m only curious. Look! who said there was only one shark?”

“No one as far as I know,” rejoined Chris. “Why, what makes you think there’s more?”

Brian pointed to the shark’s writhing body. Just behind the dorsal fin there was a clean, semi-circular gap—a bite that must have been caused by one of its kind, since no shark could so contort itself to be able to tear a piece out of its own back.

“There’s one consolation,” declared Alec, as they returned to the spot where the remains of the boar were suspended; “the brutes haven’t made off with our tackle. Now, how about grub?”

“You don’t suggest boar steak?” asked Brian.

“Not much,” was the reply. “We may as well heave the remains into the creek. There must be pigs on the island. However, what’s wrong with taro? Find some dry sticks and we’ll start a fire.”

While Brian and Chris were collecting wood, Alec set about to dig taro roots by means of his knife and the axe. Already the sun was sufficiently strong to dry the wood, and a fire was quickly started. In the absence of the baler, which had been left in the stern-sheets of the whaler, the taro had to be roasted on the point of a knife. Breadfruit and coco-nut milk completed the materials for the repast, which, in spite of its simplicity, was heartily enjoyed.

By midday the flood had almost subsided, and it was now possible to gain the rocky ledge forming one side of the entrance to the creek.

Thither they made their way, and thence they could command a fairly extensive view of the southern part of the lagoon. Already the reef had

reappeared. Heavy breakers were lashing its outer edge, notwithstanding that the wind had died utterly away, and the sun was shining in an unclouded sky.

“What’s that out there, I wonder?” exclaimed Brian, pointing to a small dark object hardly discernible on the sun-glinted ripples of the lagoon.

“Where?” asked Alec. “Ah! I see where you mean; bit of wreckage, or else the trunk of a tree that was carried down by the flood. What did you think it was—our boat?”

“I still think so,” replied Brian. “If only we had a telescope.”

“We’ll make our way along the shore, if only to prove that you’re wrong,” rejoined his chum.

The descent to the sandy beach was a difficult one, but this accomplished, they walked rapidly until further progress was barred by the precipitous face of the cube-shaped mountain. From this point the object Brian had sighted was within a couple of hundred yards of the shore.

Whatever it was, it was not drifting. It was floating low, and certainly resembled the stem of a partly submerged boat when viewed end-on. Yet, from a low vantage point, any object showing against the sun would be a baffling one to identify.

“Even if it should be the whaler, how do you propose to get her?” asked Chris. “The lagoon’s stiff with sharks. Look at them!”

“Quite,” agreed Brian, for in half-a-dozen places could be seen the triangular dorsal fins of these tigers of the deep. “The sharks are there right enough, and so’s the boat.”

As he spoke there was a commotion close to the water-logged object. Hit, either accidentally or by design, by a shark, the thing tilted—not much, but sufficiently to enable the boys to confirm Brian’s statement.

It was the lost whaler.

“You’re right, Brian; I apologise,” said Alec. “Or, at least, it’s what’s left of her. She’s been badly knocked about, and her air-tanks, or most of them, have been holed. Otherwise she would have shown much more freeboard.”

“She’s worth recovering, though,” remarked Chris.

“Meaning we might be able to patch her up—without any tools?”

“Don’t be so sarcastic, Alec,” protested Chris.

“I’m not,” declared Alec. “But we must get down to hard facts. There’s the whaler water-logged. We can only get to her by swimming; and there are the sharks. Is the game worth the candle?”

“It is,” replied Chris quietly; “and what’s more, I’m going to have a jolly good shot at it.”

CHAPTER THE NINTH

SALVAGE

THE others looked at Chris in astonishment. He was not given to idle boasting. Indeed, it was the other way about. Often his reticence was mistaken for shyness, and rarely did he display any initiative. When he did there was good reason for it.

“What do you propose doing?” asked Brian. “Swimming’s out of the question.”

“Quite,” agreed Chris soberly. “The boat’s worth saving, if only for the metal it contains. I propose knocking up a raft and paddling out to it. There are plenty of trees, and those bamboos, being hollow, have heaps of buoyancy. We’ve an axe and cordage, so we’ve everything we want for the job.”

“Good man!” exclaimed Alec approvingly. “While we’re about it we’ll knock up a raft large enough to take the three of us.”

“Not a bad idea,” concurred Chris. “We’ll make it large enough for three, but only two will make the attempt. The third will be more useful ashore. Come on, set to work!”

“It will save us the trouble of shinning up for the nuts,” remarked Brian.

It took two full hours to fell half-a-dozen coco-palms, to cut a quantity of bamboos of about four inches in diameter, and to man-handle the material to the beach. During the whole of this time the water-logged whaler had not altered her position.

In another hour the raft was completed. It consisted of four lateral supports and two lashed crosswise. To the framework the bamboos were secured, thus forming a platform. Paddles had to be constructed, and, in addition, the boat-hook formed part of the equipment. At Brian’s suggestion several stones were placed on the platform for use as missiles to frighten off the sharks that were persistently swimming in the vicinity.

“Now we’ll toss up for odd man out,” declared Chris, producing a coin from his pocket. “That half-dollar serves a useful purpose after all. I had thought of chucking it away as useless!”

“Why not all three of us?” protested Alec. “The raft’s quite big enough, and it’ll take all hands to paddle her along when we’ve the whaler in tow.”

“Perhaps you’re right,” admitted the originator of the plan. “But I thought that it would be better for one of us to remain ashore to take a heaving-line.”

“We’ll manage without that, once we get the boat in tow,” declared Alec. “Now, all aboard! Look out for ground-sharks. From what I’ve heard of other lagoons, I reckon we’ve struck unlucky with ours. It’s no place for bathing, that’s a moral cert.”

Alec and Brian each took a paddle, Chris steering by means of a long bamboo pole—in the cleft end of which had been jammed a large oyster-shell. In the absence of wind, progress was steady; and although several sharks, attracted by the strange moving object, curled around the raft, they kept a respectful distance, not knowing what to make of the vigorous beats of the paddles.

At length the raft ranged up alongside the water-logged whaler. Apparently she was undamaged. The torrential rain had filled her, but instead of being supported by the copper air-tanks, she had taken a decided list. Almost all those so-called buoyancy tanks were defective. The consequence was that, instead of floating with a fair amount of freeboard, the boat was awash save for the bow and stern portions.

When Alec attempted to get the whaler in tow the mystery of why she had not drifted out to sea was revealed. She was held by her anchor, but the rope had fouled the stock. In the grip of the current the boat had drifted, the anchor merely dragging over the bottom; but—and here was the saving factor—the tripped anchor had held in a branch of coral, thus preventing the water-logged craft from drifting further.

“And it’s still holding,” declared Alec, as he heaved away at the rope until one end of the raft dipped. “It’s a proper foul.”

“Cut the rope, then,” suggested Brian.

“Not much!” was his chum’s indignant rejoinder. “We can’t afford to lose that anchor. Stand by, lads! I’ll dive for it.”

Twenty to thirty feet beneath the surface the anchor was clearly visible. The flukes were free, but the stock was firmly held by a grotesquely-curved branch of pink coral.

Without attempting to divest himself of his scanty clothing, Alec stepped to the edge of the raft and gave a swift, comprehensive glance at the water in its vicinity. The surface was ruffled by the feathery wake of half a dozen dorsal fins, but so far the sharks had not overcome their suspicions.

“Keep those stones handy,” cautioned Alec; then, taking a deep breath, he slipped over the side.

His chums waited anxiously, momentarily changing the direction of their glance from the sharks to the diver.

Alec made no attempt to dive in the ordinary sense. Swimming downwards with slow, powerful strokes, he grasped the rope at about midway between the anchor and the boat. Then, hauling himself to the bottom, he gripped the refractory anchor and shook it clear.

Thrusting with his right foot against the rock, Alec soon shot up to the surface, but not an instant too soon. Even as his chums assisted him over the edge of the raft, a long, pale-greenish mass shot from under the platform. So close was the shark to the surface that its back rasped the framework.



EVEN AS HIS CHUMS ASSISTED HIM OVER THE EDGE OF THE RAFT, A LONG, PALE-GREENISH MASS SHOT FROM UNDER THE PLATFORM.

“That one wasn’t shy, at all events!” exclaimed Alec breathlessly. “Didn’t you fellows see it? Up with the anchor! If the boat drags the fluke’ll foul this time.”

Brian and Chris grasped the anchor-rope and hauled in the slack. Fortunately the possibility their chum had hinted at did not occur, and soon the anchor was resting on the raft.

Manning their paddle, the chums headed the raft, with the whaler in tow, towards the shore. It was heavy work. Progress was tantalisingly slow; but at length, well-nigh breathless and done up with the terrific heat of the sun, the salvage party felt the raft ground at three yards or so from shore, while the boat touched bottom at three times that distance.

The chums leapt on shore, secured the raft and heaved their hardest on the whaler’s painter. The boat obstinately refused to move another inch.

Baling, with the gunwale amidships well under the water, was useless. Even had the boat been dry, the united efforts of the three would not have

moved her in that soft, yielding sand.

“It’s nearly low water,” announced Alec. “We’ll have to wait until the top of the tide. Spell-ho, every one!”

They stood easy for the best part of an hour. Then all hands set to work to dismantle the raft.

“We’ll hang on to the wood,” said Chris. “It’ll come in handy if we have to build a hut.”

“Be careful with the cordage,” cautioned Alec. “Let me have that coil.”

Taking the rope, he waded waist-deep to the whaler, clambered aft and secured one end of the rope to the stern ring-bolt. The tide had now turned and was slowly rising. Unless the rise were phenomenally high, all they might reasonably expect was a tide of about a couple of feet.

“It’ll be a long job,” declared Alec. “Six hours’ rise, and we can’t start baling until the tide falls a bit. We’ll have to work double shifts. It’s no use half doing a job, and I want to see the boat back in the creek before we turn in.”

As the tide rose, the whaler was hauled broadside on to the shore. At about four in the afternoon—as near as they could guess—it was high water. An hour later the level had dropped sufficiently to allow the gunwales to appear above water.

All the gear that remained in the boat consisted of mast, spars, two oars—which providentially had become wedged under the thwarts—the rudder and the wooden sea-chest. The tiller, gratings and two spare oars had vanished. Everything considered, the whaler had come off lightly.

Working feverishly against time and using caps as balers, they succeeded in ridding the boat of water before the tide left her, and before sunset she was lying afloat in the creek.

“Not a bad day’s work,” commented Chris. “But we might have saved ourselves the whole business if we’d moored her properly.”

“Ay, ay!” agreed Alec. “We’ll see to that in future, never you fear. Before we turn in, who’s game for another bit of work?”

The others looked at him, but said nothing. After a really gruelling day all they felt fit for was sleep.

“No response, eh?” continued Alec. “Well, in that case it’s each for himself, I suppose. This bright lad is going to sleep soft to-night. In other

words, I'm off to cut that heather-looking stuff to put under my share of the canvas. Of course, if you prefer hard ground——”

But already the others were alert. The suggestion was too alluring. They acted upon it.

So comfortable was their common couch that all three slept soundly until the dazzling rays of the risen sun warned them that it was time to be up and doing.

CHAPTER THE TENTH

THE CARVING ON THE ROCK

AS soon as they were astir, Chris wandered off without saying a word.

“What’s he up to, I wonder?” remarked Brian. “You haven’t got his rag out, have you?”

“Not I,” replied Alec emphatically. “Well, look lively, old son, and get a fire going. I’m trying my hand at making dampers out of taro and bread-fruit. Now we’re here we may as well feast decently, and variety’s half the battle.”

Brian had only just got the fire going when Chris returned with half a dozen flat fish.

“You’re in luck!” exclaimed Brian. “How did you catch them? You hadn’t any hooks.”

“I had the boat-hook,” was the somewhat unexpected reply. “No; no joke was intended. If you must know, yesterday I saw swarms of these flat fish swimming over the sandy bottom a little way beyond that point. So this morning I took the boat-hook, lashed the file to it, tang outwards, and used the gadget as a sort of spear. I could hardly miss striking them, but the trouble was to land them. They wriggled off the point. A few I saved, as you see. Next time I’ll file a proper fish-spear with a decent barb, and then they won’t get away.”

When Alec returned from his taro-grubbing expedition, Chris had cleaned and washed his catch, afterwards grilling the fish over the fire. The net result of their joint efforts was quite a satisfying and appetising repast. Even the fresh water tasted delicious to palates long accustomed to that drawn from the ship’s tanks, and latterly to a meagre quantity of rain water.

“Now what’s the programme?” enquired Brian after the meal was over, and the remains conscientiously buried in the sand. “Do we explore?”

“Not a bad idea,” agreed Alec. “It’s just as well to know where we are and what our domain consists of. For the present we needn’t trouble about a

hut. The cave will suit until we find a better site—one not liable to be washed out.”

“And what about a distress signal?” asked Chris.

“Distress signal! What do we want with a distress signal?” demanded Brian indignantly. “We’re all right. We’ve nothing to write home about _____”

“Haven’t we?” interposed Alec. “You speak for yourself, my lad. I wouldn’t care how long we remained on the island if it weren’t for my people at home. We must rig up some sort of signal in case a vessel bears in sight. Then we’ve done all we can towards getting home. Now, lads, ready? Come for a walk, Peter!”

At the mention of that magic word “walk” the dog wagged his tail furiously and gave a succession of joyous barks. Life on the old *Cosmos* was all very well, in Peter’s opinion, except that the chances of a walk ashore were few and far between. Here, on the island, he could scamper and frolic as much as he pleased without being sternly ordered to lie down.

The chums set out on their tour of discovery. Alec carried the axe, which, by dint of rubbing on a strip of sanded canvas, he had restored to a condition of fair efficiency. Brian had a coil of rope slung over his shoulder. Chris bore the boat-hook, which he seemed to regard as his special property. In addition, each had his knife.

They struck inland, keeping by the side of the stream. For the first quarter of a mile the ground rose in a succession of low terraces, bounded on either side by brushwood and clusters of palms. Here and there were fairly extensive clearings, where the grass was so short that it looked as if these open spaces had been made by men’s hands.

There were pigs in large numbers. One little porker, emerging from a thicket, ran blindly in the boys’ direction until it caught sight of Peter. Then it turned and ran off, squealing shrilly.

“Heel, Peter!” ordered Alec.

The dog obeyed.

“Why not let Peter get him?” asked Brian.

“Because it’s not necessary,” was the reply. “When we want pork we can get it; but I’m hanged if I’ll let the dog chase and kill a pig just for the fun of it.”

“Well, aren’t we in need of pork?” asked Brian.

“Yes; but not at this stage of our walk,” replied Alec. “We can’t carry the pig with us, and we wouldn’t find any of it left on our return.”

“Who’d take it?” asked Chris.

“Look under that bush and you’ll see,” suggested Alec, pointing to a clump of thorns that they had just passed.

Out of curiosity, Brian and Chris retraced their steps. Alec had no need to do so. Already he had taken note of what lay underneath the clump.

It was the skeleton of a small animal. The bones were intact and had not yet been bleached through exposure to the air; but every vestige of flesh had disappeared. Ants had picked the bones dry.

“Jolly lucky for us that there are ants,” declared Alec, as they resumed their way. “The island seems to be teeming with animal life, and if there weren’t ants to act as scavengers the corpses would breed a pestilence. And there’s another good thing: we haven’t come across any mosquitoes.”

“But we may,” remarked Brian, who from experience in times past had good cause to dread these tropical pests.

“Chances are we won’t,” continued Alec. “If there were any on the island they would have found us out before now; so unless we’ve carried their eggs in our clothes—which is doubtful—I don’t think we’ll be troubled by mosquitoes. Hello! look over there. My word, we’re in luck!”

He pointed to a shallow hollow about a hundred yards on their left. The ground was literally hidden by birds that were unmistakably blood relations of the domesticated fowl, so common in the British Isles.

“Poultry and eggs!” exclaimed Brian. “I say! How did those birds get to the island? They must have been brought here from some ship.”

“Must have been,” agreed Chris. “It would be interesting to know when the first pair arrived. In a few years they and the pigs will overrun the place and eat up every bit of green stuff there is.”

Presently the explorers came to a low cliff. Here the stream split up into four smaller feeders, each of which had its source in the rock. On the top of the cliff was a dense, seemingly impassable line of scrub.

“We’ve struck a blind alley,” declared Alec.

“We’ll have to climb that rock if we are to get to the highest part of the island,” said Chris. “The terrace might stretch from one side to the other.”

“We can climb it easily enough,” rejoined his chum. “It’s not the cliff that’s the difficulty; it’s the stuff at the top. We may have to hack a way for goodness knows how far. We ought to have kept to the shore.”

“I’ll have a shot at it,” announced Chris. “Lend me the axe, old son.”

Thrusting the handle of the axe into his belt, Chris walked along the base of the cliff in order to find a likely place to make an ascent; for although the wall of rock averaged only about twenty feet in height, it was for the most part smooth-faced and covered in places with large patches of lichen and moss.

He stopped, gazed at the rock, and then beckoned to his companions.

“What is it?” asked Alec. “Found a pirates’ hoard?”

“Not yet,” was the reply, “but it looks as if we’re on the track of something.”

Whipping out his knife, Chris began scraping the moss from the hard stone. Carved quite half an inch deep were the letters MDCCII. Under them were the letters A.D.

“That shows we aren’t the first to set foot on the island,” declared Chris. “Some one was here in 1702, and evidently he was in no great hurry, since he must have taken days to carve that date.”

“But why did he waste time over the A.D.?” asked Brian. “Nobody would dream of reading the date as B.C. 1702.”

“It’s more than likely that A.D. are the man’s initials,” said Chris. “If they stood for Anno Domini, the letters would precede the date. They must mean something. I don’t suppose the fellow went to all that trouble just for the fun of the thing, like those silly asses who take a delight in plastering their names over every building of note they come across.”

“There’s nothing more?” asked Alec.

“Nothing as far as I can see,” was the reply. “Perhaps if we scraped the whole of the face of the cliff clean we might discover some other carving.”

“Nice job for a dull afternoon,” commented Alec. “But standing here won’t get us to the top.”

“That’s a fact,” agreed Chris, as he adjusted the axe through his belt so that the edge was turned away from him. “This looks a likely place.”

With very little difficulty Chris climbed the twenty-odd feet of cliff and gained the top. Here he hung on to a stout branch with his left hand, while he hacked away with the axe at a mass of particularly tough undergrowth. In a few minutes he had cleared a patch sufficiently wide for him to stand.

“What’s up there?” enquired Alec.

“Scrub—miles of it, I should imagine,” replied Chris. “We’ll never be able to hack a way through unless——”

“Unless what?” asked Alec.

“Unless we set fire to the stuff.”

“Well, why not? It’s no earthly use, this scrub.”

“Quite,” agreed Chris. “But what if the flames spread to the coco-nut groves?”

“Not with the wind in this quarter,” replied Alec. “Stand by for a line!”

Brian, glad of the opportunity to show that his coil of rope would be useful after all, heaved one end to the top of the cliff. The end Chris passed round the stout branch that was more than capable of supporting his weight, and paid out the rope until both extremities rested on the ground below.

Then Alec swarmed up. With the burning glass he quickly set the dry brushwood alight. In fact, so rapidly did the flames spread that the two lads had to beat a hasty retreat. Recovering the rope, the three retraced their steps, leaving behind them a furious sea of fire.

CHAPTER THE ELEVENTH

THE RUINED TEMPLE

FOR three days the fire raged. Of its extent the chums could form no idea, except that on the side nearest them there was a wall of flame quite a mile in width. On the left it stopped short at the eastern face of the sugar-loaf mountain. On the right the conflagration was held by the sea. But how far back the fire raged they knew not.

During those three days the chums were far from idle. They commenced to build a hut, choosing the site on shelving and sheltered ground well above the level of the recent flood and open to the lagoon.

Chris, as architect-in-chief, laid particular stress upon the absolute necessity for strong foundations.

“Something to withstand the fiercest hurricane,” he explained. “The roof might go—probably will—but with good foundations and stout walls, re-roofing a hut doesn’t matter very much.”

“But it would be better if the jolly old hurricane didn’t lift our thatch every time,” remarked Brian. “You do your level best, old son, to design a roof that won’t want to be an aeroplane every time the wind pipes up!”

Considering the scanty nature of their resources, the amateur builders made good progress during those three days. With roughly-made wooden spades, they dug holes six feet in depth to receive the uprights of the structure. These were placed in pairs, each one of a pair being six inches apart. The spaces were then ready to hold the horizontal timbers of the walls. Without nails, each piece had to be secured by fibre ropes; but before this part of the work was ready to be tackled the fire had burnt itself out, aided by an hour’s steady rainfall.

“We’ll knock off building and carry on with our tour of exploration,” decided Alec. “The rain we had last night must have cooled the ground, so we’ll be all right.”

“Are we taking Peter?” asked Brian.

“Rather,” was the emphatic reply.

Equipped as on the previous expedition, they set out. At the top of the cliff that had barred their progress they found that the brushwood had completely vanished. The stout stem that had given Chris a means of holding on had perished in the flames.

Nevertheless, Chris swarmed to the top. It was a weird sight that met his gaze. To a depth of quite a mile the brushwood had been consumed, leaving a wide track of blackened débris, with here and there an occasional stem that had partly resisted the flames.

But what particularly attracted notice was a mass of weather-worn masonry standing on a low mound within four hundred yards of the edge of the cliff. Undoubtedly it was a dwelling of sorts.

"I say, you fellows!" he exclaimed, "I'm afraid we've burnt some one's house. If so, there'll be trouble. Heave the line up and haul yourselves up as fast as you can."

In the absence of anything sufficiently firm to which to make the rope fast, Brian hurled the boat-hook to the top of the cliff. This Chris thrust into the ground and bent the rope to it.

Peter was the next to make the ascent. It was some job. The intelligent animal knew what was about to happen. At the first attempt Alec held him with one arm, and tried to haul himself up. But the dog's weight proved too much for the lad's strength.

"We'll have to leave him behind," said Brian.

"Not much," replied Alec. "Come on, Peter, old boy! Let's see how you like a bowline-on-a-bight."

Dexterously Alec made the necessary double loop, padding the bights with his coat. The loops were then passed under the dog's body, and Chris was bidden to haul away.

"Don't step too close to the edge," added Alec, by way of caution. "Steady, Peter! If you start kicking there'll be trouble."

But Peter didn't kick or struggle. With absolute confidence in his master he realised that there was nothing to fear, and although it took a tremendous exertion on Chris's part, the dog was hauled to the top of the cliff without mishap.

Then Brian swarmed up, followed by Alec. Hastily the rope was re-coiled and the boat-hook pulled from the ground; then, anxious to discover

the result of their unwitting crime of arson, the chums hurried across the calcined ground to the building.

“Why, it’s a temple of sorts!” exclaimed Chris. “Look at those carvings. They must be hundreds of years old.”

It was, indeed, a strange discovery. The building was of stone, standing four-square, each face being roughly eighty paces in length and thirty feet in height. The openings that had originally been windows were square, each being about six feet in height and breadth. The walls were solidly constructed of blocks of stone, many of them measuring ten feet in length. In the centre of each wall was a door, but owing to the accumulation of soil through countless ages the horizontal lintels—for there was not a sign of an arch in the whole building—were but three or four feet above the ground.

At first the building looked grim and forbidding. It gave the lads the impression of a gaunt, ugly barn; but a closer acquaintance not only revealed the strength and solidity of the structure, but the fact that the exterior walls were covered by an exquisite scheme of carving. Time had played havoc with the sculptor’s work, but even so enough remained to show that the symmetrical and intricate designs were the work of a highly-civilised race.

Strange to relate, although the fire had spread far all around the building, the walls were absolutely untouched. Even the blackened ground terminated at not less than a hundred feet from the structure, as if the devouring element had been sternly repelled in its otherwise all-conquering onslaught.

With feelings akin to awe, the chums entered the building, bending their heads to avoid contact with the low doorway.

The roofless interior was divided into aisles by massive pillars. Each pillar consisted of a stone image, representing a deity. The features of some were placid and benign; others were demoniacal in expression. All were covered to the waist by the dust of ages. Assuming that at one time these figures were completely above ground, their height would be at least sixty feet. That being so, it was also probable that the four doorways were perhaps thirty feet in height, and were approached by flights of stone steps.

Only in one case did the stonework of the roof between two pillars remain in position—a monolith measuring thirty feet in length with a girth of at least twelve feet. The rest of the massive roof had long since collapsed. Not a trace of it remained. All the fallen masonry had been completely buried by several feet of earth.

“Where did they get the stone from, I wonder?” remarked Alec. “We ought to find a huge quarry somewhere.”

“We might,” said Chris. “On the other hand, we might not. Statues like this are to be found on Easter Island, and there isn’t any unworked stone in the place. It is said that Easter Island is part of a submerged continent, and that all the inhabitants of it perished in a great catastrophe. It seems as if this is another small portion of that continent which managed to escape. Look at the writing on that wall! If any living person could read it—no one can, and probably never will—what a story it would tell!”

“Did that old chap A.D. know anything about the place, I wonder?” asked Brian.

“Hardly,” replied Chris. “It has been hidden in the tall scrub, perhaps for centuries. If he had, and had succeeded in getting away from the island, he would have told people about it. There would have been scientific expeditions and all that sort of thing.”

“Can’t we claim the ruins and the island as well?” asked Brian.

Chris shook his head.

“I’m not a lawyer. Goodness only knows. We might claim the place, but would our claim be allowed? I doubt it. We don’t know the position of the island. It may already be a Jap or Yankee possession; but if it isn’t, there’s no reason why we shouldn’t take possession of it as a British dependency.”

“Plenty of time for that if and when we get away from the place,” remarked Alec. “Let’s get a move on. We can come here again. That’s my goal.”

And he pointed to the cube-like mountain towering high above the undulating and lower portion of the island.

“What, going to climb that?” asked Brian.

“We’ll have a jolly good try, anyway,” was the response.

CHAPTER THE TWELFTH

EXPLORING THE PLATEAU

TWENTY minutes' steady tramping brought the explorers to the further edge of the fire-swept zone. It was a strenuous tramp in the full glare of the noonday sun. Not only were the solar rays oppressive; the carbonised dust radiated heat and rose in thick, choking clouds at every step the lads took. Peter, too, felt the heat. His long hair was powdered with grey dust. His tongue hung from his wide-open mouth. His tail drooped in a most dejected manner. No doubt he wondered in his doggy mind what had possessed his master to leave the shelter of the palm groves for this arid desert.

The reason for the clearly-defined limit of the fire was now apparent: a broad yet shallow stream flowing through a belt of marshy ground had effectually stopped its progress. Beyond the stream the tropical forest flourished. There was no sign of the impenetrable scrub, but a wide expanse of graceful palms, their broad leaves moving gently in the breeze.

The boys sought to quench their thirst at the stream, but the water was not fit to drink. It was full of sediment, and covered with particles of burnt grass.

"We've done for ourselves as far as the stream is concerned," said Brian.

"Perhaps, but I don't see that it matters," rejoined Alec. "If we hadn't fired the bush we might never have been able to get here. It'll clear in a few days. Meanwhile, there are coco-nuts in plenty."

"I'm rather fed up with coco-nuts," declared Chris. "We ought to have brought drinking water with us."

"We'll find another stream before very long," said Alec optimistically. "With all those trees there's bound to be water. How about fowl for dinner? I'm quite peckish."

"Good idea!" rejoined Brian.

"Find 'em, Peter," exclaimed Alec, pointing to a number of birds hopping about in one of the groves.

Peter needed no second bidding. Hitherto the human beings whose orders he obeyed had always checked him severely whenever he offered to chase birds. He had vivid recollections of Chief Officer Durnford “dusting his coat” when he attempted to seize a duck in the market at Panama.

Now, for no apparent reason, his present master was acting in exactly the opposite way. He was encouraging, nay, ordering, him to chase birds!

Peter rushed off, scattered the terrified fowls, and returned with a plump cockerel in his mouth.

“Good dog!” exclaimed Alec. “Drop it!”

Peter did so, wagging his tail with delight. He was beginning to see why he had been sent. He licked his chops in anticipation of a meal.

“Who’s going to pluck the bird?” asked Brian, without enthusiasm. Usually the drudgery of cookery fell upon him.

“No one,” replied Alec, handing Brian the burning glass. “Get a fire going and see that it doesn’t spread this time. Chris, you might get some bread-fruit and plantains. I’ll see to the bird.”

Taking his axe, Alec retraced his steps to the stream. From the bank he dug up a quantity of moist, whitish clay. Returning to the spot where Brian had lighted a fire, the self-constituted cook proceeded to clean the bird. This done, without removing the feathers, he plastered the fowl with clay until nothing was visible but a ball of plastic material enclosing the bird. This he placed in the heart of the fire.

“Ready in about an hour,” he declared.

And it was, for at the end of the stipulated time the clay, cracking with the fierce heat, came apart with the bird’s feathers adhering firmly to it; while the fowl, done to a turn, had but to be served round.

“By Jove! I don’t feel like climbing after that tuck-in,” declared Chris, when the repast was finished, and Peter had cleared up the remains. “Can’t we put the job off till to-morrow?”

“There’s no putting off till to-morrow what you can do to-day on this island, my lad,” said Alec firmly. “That’s how slackers are made. We’ll stand easy for an hour. Then you can tighten your belts and get busy.”

“All right, slave-driver,” rejoined Chris cheerfully. “Why not start at once?”

“Good idea!” agreed Alec promptly, taking his chum at his word. “On we go!”

The rest of the way to the base of the lofty height which the chums had appropriately named Sugar-cube Mountain was fairly easy going, the dense foliage affording complete shelter from the sun. In fact, so thick were the palms that the explorers found themselves confronted by the precipitous mass of hard rock before they expected it.

For at least two hundred feet it towered, stern and forbidding and without the faintest sign of a foothold.

“Up with you, Alec!” exclaimed Chris chaffingly; “‘do it now,’ you know.”

“It’ll take some doing,” admitted his chum dubiously. “Let’s work our way round to the north side and see if there’s a way up.”

“What’s the use, anyway?” protested Brian. “I’m with Chris. We’ll lie on the ground and watch you. Hang it all, man, the mountain is as bare as a brick. There’s nothing growing on it. We don’t want to live on it, so why risk your neck? Besides, there’s Peter. He’ll never be able to climb, even if you can.”

“Let’s try,” said Chris, unexpectedly siding with Alec. “There’s some fun getting to the top. We’ll be able to see what our island looks like. If there is any difficulty with Peter, Brian can stop with him.”

They resumed their way, keeping the sheer face of the rock on their left, until they arrived at the north-eastern angle of the hill. Here the ground sloped gently towards the lagoon, the shore of which was barely a mile away. Save for a few palms, there was an almost entire absence of foliage, the ground being covered with short grass that gave a park-like aspect to this side of the island.

But they paid scant heed to this portion of their domain. Their attention was directed upon the northern face of the mountain. It looked promising, for although the other sides rose sheer and in an unbroken precipice, this consisted of several terraces, averaging fifty feet in height and resembling the “scars” of the mountains of Yorkshire and Lancashire.

“It looks as if there’s been a big fire here at some time,” declared Chris. “There are distinct traces of it on the lower portion of the rock.”

“If so, that accounts for the absence of scrub,” added Alec. “What’s that? Why, I believe it’s a flight of steps.”

It was. Within a hundred yards of the north-east angle of the cliff was a series of hewn steps. They were by no means rough-hewn, each being evenly spaced. And what was stranger still, the steps cut through each of the intermediate terraces and apparently led direct to the top.

There was now no lack of enthusiasm. Brian was as eager as the others to see what there was at the top; while Chris, in spite of his generous repast, was undaunted at the sight of between three and four hundred stone steps that had to be tackled.

They commenced the ascent, Peter bounding ahead. It was a strange experience. At the level of each terrace it was possible to step off on to the platform, otherwise the flight ran through an artificial gorge cut into the solid rock. The steps were considerably worn, showing that at one time they had been used to a great extent by numerous people.

“This must have been the citadel of the people who built the temple,” declared Chris. “It must have been impregnable. A dozen men at the top could keep an army at bay before firearms were invented.”

“The fellows coming up must have been winded before they got to the top,” remarked Brian. “They’d have precious little fight left in them by that time. I feel like that myself, don’t you, Alec?”

“Two hundred . . . one . . . two . . . three . . .” was Alec’s only response. He was studiously counting the number of steps.

Already Peter was feeling the unusual exertion, and instead of being on ahead was sedately following his master.

“Three hundred and sixty-five,” declared Alec breathlessly, when the topmost step was reached. “I wonder whether that number was intentional—something to do with the number of days in the year. I say, what a view!”

From where they stood, roughly two-thirds of the island was visible. In outline it resembled a rectangle with a long, narrow neck of land projecting from the north-western part. The reef followed the contour of the shore and, with the exception of three small breaks, was continuous. It was only off the south-eastern corner of the island that the reef approached close to the land, and here, as the chums had already discovered, it was complicated by completely surrounding the smaller island, forming an efficient breakwater to the creek in which they kept their boat.

They had expected to find that the top of the plateau consisted of bare rock. It was not so; nor was it by any means level. The surface was covered

with turf that looked fresh and green in spite of the heat of the sun. There was not as much as a single tree or even a shrub.

“Almost good enough for footer,” was Brian’s verdict. “What a quaint show. Fancy people going to the fag of cutting three hundred and sixty-five steps to get to the top and then knocking off. There isn’t even a hut!”

“Perhaps something happened and wiped them all out when they had just finished the steps,” hazarded Alec.

“They had time to wear away part of the steps,” said Chris. “That doesn’t look as if the catastrophe, whatever it was, followed on the heels of the completion of the staircase. Let’s explore. I say, Alec, what about stopping here for the night?”

“No grub—no water,” demurred his chum laconically.

“And nothing to make a fire with,” added Brian. “Right-oh—let’s explore.”

They made a complete circuit of the plateau, finding no traces of man’s handiwork.

“There’s no hurry,” declared Alec. “Let’s have a spell-ho, and enjoy the cool breeze. If we leave ourselves time for another good meal before dark we needn’t get back to our cave. There is plenty of shelter in the palm-groves.”

They threw themselves upon the springy turf. The air, though warm, contrasted most favourably with the humid atmosphere of the lower part of the island.

Suddenly Peter pricked up his ears and gazed attentively at some distant object. At first the others could not make out what had attracted his attention; but presently they spotted a small rat-like animal whose mode of progression was similar to that of the kangaroo. Without being alarmed, it was moving in a series of jumps, stopping now and again to nibble the herbage.

It approached. While it was doing so, Peter, without moving a muscle, never took his eyes off it; but when the creature, scenting danger, turned and made off with incredible speed, the dog started in pursuit.

Alec made no attempt to call the dog back. He knew that the massive, heavily-coated Peter stood no chance of overtaking his quarry.

They kept the dog in sight until, at two hundred yards, he was hidden by a slight inequality of the ground.

Five minutes passed without any sign of Peter.

"I say, hope he hasn't toppled over the edge," said Alec in some alarm.

They sprang to their feet. They could still see nothing of the dog. Then they commenced to run in the direction of the hillock where Peter was last seen.

Even as Alec and Brian commenced the ascent, Chris having fallen a little behind the others, they heard the dog give a short, deep bark.

"He's all right then," exclaimed Alec gratefully. "'Tany rate, he hasn't fallen a couple of hundred feet. Why——"

He paused both in speech and action, for, having gained the crest of the rise, another remarkable and unexpected sight met his gaze.

The ridge was part of a large rectangle or embankment enclosing a hollow that was quite invisible from the edge of the cliffs. During their circuit of the plateau the chums had noticed the rising ground in the centre, but had been quite unaware of what lay within the enclosed space.

There were stones in abundance—huge, hewn stones lying in utter confusion. Literally it could be said that not one remained upon another—unless, of course, some rested on buried foundations.

The chums were gazing upon yet another relic of a forgotten civilisation. It was apparently the ruins of a citadel, or, perhaps, a palace, situated in the mathematical centre of the vast plateau. Although the embankment was rectangular in form, the ruins lay within the limits of a perfect square. In that respect they resembled the roofless temple the boys had discovered earlier in the day. But there the resemblance ended, for the walls of the temple were practically intact. This consisted of a jumble of stones.

Guided by Peter's persistent barking—for contrary to his usual custom he paid no attention to his master's order to return—Alec descended the inner face of the embankment and scrambled over the fallen masonry.

Almost exactly in the centre of the square was a small clear space, measuring about twenty feet in length and breadth. Again, in the centre of this inner square was a gaping cavity enclosed by a massive coping. At the edge of this stood Peter, fur bristling, eyes flashing, and barking vehemently at something within the gloomy recesses of the pit.

CHAPTER THE THIRTEENTH

A FIGHT TO THE DEATH

“COME here, Peter, you idiot!” exclaimed Alec, anxious for the animal’s safety.

The “idiot,” for a wonder, refused to obey. His instinct, more acute for sensing danger than that of human beings, compelled him to remain, despite orders. Something in that dark shaft had aroused Peter’s anger, but of its nature Alec and his companions could form no definite idea.

Seizing Peter by his collar, Alec tried to drag him away. The leather, perished by exposure to sea-water and by the drastic treatment it had received when the brass ring had been removed, parted. Alec staggered back and narrowly escaped colliding with one of the large stones. The dog, forepaws tautened at the very edge of the black hole, re-doubled his furious challenge to the unseen menace.

“Will you be quiet!” shouted his master. “Hand me the end of that rope, Brian!”

His chum did so. Making a bowline sufficiently large to slip over the dog’s neck, Alec approached his pet with the object of using the rope as a lead, and pulling Peter away from the dangerous shaft.

As he did so, he caught the deep red glint of a pair of eyes. He could see nothing else. In the intense blackness of the narrow pit only those formidable points of reflected light pierced the gloom.

Anxiety for Peter’s safety outweighing his personal fears, Alec gripped the dog by the scruff of the neck and dragged him backwards as far as the clear expanse allowed.

“Look out, you fellows!” he cautioned.

Alarmed by Alec’s tone, Brian drew his knife; while Chris, holding the boat-hook “at the ready,” prepared to meet the as yet invisible menace.

An instant later and a fearful apparition emerged from the pit. Whether man or ape, there was little time to conjecture. The creature, standing erect,

measured not more than five feet in height, but was disproportionately broad across the body. Its limbs were long, ending in claw-like fingers. Its head, devoid of hair like the rest of it, was broad with a low, receding forehead. Deep-set eyes, flat nose, and a large mouth displaying a double row of yellow, jagged teeth—the canines being missing—gave the creature an expression at once cunning and ferocious.

With a hideous cry, more like a croak than a growl, the creature stood irresolute, as if deciding upon the object of his attack.

The chums stood their ground. Although their first impulse was to take to their heels, they realised that their chances of escape amidst that chaos of fallen masonry were hopeless.

Whether they wanted to or not, they must put up a fight against a creature of unknown species that might be a human being of the lowest order—an undeveloped descendant of the pre-historic caveman.



RAISING THE BOAT-HOOK, HE DEALT THE CREATURE A VIOLENT BLOW AS IT SHUFFLED BY.

Alec, still grasping Peter by the scruff of his neck, appeared to be the first object of the formidable creature's attack. Shuffling awkwardly, it

advanced, pawing the air with its abnormally long forearms and bellowing unmistakable challenge.

It ignored the others, but Chris was not going to let an advantage slip. Raising the boat-hook, he dealt the creature a violent blow as it shuffled by. So powerful was the stroke that the stout ash stave splintered. Such a blow would have felled any human being, but this formidable brute did not seem to feel it. Dropping the apparently useless pole, Chris drew his knife.

For some reason, Alec was the only one of whom it took any notice. Its furious eyes were fixed upon him. Not once did they shift to look at the now frantically straining Peter.

With an unexpected twist, the dog broke away from his master's grasp, turned and ran past him. It was not cowardice. Peter would willingly have given his life for any one of the three. It was merely to gain space for an effective spring.

True to the sheep-dog strain in his mixed breed, Peter went for the creature's hind leg, gripped it at the tendon, wrenched with all his strength, and succeeded in bringing the brute to the ground.

The advantage gained was but momentary. The animal, rolling its ungainly body over, grasped Peter's hind-leg in its hand-like paw. There was a sickening snap.

Not a cry came from the devoted dog. He went on gripping and worrying his antagonist with his powerful jaws.

It was now or never. Retrieving and holding the jagged shaft of the boat-hook firmly in both hands, Brian thrust the point into the creature's open jaws, and felt the sharp end of the tough wood sink into the roof of its mouth.

An instant later those terrible jaws closed, biting through the ash staff as if it were made of cardboard. Then, seizing the remains of the boat-hook and wrenching it from Brian's grasp, the infuriated brute dealt the lad a blow that sent him staggering, to fall senseless upon the ground.

But the toughest example of animal life cannot ignore the presence of six or eight inches of wood driven into the roof of its mouth. Brian's thrust had been true and strong; the brute, in biting through the shaft, had driven the spike-like portion deeper into its mouth. Frantic with pain, it strove to tear out the fragment.

Simultaneously Alec and Chris got home with swift thrusts with their knives; the former striking for the creature's bare throat, while his chum drove the keen steel deep into its armpit.

The amount of animal strength, vitality, and ferocity in that uncouth frame was almost incredible. Notwithstanding its severe injuries, the brute gripped Alec's shirt in its unwounded paw and drew the lad towards its huge jaws, from which blood and froth were running copiously. Alec could feel the thing's hot, fetid breath. With a desperate effort he struck with his sharp steel across the bony wrist that held him. Then, staggering back, he left the greater part of his sole upper garment in the now nerveless clutch of his opponent.

At the same time Chris thrust deeply at the brute's heart. It collapsed inertly, wrenching the knife from the boy's grip.

But the end was in sight. Groaning horribly and pawing the air with rapidly-diminishing strength, the creature at last lay motionless.

"Look after Brian," gasped Alec, as he knelt beside his devoted pet.

Peter was in a bad state. The right hind-paw trailed limply, the bone projecting through the flesh. His coat was smeared with blood. At first Alec feared that he had been badly torn by the creature's talon-like nails, but most of the blood had come from the dog's antagonist.

Peter was panting heavily, but not a moan came from him. He tried and succeeded in raising his head to his master and licked his face.

Alec glanced in Brian's direction; he saw his chum sitting up and feeling a rapidly-rising ridge on the top of his head.

"Just left off seeing stars, thanks!" replied Brian in answer to Alec's enquiry. "Carry on; I'm all right so far. How's old Peter?"

"Come and bear a hand, Chris," exclaimed Alec, setting to work to cut splints from the staff of the boat-hook.

Between them they succeeded in setting Peter's broken limb, although the wound caused by the jagged bone complicated matters. The operation completed, Peter, after persisting in licking his master and Chris in appreciation of their work, obeyed orders to keep quiet.

The chums now had an opportunity to turn their attention to their vanquished foe. It was an ape—a male of great age. The absence of hair and the condition of the teeth and nails proved that. Measured from finger tip to finger tip, the brute had a span of between six and seven feet.

“Wonder if there are more of them?” asked Chris, casting a glance in the direction of the sinister-looking shaft in the ground.

“I doubt it,” replied Alec. “If there were we wouldn’t be here. They’d come to their pal’s help. Later on we’ll explore the hole, but we’ll have to bring the boat’s lantern. In any case, it won’t be for some time. We’ve our work cut out for the present. The difficulty is Peter. We must carry him back and not jolt him.”

“Then the sooner the better,” rejoined Chris, pointing to the golden west. “It’ll be sunset in a few minutes, and I’m dashed if I want to spend a night here. Supposing another brute like that butts in?”

CHAPTER THE FOURTEENTH

THE DESCENT IN THE DARK

“**T**HEN nip down as hard as you jolly well can and cut a couple of bamboos,” said Alec. “Six or seven feet long will do. We’ll have to fix up some sort of a stretcher.”

“Ay, ay, Cap’n!” replied Chris, and made his way towards the top of the stone staircase. He ran down the steps quickly enough, cut the required canes and came back. He did not run up those three hundred and sixty-five steps, but all the same he was breathless when he reached the top.

Placing the bamboos on the ground parallel to each other and about thirty inches apart, Alec and Brian commenced to pass the rope over and under them, each alternate part making a half-turn with one nearest to it. In this way quite an efficient stretcher was provided, while, to mitigate the hardness of the rope lashing, Brian and Chris contributed their shirts to form a sort of cushion. Alec’s was no longer in being, for the scanty portion the ape had left had already been used for binding Peter’s splints.

As gently as possible they helped their injured pet on to the stretcher and bore him towards the staircase.

“I believe old Peter’s quite enjoying himself,” remarked Brian. “Dashed if I could look so jolly pleased if I had my leg smashed.”

“How’s your head?” asked Chris.

“Rotten,” replied Brian laconically. “Everything’s spinning round like a capstan taking charge.”

“Think you’ll be all right to get down?” asked Alec anxiously.

“I’ll have a shot at it, anyway,” was the reply.



THUS THEY COMMENCED THE DESCENT.

At the head of the steep staircase the party halted. Viewed from above it looked steeper than ever.

Alec went first, with the poles of the stretcher resting on his shoulders. Chris took the after end, his arms extended downwards to keep the injured animal as level as possible. Brian, resting one hand on Chris's shoulder, walked by his chum's side.

Thus they commenced the descent.

They had not done more than a hundred steps when Brian called a halt and promptly sat down.

"I'll pitch on the bottom if I carry on," he said apologetically. "You fellows get on down with Peter. I'll be all right in a brace of shakes."

Chris set his end of the stretcher down on one of the steps only just in time to catch his chum in his arms. Brian had fainted.

The situation was getting serious. Already darkness had set in with a rapidity common in the tropics. A false step on those worn stones might

easily spell disaster.

“We’ll have to get Brian down on the stretcher and come back for Peter,” decided Alec. “You lift him out while I keep this end up.”

It was a tough proposition for one pair of hands to move the heavy dog. For the first time Peter yelped, but immediately apologised by frantically licking Chris’s hand.

“Stop there, old boy,” ordered Alec, addressing his pet. “We’ll come back for you, never fear!”

Placing the unconscious Brian on the stretcher was a simpler task than lifting Peter from it, although the former was quite five stone heavier.

The perilous descent was resumed. Every movement had to be made with the utmost caution, for had Alec slipped he would have pulled Chris and the stretcher after him; while had Chris stumbled over the rounded edge of the steps he would have pushed Alec down the steep incline, stretcher and all, for holding the poles on his shoulder he would have been unable to retain his balance.

The descent seemed interminable. In the intense darkness there was nothing to indicate the number of steps that remained. Even the high walls on either side were invisible, and only made their presence known when inadvertently the bearers’ shoulders rasped against the hewn cliffs.

Sweat poured from the faces of the two lads. Alec’s shoulders were fast becoming numbed by the pressure of the poles, while Chris seemed as if he had lost all power in his hands. His fingers were merely rigid, nerveless hooks on which the slippery bamboos rested.

At length Alec stumbled badly. He had attempted to descend a step that wasn’t there. He had reached level ground.

Thankfully he lowered the poles from his shoulder, cautioning his chum that the perilous descent was at last ended.

“Where now?” gasped Chris.

“Under that tree,” replied Alec, pointing to a species of banyan, the multiple trunk of which was dimly silhouetted against the now gathering starlight.

It was only a matter of about twenty yards. Thankfully the bearers deposited the stretcher on the ground under the arched tree.

“Oh, for a drink of water!” exclaimed Chris.

There was little chance of his wish being gratified. Water there was somewhere, but to attempt to find it in the darkness was out of the question.

“Spell-ho for five minutes,” declared Alec, flexing his cramped arms. “Then we’ll go and bring Peter down. Game?”

“‘Course I am,” replied Chris. “We can’t leave the poor chap up there all night. Where’s the stretcher? How long will it take, I wonder?”

The answer was supplied by something soft and moist against the back of Alec’s hand.

It was Peter.

“We needn’t have worried about him,” remarked Chris, thankful for the fact that they would not have to make another hazardous ascent and descent in the darkness.

Alec knelt down and passed his hand gently over his pet’s injured limb. To his relief he found that the splints were still in position.

Peter wagged his tail frantically and then sniffed. His protruding tongue indicated his wants.

“Water, is it?” asked his master. “All right, I’ll see what can be done.”

“You’ll have a job,” remarked Chris. “We’ve nothing to fetch it in even if we find a stream in this intense darkness. We ought to get some, ‘cause of Brian, too.”

Alec agreed. It certainly was a tough proposition. Hampered as they were, the task was doubly difficult; yet, although Alec was awfully fond of his pet, he realised that the still unconscious Brian had the prior claim.

“Game for another hour?” he asked abruptly.

“Might be—why?” asked Chris.

“Well, we might carry Brian on the stretcher, and keep by the side of the cliff until we strike the stream we crossed this morning.”

“And Peter?”

“If he can find his way down a couple of hundred steps, there’s no reason why he shouldn’t hobble along a bit,” said Alec. “He won’t stay here by himself till morning, that’s a dead cert.”

“What’s that?” interrupted Brian’s voice. “You are going to carry me on that contraption? Not much. I’m fairly fit now; I’ll walk.”

“Well, you offered no objection when we hiked you down the staircase on the stretcher,” declared Chris.

“What! am I on the ground?” asked Brian, still dazed. “I quite thought I was hanging on like grim death to one of the steps. Yes, for goodness’ sake, let’s get to the stream. My throat’s like a lime-kiln.”

He staggered to his feet, gamely asserting that he could walk five miles, if necessary.

“Perhaps, after all, we’d better carry Peter,” suggested Chris, to which proposal Alec readily agreed. As a matter of fact, the dog had not accomplished the descent without considerable pain. The excitement of the reunion over, he was lying on his side, paw outstretched and panting heavily.

They lifted the dog on to the stretcher. The procession reformed, Chris leading, Alec taking the after end of the poles, while Brian brought up the rear.

Fortunately it was good going. The ground was fairly level, and in less than twenty minutes’ time they arrived at the bank of the stream.

Thirst assuaged, they prepared to make the best of a long night. A fire was out of the question, for without sunlight the burning glass was useless. The few matches they had saved were left in the cave by the creek. Although Chris tried to start a fire by rubbing sticks together, the dew was so heavy that the effort met with no success.

Groping in the dark, Chris found a number of plantains. These served as a sorry meal. Then, feeling desperately cold, they huddled together under a bush, and so spent the hours of darkness in fitful slumber.

CHAPTER THE FIFTEENTH

BURIED TREASURE

AS soon as it was daylight they were astir. Within an hour after sunrise the strength of the sun was sufficient to make the burning glass effective, and quickly a roaring fire was blazing to cheer them.

Scouting round, Chris discovered a dozen eggs, and plenty of taro and bread-fruit. The eggs they cooked in hot embers, and although five, when broken, gave indisputable evidence that they were not “new laid” or even “fresh,” the others were quite palatable.

Before starting the meal, the lads bathed in the stream, which, although only waist-deep, flowed over a hard, gravelly bottom.

“At any rate, there’s no fear of sharks,” declared Chris as he emerged.

“No,” replied Alec, “but what’s that on your leg?”

Somewhat anxiously Chris glanced at the limb. Clinging to it were half a dozen leeches.

“What ought I to do?” he asked, tugging at one of the parasites. “It’s hanging on like—like a leech!”

“Course it would,” agreed Brian.

The others had hurriedly emerged, and were strenuously investigating to see if they had been similarly attacked.

“Paraffin or nicotine will shift ’em,” declared Brian.

“For goodness’ sake don’t act the goat!” protested Chris. “They’re beginning to sting like blue blazes. Get your knife, Alec, and cut them off!”

But Alec knew better. By cutting the leeches away, the suckers in the heads would remain, later to cause irritating and possibly dangerous wounds.

Hurrying to the fire he brought back a glowing stick.

“Singe them with this,” he suggested, handing the brand to his chum.

Stoically enduring the heat, Chris passed the glowing piece of wood over the black, eel-like leeches. Writhing, they detached themselves and fell to the ground, leaving angry-looking marks on the lad's flesh.

Misfortunes, it is said, rarely come unattended. When the bathers prepared to resume their scanty clothing, they found the garments swarming with ants. Seizing their trousers, they commenced to shake them vigorously.

"It's not all jam on a desert island!" exclaimed Brian, pausing in his efforts. "Leeches and ants, not to mention apes and sharks. Who says—— Look out, Alec, old son!"

The warning came too late. Alec, seized with a brain wave, had been shaking his trousers over the fire, in order to stupefy the insects and to cause them to drop off more quickly. Hearing Brian's voice, he turned his head in his chum's direction. Incautiously he allowed the legs of the garment to touch the flames, and the next instant they were blazing.

Quickly Alec stamped the flames out; but the damage had been done.

"I've always heard that shorts are the thing for the tropics," he remarked, with a hearty laugh. "Now I've a topping pair!"

At length the delayed repast was consumed. Food and warmth put a totally different aspect upon the situation.

"If it weren't for poor old Peter we'd fetch the lantern and explore that hole up there," said Alec, glancing up at the frowning cliff that formed the eastern face of the plateau. "I'm rather curious—but the best thing we can do is to get back and carry on with building the hut. It'll be quite three weeks, I fancy, before Peter can use that leg."

They set out on the return journey, looking, as Chris remarked, a pretty gang of ruffians. They were bare from the waist upwards, except that each wore an apology for a hat. Alec, in his tattered shorts, led the way, Chris next, the pair carrying Peter on the stretcher between them. Brian followed, with a large green leaf under his dilapidated cap as a sort of plaster to a huge black and blue lump on his forehead.

Repassing the temple, they reached the twenty-foot cliff, the descent of which proved the only serious obstacle of the journey. Before this could be done they had to dismantle the stretcher, using the rope to lower the injured dog, while Alec, swarming down at the same time, kept the animal's broken leg from contact with the hard face of the cliff.

Well before noon they arrived at the cave, where, by unanimous consent, they rested until the cool of the late afternoon.

For the next three weeks they stuck to the task of building a suitable dwelling. With only their knives, the axe, and the rusty saw, they made good progress, and before the time came for Peter's splint to be removed the hut, including the palm-leaf thatch, was completed, except for the interior "decorations." For with the seaman's instinctive handiness they had planned to hang the wall with matting woven from coco-nut fibre, and to weave mattresses for the bunks. Cups and basins they had already made from dried coco-nut shells and gourds, their only metal utensil capable of holding water being the now battered baler.

"That's our vulnerable part," remarked Chris, when the roofing had been completed. "An on-shore hurricane might not only strip the thatch, but smash in the front of the hut. What do you say to putting a sloping bank of earth against this side? It will protect the wall and possibly deflect most of the wind clear of the roof."

"Horrible swot, digging earth," protested Brian. "Why not a sloping wall of coral, and bank that up with earth? Then all we want is a dozen or so of twopenny packets of seed, and we'll grow a topping vegetable garden!"

"Then you'd better write off for catalogues, my festive!" rejoined Chris facetiously. "If you start at once you may catch the next mail. But, joking apart, what if a vessel should show up?"

"I'd feel inclined to give her a miss," replied Brian. "We're having a jolly time here. Fancy having to wear collars and ties again! If it weren't for my people, now——"

"And ours," added Alec.

"Of course," continued Brian. "If it weren't for them I'd like to hang on here for quite a long time; although I admit I'd give a lot for a jolly good dinner of English roast beef, baked potatoes, and Yorkshire pudding. One gets rather tired of fowl and pork!"

"Talking of grub you can't have won't get your proposed embankment done," remarked Alec. "'Do it now' is our motto, as I've told you before. Set to, lads!"

There were plenty of detached lumps of coral on the beach, and although transporting them to the higher ground was a tedious business, within the next few days the sloping bank was sufficiently advanced for the final covering of earth. The bank came level with the sills of the two windows,

and, as Chris pointed out, it was necessary to cover the glistening coral with soil in order to do away with the blinding glare.

Thirty yards from the hut was a mound that promised fairly easy work to remove it. Once the outer covering of turf was taken away, even the wooden shovels made good progress until they struck something flexible but tenacious.

“What’s this?” exclaimed Brian. “Looks like old canvas. Where’s that axe, Alec?”

He dealt the obstruction a hard blow. The fabric ripped. The edge of the steel grated on metal. The others desisted from their work and gathered round.

A few seconds’ work and Brian, with a lusty heave, unearthed what appeared to be a pewter basin.

“It’ll do with a clean up,” he remarked, as he threw it aside. “I suppose our friend A.D., whoever he was, slung his old pots and pans here. We’ve dug up his dust-bin!”

“And he took care to wrap the discarded old pot in canvas, eh?” added Chris, whipping out his knife and carefully scraping away the oxidised deposit. “Brian, old son, it’s silver! Any more of that sort going?”



THERE WERE FLAGONS RICHLY CHASED AND ORNAMENTED WITH PRECIOUS STONES.

"Heaps—tons of it!" replied his chum, now wild with excitement.

“Then don’t, for goodness’ sake, smash it,” cautioned Alec. “Steady on while we cut away the earth on top.”

Hardly able to restrain their impatience, the lads, regardless of the heat that sent the perspiration pouring in rivulets from their faces, shovelled away the thick covering of soil.

Then they resumed their task of removing the treasure, for treasure it undoubtedly was. There were flagons richly chased and ornamented with precious stones, platters, crucifixes, jewelled hilts of swords, the blades having been ruthlessly broken and thrown away by the hidiers of the spoil. Under the silver were six sacks, three of them filled with gold coin. The remaining ones contained gold and silver, the last having burst and scattered most of its contents amongst the sand and earth.

“What’s that lot worth, do you think?” asked Alec in awe-struck tones.

“Enough to make us rich for life, if we are able to get it home,” replied Chris. “Here it’s just so much dross.”

“That’s a fact,” admitted Brian. “What’s to be done with it? Shovel it all back? We couldn’t ask the skipper of a vessel to cart it for us. He’d probably pinch the lot and sling us overboard, if he happened to be a Dago.”

“What’s the use of putting it back?” rejoined Chris. “There’d be the disturbed earth to give the show away to the next people who come along. Besides, those sacks aren’t any too good. I vote we dig a hole in the floor of the hut and bury the stuff there. If we trample the floor well with coral dust there won’t be a trace. Then it’s on our particular property, and we’ve a claim on it.”

This advice was acted upon, and before nightfall the bulk of the treasure was hidden, although at Alec’s suggestion sixty of the gold coins, all of which bore the effigy of Charles II. of Spain and dates between 1671 and 1698, were retained.

“They’ll come in handy when we get home,” he added. “Let’s have a day off and go for a trip in the whaler. We deserve it after all this swot. How about a coasting trip to the north side? We’ll take the lantern with us, and if there’s a chance we’ll see what’s down that hole in the mountain.”

CHAPTER THE SIXTEENTH

THE CUTTLEFISH

QUICKLY the whaler was provisioned, mast set up and sail hoisted. Then, having stowed all gear and unmoored, they paddled their craft down the sheltered creek to the lagoon.

A soft, warm, on-shore breeze was blowing, ruffling the placid surface. On the reef the breakers thundered incessantly.

“Boat oars!” ordered Alec, easing off the mainsheet to the favouring wind. “That’s good! Make yourselves comfortable. Peter, come aft; you’ll be foul of the jib sheets when we go about if you stop there.”

Skirting the shore of the south side of the island, and midway between it and the reef, they amused themselves by watching the ever-changing beauties of submarine growth, clearly visible twenty-five or thirty feet beneath the keel; and studying the various aspects of the shore, where, with the exception of the sandy beach in front of their hut, the low cliffs rose steeply from the water until the frowning heights of Sugar-cube Mountain raised their formidable cliffs to dominate the whole island.

“Pity there’s no way up this side,” remarked Brian. “It would save an awful long tramp. I say, our hut doesn’t show up very distinctly with that bank in front.”

“We don’t want it to,” replied Chris. “We’ve built ourselves a home, not a hoarding. We don’t want unwelcome callers. Alec, old son, there’s no fearful hurry, is there? Let’s run across and explore the little island.”

“Right-oh,” agreed the skipper of the boat. “Close haul! It’s a dead beat to wind’ard.”

Half a dozen tacks brought the whaler to the atoll. Sail was lowered and the kedge taken ashore. Then, bare-footed, they landed on this hitherto unexplored portion of their domain.

With the exception of three coco-palms and a ridge covered with silvery-grey reeds, the atoll was bare. Nowhere did it rise more than three feet above high-water mark. Had it not been for an outlying reef, the breakers of the Pacific would have swept clean over it. As it was, showers of spray fell like

rain upon the small lagoon, entirely enclosed by the atoll, the particles of watery vapour displaying a perfect rainbow.

Crossing the ring of coral, they came to the inner lagoon. It was barely a hundred yards across, clear as crystal. The bottom, barely twelve feet down, was of pure white sand, without a vestige of weed, and the only fish of any sort were a few bright-coloured ones, no larger than a young trout.

“What a topping bathing-pool!” exclaimed Chris. “No sharks. We’d see them if there were any. Let’s have a swim.”

“Hold hard,” cautioned Alec. “We’ll heave a few chunks of coral in first. If there are sharks lurking on the bottom that’ll shift them.”

Using the back of their hard-worked axe, they dislodged several branches of dead coral, and tossed them into the pool. When the ripples had subsided, the small fry had scuttled for safety, but there was no swirl to indicate the presence of either the “white nose” or the ground shark.

The chums dived in; so did Peter. The dog was evidently under the impression that his master was in danger, and made strenuous efforts to get to him. Alec’s efforts to avoid his pet were successful for a time, until Peter brought his forepaws down on the swimmer’s back.

“Keep still and see what he’ll do,” urged Brian.

“I’d like to see you keep still with your back cut to ribbons,” retorted Alec, as he half turned and pushed the massive dog aside. “Go and shake Brian, Peter!”

The dog commenced swimming in Brian’s direction. The lad promptly struck out for land, and being a good swimmer, outpaced his canine rival.

Gaining the coral bank, he proceeded to haul himself up, when he felt his legs grasped by a pair of long, leathery arms provided with hundreds of suckers.

It was not a giant leech this time, but an octopus—a fairly small one, with a body about as large as a football, and with eight tentacles, each measuring roughly four feet in length. Two of these tentacles had obtained a hold on Brian’s legs, the others anchored the polyp to the coral.

“Get my knife, one of you!” yelled Brian. “Keep clear. A squid’s got me.”

Alec and Chris swam ashore as hard as they could.

It had long been an understanding between the three that on no account should a false alarm be raised. In consequence, they knew that Brian was in difficulties and not trying to play a senseless prank.

Picking up his own knife, Alec hurried to the spot where his comrade stood thigh-deep in water, his knees bending slowly yet surely under the contraction of those tenacious bands of living leather.

Taking the proffered knife and holding Alec's hand with his left, Brian bent and drove the blade hilt deep into the hideous creature's body.

With a terrific series of convulsions, accompanied by a discharge of inky fluid that darkened the clear water for several yards, the octopus relaxed its suction. To Brian it felt like the sudden switching off of a powerful electric shocking-coil. He was free.

His chums helped him out. His legs trembled to such an extent that for the present they were incapable of supporting him.

"Topping bathing place—I don't think!" he exclaimed, when he had partly recovered his spirits. "And what a sight your back is, Alec!"

It was. Already the marks of Peter's claws showed up like a set of railway lines at a junction, the scratches looking an angry red against the deep rich tan of his bare back.

"It seems as if swimming is dead off as far as we are concerned," said Chris. "What with leeches, sharks, cuttlefish and, when we get out, swarms of ants—well, I'm afraid we can't boost our island as a bathing paradise in the lovely Pacific! Come on, let's get afloat again."

They pushed off and hoisted sail. By this time the breeze had fallen considerably. There was just enough wind to keep steerage way on the boat.

"We've thrown away a good chance," remarked Alec. "If we'd carried on we should have fetched the north side of the island by this time. I don't mind as long as we can find a secure berth. We'll make a night of it, and explore the plateau to-morrow."

At length they drew abreast of the south-west corner of the island. It was on this side that they had found the passage through the reef, but on that occasion they were too busily engaged to notice much of the coast-line.

Progress was very slow off the point. A strong current was running against them, although its presence was not evident on the surface. The lagoon was almost as calm as a mill-pond. It was only when they looked

down and saw the long masses of sea-weed trailing in the current that they realised why they were such a time weathering the point.

Then the breeze dropped entirely, leaving the canvas shivering idly from the yard. The boat began to fall astern.

“Stow sail, lads!” ordered Alec. “Wind’s done. We must out oars and get her past this point.”

They lowered canvas, unshipped the mast, and took to the oars. Gradually the whaler gained ground, until most of the lagoon on the west side was exposed to view.

Suddenly Alec gave an exclamation of astonishment. Lying at anchor within the lagoon and at a distance of about two miles off was a vessel.

CHAPTER THE SEVENTEENTH

UNWANTED VISITORS

“**A** VAST pulling!” ordered Alec, in a low voice as if he were afraid of the crew of the distant craft overhearing him. “There’s a vessel ahead.”

Brian and Chris, lying on their oars, turned their heads to see the unexpected sight. The vessel was a steamer with one funnel and two masts. The hull was black, with deckhouses and bridge; the funnel was a dingy grey with red top. She flew an ensign, but, owing to the absence of wind, it hung idly from the ensign-staff. A thin trail of smoke issued from her funnel.

She was lying at anchor; even at that distance it was evident by her position, for her bows were pointing shorewards with her broadside exposed to the boys’ view.

Slowly but surely the whaler began to drift backwards. Soon the projecting bluff of the south-west point of the island would hide her from the strange craft.

“What are we going to do?” asked Brian. “Are we going alongside her?”

“Not till we find out more about her. Perhaps not even then,” replied Alec. “What’s the object of that craft putting into the lagoon, and in all probability sending a boat ashore? Water? Hardly. Trade with natives? No doubt they’d like to trade with us if they knew our possessions.”

“They may be all right,” remarked Brian.

“And they may not,” added Chris. “I agree with Alec. We can’t be too cautious. What’s your plan, old son?”

“To get back to the creek as fast as we can. Then one, or perhaps two of us, can get across the island, by the route we found a few weeks back, and keep the vessel under observation.”

The rowers resumed their oars, backed the boat round, and pulled towards the whaler’s berth.

“Why can’t we all go?” asked Brian.

“Cause of Peter,” replied Alec. “The chances are he won’t stop by himself, and if he comes along, in addition to the trouble of hauling him up the low cliff, he might give us away by barking. If we find out that the ship’s British and they seem a decent crowd, then, of course, we’ll make ourselves known.”

“And leave the island?” asked Chris.

“That depends,” replied Alec guardedly. “In any case, they’ll take letters for home, and perhaps spare us some stores.”

Twenty minutes’ steady pulling brought the whaler into the creek. The chums unshipped the gear, moored the boat securely and returned to the hut.

“Odd man out!” suggested Alec, producing one of the Spanish coins.



HERE, BY TAKING COVER, THEY COULD OBSERVE THE STRANGE CRAFT WITHOUT
MUCH RISK OF DISCOVERY.

“I never was lucky,” remarked Chris ruefully, as the final spin of the coin indicated that he was the one to remain behind. “Well, I wish you fellows luck, all the same. Don’t be longer than you can help!”

Following the known track, Alec and Brian came to and surmounted the little cliff, crossed the belt of burnt scrub, where already green shoots were appearing through the vegetable ash, skirted the old temple, and finally gained the north side of the base of the plateau.

Here, by taking cover, they could observe the strange craft without much risk of discovery, since the ground sloped gradually to the neck of land forming the northern part of the island, and was fairly clear of vegetation. No one could approach the spot where the two boys were concealed without being spotted by them.

A closer view of the vessel proved her to be one of about three thousand tons, flying the ensign of a Central American Republic. Two of her boats had been lowered. One was hauled up on the beach; the other, a motor-craft, was on its way from the ship to the shore, where a pontoon composed of planks and barrels had been knocked up in order to facilitate the landing.

“What are those fellows doing?” asked Brian, pointing to a crowd of about fifty men all digging diligently under the eyes of a couple of grotesquely-uniformed officers. “Are they gardening?”

At first sight it looked as if they were. The diggers were blacks—*peons*, or labourers, probably forced to take part in the expedition. They were working with some sort of method, digging deep trenches at a few yards apart completely across the narrow tongue of land that in plan resembled the head and neck of a swan, with the rest of the island as the body.

“We’ll give that craft a miss, old son,” said Alec earnestly. “Those chaps are after treasure—our treasure, more than likely.”

“They are, are they!” rejoined Brian indignantly. “I hope they won’t spread themselves over the island and find our hut.”

“That’s a risk we must run,” declared his chum. “Although pirates are out of date, I don’t suppose these fellows are chary of committing murder if there’s little chance of being found out. The question is: how long are they continuing the search?”

“Wish we had a pair of binoculars.”

“No use wishing for what we can’t get,” said Alec. “We’ll have to keep watch until they go—one of us, at any rate. There’s no reason why we shouldn’t get nearer, since they show no signs of straggling.”

Dodging from tree to tree and taking care to keep the foliage between them and the treasure-seekers, the boys came within a hundred yards or so

of the nearest of the diggers, a slight rise of ground on their left screening them from observation from the ship.

The uniformed men were talking and gesticulating excitedly, skipping from trench to trench and urging the *peons* to greater activity. Presently they were joined by a third olive-featured individual, who was in civilian clothes and was wearing a sombrero, while round his waist he sported a crimson scarf. With him came two of the crew, carrying a tent and a box containing bottled drinks and provisions.

The three leaders of the party gesticulated more than ever. One produced a paper, a plan evidently, spread it out on the ground, and tapped it with his finger as if to emphasize a certain point. The others nodded in concurrence and patted him on the back.

“They think they’re on the right track, evidently,” whispered Brian.

Towards evening the red-scarfed man returned on board. The uniformed officials went to the tent, while the working party lit fires and prepared to spend the night in the open.

“You’d better hook it as hard as you can,” suggested Alec. “Chris will be getting anxious if he doesn’t hear. You’ll get back before dark.”

“And you?” asked Brian.

“I’ll be all right. I’ve grub and water, and I’ll take jolly good care they don’t spot me.”

Reassured on that point, Brian crept cautiously away until, having put plenty of cover and distance between himself and the treasure-seekers, he hurried back to the hut.

But Alec had a far from quiet night. For the first part of the evening, until the young moon had set, the *peons* roamed all over the northern part of the island, chasing and killing pigs and fowls in a most wanton manner. Had they remained for a month, they would have had more meat than they could possibly eat as the result of that evening’s purposeless slaughter.

Even when the stragglers returned, there was little rest in the camp. The blacks and half-castes quarrelled incessantly. More than once shrieks rent the air, when one of the *peons* drew his knife and used it.

Snatching a few hours’ sleep, Alec awoke to find dawn breaking. At sunrise the camp was astir, the *peons* being compelled to toil as soon as there was sufficient light to see to dig.

Not long after the civilian—evidently the director of the expedition—came ashore, and another conference took place.

Suddenly a hand was placed on Alec's ankle. Turning, he was surprised to find that Brian had returned.

"Smart bit of scout work, that!" whispered Brian. "You never heard a sound. Well, what is happening?"

"Still digging," replied Alec. "The old chap with the scarlet dado round the dining-room isn't looking quite so cock-sure to-day. They are a gentle, refined crowd, I give you my word!"

And he told his chum of what had happened during the night.

"Jolly good thing for us that we didn't go alongside the vessel," remarked Brian.

"Rather," agreed Alec. "And the sooner we see the last of this picnic the better I'll be pleased!"

The long day wore on. In spite of the shade afforded by the tree under which they lay concealed, the chums felt the heat and inaction considerably.

But there was little rest for the working-party. Harried by the officers, stormed at by the civilian, and threatened by their half-caste overseers, the *peons* dug and dug, except for half-hour intervals for meals. Everything pointed to the fact that the searchers were working against time, and that in their greed they were nearly frantic to lay hands on the elusive treasure.

By noon the whole of the neck of land was furrowed over a depth of a furlong. Consultations between the principals became more frequent and more heated. Judging by the expressions on their faces, it seemed as if the red-scarfed person was upbraiding the others for having brought him on what now looked like a fool's errand.

After half an hour's rest work was resumed, the men filling in the trenches and digging fresh ones between those they had previously excavated.

This went on till nightfall, when Brian "took over," Alec returning to the hut.

Judging by the former's account the next morning, the treasure-seekers had been quarrelling and fighting for the greater part of the night.

When Alec rejoined his chum, the *peons* were still digging, but with obvious reluctance, while the director of the proceedings walked slowly to

and fro, with his chin sunk on his chest. Occasionally he would rush up to the two uniformed men and gesticulate violently.

The climax came when the whole of the pegged-out area was dug down to the solid rock, but without the desired result. A quarrel between the principals ended in blows, the two men in uniform simultaneously attacking the civilian. Whether knives were used the chums were unable to determine, but the red-scarfed man fell to the ground, and lay writhing until a couple of *peons* carried him to the motor-boat.

Half an hour later the neck of land was deserted; the ship, which had had her fires banked the whole time, got under way and headed for the gap in the reef.

With feelings of relief, the chums watched her until she was hull down away to the eastward. Then they walked to the scene of the unsuccessful operations.

The treasure-seekers had left nothing of value. Even the pontoon had been demolished, the débris floating seaward with the off-shore breeze.

“It’s like a bad dream!” declared Brian. “Well, they’ve gone. That’s a blessing. ‘Spouse we ought to be getting back, too?”

The return to the hut was performed without incident. Use being second nature, the ascent and descent of the twenty-foot cliff now presented little difficulty, especially as Brian had woven a grass rope which was kept permanently fixed to a stump driven into the ground close to the edge.

On the morning after the departure of the foreign treasure-hunters, Chris broached the subject of carrying out the original plan of visiting the north side of the island by water, and thence exploring the shaft on the plateau, whence the baboon had emerged.

“And let’s hope we have better luck this time,” added Alec, when the suggestion was agreed to. “Yes, Peter, old boy, you can come along! There’s a fair wind, lads, and if we don’t waste time swimming in the little lagoon we may fetch the north side without having to row!”

CHAPTER THE EIGHTEENTH

THE GUARDIAN OF THE DEEP

THREE hours of enjoyable sailing, most of which consisted of a beat to wind'ard past the west side of the island, brought the whaler to North Point—the beak-like extremity of the long neck of land projecting from the main portion of the island. Then, rounding the point, the whaler, with freed sheets, ran before the breeze down the west side of the promontory.

Although sheltered by the reef, the lagoon on this side was wider than elsewhere. The shore, too, was flat and sandy, which made not only a bad landing, but a difficult berth in case the wind should pipe up. Nor could the crew hope to beach and haul up their heavy craft above high-water mark; while if they attempted to anchor her off shore they could only get to and from her by swimming. Several dark triangular objects feathering the ruffled water put the veto on that. They were dorsal fins of the ferocious blue sharks.

Once, indeed, the chums made an attempt to run the whaler ashore, but the forefoot grounded quite fifty yards from the sandy beach, and in that intervening belt of water they knew that the treacherous and daring ground shark abounded—a fish that will not hesitate to attack its prey in less than a foot of water.

“Looks a wash-out!” declared Chris.

“Wait till we find out what’s behind that ledge of rocks,” replied Alec, indicating a ridge of dark-grey stone jutting out like a stranded whale.

As they approached the point, it was soon evident that no landing could be effected on the rock itself, for not only were the sides high, but the waves broke against it sufficiently strong to cause damage to the whaler’s planking. But beyond the spur of rock was the entrance to a small creek. It was not so wide as the one in which the boat was usually moored, nor did it run inland any distance; but as a temporary berth it would serve its purpose, provided there was sufficient depth of water.

“Down sail, lads!” ordered Alec. “Out oars! Easy all, we don’t want to bump on the coral.”

At the mouth of the creek there was quite a ground swell, but once inside the entrance the water was not only smooth, but fairly deep. Fifty yards from its mouth a bend in the creek hid the lagoon from sight.

“This’ll do, lads!” exclaimed Alec, pulling the helm over and allowing the whaler to glide alongside a steep-to bank.

They disembarked, Peter barking joyously as he scampered over the sun-dried grass.

The painter was bent to the trunk of a tree, gear was stowed and provisions were landed. Then, taking stock of their surroundings, the boys found that they could not have chosen a better base for the exploration of the plateau.

Curiously enough, although the hewn staircase on the north side of the plateau was within half a mile of the landing place, there was nothing to indicate its presence. By some remarkable optical freak, the effect of which was probably known to the constructors of the ascent, both the cutting and the steps were merged into the general, terrace-like aspect of the north face; although the lads discovered that for a short period at noon, when the sun, high in the sky, shone directly into the cutting, then and only then did the mysterious work of unknown hands stand out against the sombre face of the rock.

Taking the lantern, several candles, the axe, and the ball of tarred twine, the explorers set out for their objective. To the base of the cliff it was fair, even easy, going; for although the ground was undulating in places, the ascent was gradual and unimpeded by scrub, marshes, or rocks.

Once more they commenced to climb the steep steps, but this time Peter, instead of bounding on ahead, kept steadfastly at his master’s side. There could be no doubt that the dog remembered the circumstances under which he had had his leg broken. There was a look in the animal’s eyes that seemed to say: “I’m not hoping for another scrap up there, but if it comes off I’ll do my best to defend you!”

Arriving at the top of the staircase, they halted to recover their breath, and then set off across the level ground in the direction of the ruins.

Cautiously they approached the spot where they had encountered the ape. There lay the skeleton of the brute, picked clean by ants, while in the wide-open jaws was the head of the boat-hook that had played so great a part in the successful issue of the combat.

At the edge of the shaft they peered into the depths. The head of a flight of steps showed through the gloom. Dust, inches deep, lay on the worn stonework—dust apparently undisturbed since that exciting moment when the hairless ape appeared to give battle to the invaders of his hitherto inviolate domain.

“All clear, I think!” exclaimed Alec, preparing to slip a bowline under his shoulders.

“Steady; not so fast,” cautioned Chris. “The air may be poisonous down there.”

“Well, the ape seemed to thrive on it,” protested his chum.

“If you claim equality with an ape, there’s no more to be said,” remarked Chris with a laugh. “But what might suit him mightn’t suit you. We’d better throw some lighted grass down.”

This they did. The inflammable stuff burned brightly, revealing the floor to be about twenty feet below the level of the ground, the steps running the whole distance without a break or a turn.

“Good enough, I think,” said Chris. “The air’s pure. Take the axe with you and go slow.”

“Trust me for that,” replied Alec, handing the rest of the coil of rope to Brian. “Here, Peter! Stop there!”

But Peter was not going to let his master descend without him. Before Alec could stop him, the dog ran down the steps into the darkness, barking loudly as he awaited the lad’s descent.

Holding the lighted lantern in his left hand and the axe in his right, Alec began to walk down the steps, the others paying out the rope and keeping a steady strain in case a slip should send him headlong.

Arriving at the floor of the subterranean cavity, Alec raised the lantern above his head and looked round. It was some time before his eyes grew accustomed to the relatively feeble light compared with the glare of sunshine he had just left.

Presently he saw that he was in a large and presumably artificially constructed chamber. Like the temple, it was square in plan, the walls being covered with grotesque carvings. At one end was a doorway with a flat lintel. Again the similarity of design between the two works became apparent. These long-forgotten survivors of a lost race seemed to have had

no idea of the use of curves in their architecture. Such a thing as an arch did not exist as far as they were concerned.

The floor was covered by a thick deposit of fine, powdery dust that rose in clouds whenever Alec moved. Nor was there any sign of dampness. The air was perfectly fresh and dry, a fact that pointed to an ingenious but as yet unseen system of ventilation.

“All right below there?” shouted Brian.

“All O.K.,” replied Alec, slipping the bowline from his waist. “Come down.”

Brian and Chris did so, blundering like bats until Alec, setting down the lantern, grasped them by the arm.

“I thought you’d put the light out,” declared Brian. “I can see it now. . . . Hello! Footprints!”

“Peter’s,” exclaimed his chum. “The dog’s off through that doorway. Come back, you rascal!”

The dog returned, bringing with him a cloud of dust. He was quiet now, and gave no indication of anything of a dangerous nature.

The chums proceeded on their voyage of discovery. The doorway opened into another room about thirty feet square, the ceiling being flat and cut out of the solid rock. The walls were devoid of carvings. On the floor were heaps of shards, consisting mostly of the remains of large glazed urns. In one corner were a number of bones, including skulls of ape-like characteristics.

“There’s been a colony of baboons here at some time,” said Chris. “Our late, unlamented friend must have been the last of the bunch. Hello! What’s this?”

He pointed to a low doorway in one side of the chamber. Formerly there had been a door formed of one solid slab of hewn stone, working on a quoin in place of hinges. The slab had fallen and was lying tilted and half buried in dust.

“Looks like a strong-room,” said Brian. “I wonder if we’ll find more treasure?”

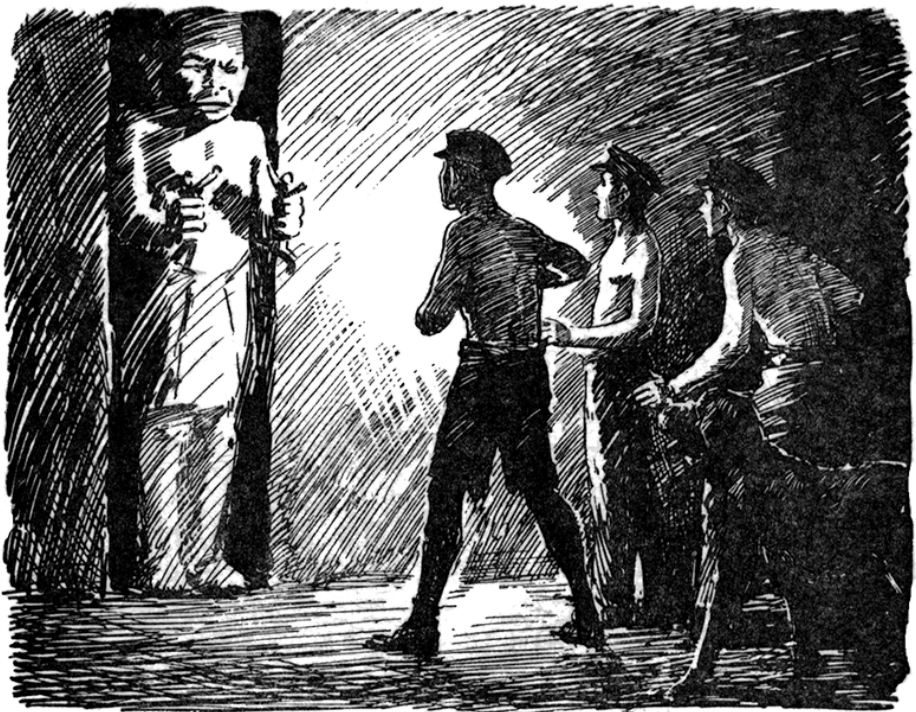
They held the lamp aloft and peered through the opening. The light did not carry very far, but what there was to be seen consisted of a narrow corridor with niche-like recesses on either side.

"If we're going to tackle this show we'd better make fast one end of the ball of twine and pay it out as we go," suggested Chris. "If this place is anything like the catacombs of ancient Rome, we may have a job to find our way out if we don't!"

"Peter doesn't like it," declared Brian, as the dog made a determined effort to place his forepaws on Alec's chest.

"Affection or affectation," explained Alec, pushing his pet aside. "Heel, Peter! Now, then, off we go!"

Alec led, Peter following closely at his heels and whimpering his protests. Chris came next, Brian bringing up the rear and paying out the twine that was to act as a guide to their return should they lose themselves in the devious passages.



OCCUPYING MOST OF THE SPACE WAS A HIDEOUS CARICATURE OF A HUMAN FIGURE.

At the first niche, twenty feet from the entrance, Alec raised his lantern to investigate. Instead of being a branch corridor, as he had expected, it was only about two feet in width and depth and about seven in height. But occupying most of the space was a hideous caricature of a human figure—a

grotesque image with a face upon which the sculptor had delineated a trinity of hatred, malice, and uncharitableness.

The arms were pressed tightly to the side as far as the elbows. The forearms were extended, the clenched fists grasping miniature figures of human beings writhing in the remorseless grip.

“Bright lad, isn’t he?” observed Alec after a brief inspection of the figure. “Put there to frighten people, I suppose. Well, it won’t put the wind up us!”

He moved forward a step. As he did so, the huge mass of the image moved forward as if to crush the intruder with its ponderous weight.

CHAPTER THE NINETEENTH

TRAPPED!

THE lantern clattered to the ground; the candle went out, plunging the tunnel into darkness. At the same time Chris and Brian heard a dull thud, followed by a shrill yelp.

Then silence.

“What’s up?” asked Chris anxiously, for owing to the previous position of the lantern as Alec held it up, the glare prevented Chris and Brian from seeing the huge stone figure as it lurched forward and fell with a muffled thud completely across the narrow passage.

The next moment something heavy cannoned against Chris’s shins. Swept off his feet by the unexpected impact, he fell forward across Peter’s back. The dog, his teeth gripping Alec’s belt, was endeavouring to drag his master out of danger.

For the next half-minute everything was confusion; Alec, Chris, and the dog writhing and struggling in the narrow space, while Brian, not knowing what was happening in the darkness, was under the terrible impression that his chums had been felled by another ape or other fearsome denizen of this subterranean labyrinth.

By degrees a comparative state of calm prevailed. Alec and Chris sorted themselves out and sat down with their backs to one wall of the tunnel, while Peter, reassured that his master was alive, rubbed his shaggy head against the lad’s still trembling hands.

“Get a light somebody!” exclaimed Brian entreatingly. Then the absurdity of the request dawned upon him. Without matches there was no possibility of re-lighting the lantern without going into the sunshine. The darkness was so intense that the lad lost all sense of direction. In the confusion Brian had dropped the ball of twine, and although he groped for it, he failed to find it.

“Where’s the lantern?” asked Alec.

“I believe I’m sitting on it,” replied Chris. “It’s something very uncomfortable. Yes, here it is—what’s left of it. What’s to be done?”

“Why, get out of this hole,” said Alec promptly. “Hang on to me, Chris. Brian, you get hold of Chris——”

“Not my hair, you ass!” exclaimed Brian indignantly, when his chum, groping, took a tenacious grip of his locks.

“All ready?” asked Alec, holding on to the dog’s bushy tail. “All hands on deck, Peter!”

The sagacious animal knew what this meant. It implied that wherever he was under cover, he had to make his way into the open air as soon as possible.

He trotted down the passage, his pace retarded by his master’s hold on his tail. Then, although the chums were unaware of it, he took a bee-line across the second of the two halls into the first, where a ray of light indicated the steps communicating with the open.

“What actually happened?” asked Chris when the chums had recovered from the shock.

Alec told him.

“The beastly thing missed me by inches,” he declared. “I believe, although I’m not sure, the floor gave way at the same time. At any rate, I found myself staggering forward. If Peter hadn’t dragged me back I’d have been a dead ‘un. As it was, the statue very nearly got my foot; I felt it.”

“We’re lucky to be here,” said Brian. “That’s what comes of barging into places like that.”

“Yes, and I mean to profit by the experience,” rejoined Alec.

“What! You aren’t going down there again?”

“Why not? We know the trick now. I’m curious to find out where the passage leads to. Besides, I’d like to examine that image and see how it works. What say you, Chris?”

Chris agreed; while Brian, fear of being thought a coward by his chums outweighing his decided reluctance, remarked that if the others went, he was not going to be out of it.

The lantern was flattened and the glass globe pulverised; but the explorers had brought half a dozen candles. Three of these were lighted, each lad carrying one; and thus equipped they again descended the shaft.

At the entrance to the narrow passage, Brian retrieved the line and followed it till he found the ball of twine. Then they cautiously approached the fallen statue. It was lying across a narrow cavity on the floor, a space sufficiently wide to cause an unwary person to stumble and fall across it, when, in this helpless position, his back would be broken under the weight of the descending mass of stone.

The whole thing was an ingenious piece of work. The feet of the image were firmly fixed to a pivoted stone that also formed the flag in the floor, the combined mass being so delicately poised that the mere weight of a person's foot would upset the equilibrium of the diabolical statue. Owing to centuries of disuse the stone had moved stiffly in its socket, and to that fact Alec owed his life. Had the image fallen quickly, even Peter's courage and sagacity would have been in vain.

Once down, there was now no means of restoring the effigy to its upright position. Possibly its creators had some device for doing so; but the united efforts of the three boys failed even to move it a fraction of an inch.

Reassured on that point, they used the prostrate image as a stepping-stone and proceeded on their way, testing the floor at every step and examining every niche before attempting to pass it.

Making two right-angled turns, the passage opened into a wide, rectangular chamber in which were hundreds, perhaps thousands, of niches, about four feet in length and three in height, extending, with an interval of a foot or so between, from the floor to the roof. In each niche was a mummy in a sitting position, head bent and shrivelled arms resting on its drawn-up knees; while by the side of each stood two small jars, originally containing food and wine for the use of the deceased in the next world—a custom that was almost universal amongst mankind up to the dawn of the Christian era, and which still exists amongst certain races.

Facing, or nearly facing, the passage by which they had entered this prehistoric burial place was another and wider corridor that descended steeply by means of stone steps. In the uncanny quiet of the catacomb could be heard the dim sound of rushing water coming from the dark and forbidding depths of the inclined passage.

"We are at the end of the twine," whispered Brian, as Alec was about to descend the steps.

"Well, it's a straight way," replied Alec.

“Perhaps,” admitted Brian. “Look behind you. Which way did we come?”

Alec turned and looked. Instead of one opening, there were seven, all within thirty feet of one another, and each identical in shape with the others. He had to admit that he did not know. Any one attempting to retrace his course without the assistance of the trailing line of tarred twine might easily mistake the entrance and perhaps wander into a labyrinth from which escape might be not only difficult but even impossible.

“We’ve Peter,” Alec reminded him.

“I wouldn’t run the risk even by relying on Peter’s sense of picking up a scent,” declared Chris. “Come on, let’s get out of here.”

The words were hardly out of his mouth when there was an appalling roar like thunder, the reverberations echoing and re-echoing through the succession of subterranean vaults and passages for a full minute. To the startled lads, it seemed as if part of the roof had collapsed to cut off their retreat for all time.

Then, as the volume of sound decreased, it was out-voiced by the noise of a torrent of rushing water.

It came from the passage that Alec had proposed to explore. Although they could not see the tumultuous flood, they could hear it not so very far away. Then the noise ceased, save for a steady dripping of water from the roof of the tunnel.

“That would have done us in, if we’d gone down there,” declared Brian. “The first noise of rushing water we heard has stopped, too.”

“I vote we go back,” suggested Chris, and no one raised any objection.

Guided by the line, they proceeded a considerable distance, when, to every one’s astonishment, the tarred string terminated in what at first sight appeared to be a small fissure in the rock. Beyond that point the passage curved slightly to the right.

“I don’t remember this bend,” said Chris, in a low voice. “I believe——”

The sentence was never finished. They realised the nature of their latest desperate plight. The way by which they had come was fast closed by a slab of rock weighing, at a very moderate estimate, at least two tons. This time it seemed as if the ingenious and frightful devices by which this lost civilisation guarded the secret of the plateau had not failed their trust.

CHAPTER THE TWENTIETH

THE WATER DEMON

BY the guttering light of the candles, the trapped lads examined the diabolical device that had so effectually cut off their retreat. But for the twine, jammed almost to breaking-point by the close-fitting rock, there was nothing to indicate that a passage had led that way not so very long ago—while they had been exploring the catacomb, in fact.

At this point of the labyrinth the passages formed a letter Y, the upper strokes making a very acute angle. At the junction the moving slab of stone acted much as a two-way valve. It closed one arm of the Y and left the other one open, or *vice versa*. The chums had entered by one passage, and would have been lured—had they not followed the length of twine—into the other passage, much as a train is shunted on to another line.

“Put out those candles,” said Alec, in a low voice. “One will be enough. We may want the others badly before we’re out of this mess.”

“Do you think there’s any way out that way?” asked Brian, indicating the open tunnel.

“No; I don’t,” replied his chum bluntly. “It’s my belief that it’s only a blind to lure us into a regular maze. That’s our way—or none.”

They tried to move the obstruction. They could not even shake it, nor was there any projection whereby, by means of the axe, they could attempt to prise the slab open.

“I’ll see what’s doing along this passage,” declared Brian, preparing to unwind the ball of twine.

“No, you don’t,” protested Alec firmly.

“But I can find my way back.”

“You might or might not. There may be another booby-trap and you’ll be cut off. I wonder if we could hack a way through the slab with the axe. It might——”

“What’s that?” exclaimed Chris, as a weird gurgling sound came from behind the barrier. “Sounds like water.”

They listened intently. Water—or, at least, some liquid—was running with considerable force.

Presently moisture began to ooze through the close-fitting jamb, until with increasing pressure a thin jet squirted out.

“If that slab gives way——” began Chris.

The chums realised the new peril that beset them. The tunnel through which they hoped to proceed to regain the open air was being filled with water, held up by the stone slab. When, as appeared likely, the pressure reached a certain point, the barrier would give way, releasing a terrific volume of water that would sweep away everything and everybody in its path.

“Our only chance is to take refuge in this branch of the tunnel,” declared Alec. “It’s on the up-grade. The water will rush down the passage into the catacomb. I don’t know, though,” he added as an afterthought. “The dust on the floor has been lying there for centuries. There may be another outlet which we’ve missed.”

The three entered the right-hand branch of the Y and waited.

“Look here!” exclaimed Chris, “we take it for granted that that slab of stone gives way under pressure. What happens then? It looks as if the hideous thing will swing back on its hinges, or whatever it turns on, and close this section of the tunnel. It was closed when we came through, or we would have noticed it. We’d be trapped as bad or worse than we are now.”

Hastily they examined the wall of the tunnel to detect, if possible, a projection for the stone door to bring up against. There was none. The walls, they discovered, contracted slightly, thus allowing the swinging slab to wedge itself firmly when it turned into the alternative position.

“There’s only one thing we can do,” declared Chris. “The axe; if we place it there, where the edge of the slab would appear to touch the wall, it might prevent it jamming. Let me have the axe—quick! The stone’s giving way!”

Kneeling and holding the axe, edge away from him, Chris waited. Sweat was pouring from his forehead. He motioned his chums to stand clear. Fully realising the risk he ran, he was determined to take the chance of being crushed by the swinging mass of stone should the head of the axe fail to check and hold it.

“Light the other candles,” he gasped, “in case this one goes out!”

Alec did so, handing one to Brian and protecting his own against the expected rush of air accompanying the bursting of what was virtually a reservoir.

The slab was groaning under the steadily increasing pressure. The jet of water, at first a steady trickle, was now flung a full ten yards before, impinging on the side of the tunnel, it dissolved in a cloud of spray.

Suddenly, with an appalling roar, magnified tenfold by the acoustic properties of the maze of tunnels, the stone slab was hurled outwards, releasing a perfect maelstrom of hissing, surging water. With a jerk that momentarily paralysed Chris's nervous system, the axe took the glancing blow of the edge of the revolving stone—and held!

For full thirty seconds the din of rushing water continued. Well it was that the chums had taken the precaution of re-lighting two of the candles, for the one by Chris's side was overturned and Brian's blown out by the rush of displaced air. Had not Alec held his hand as a screen, and so close to the flame that it scorched his fingers, they would have been left in total darkness.

Chris stood up, straightened his aching back; then, hardly noticing that his knuckles were barked, he carefully examined the slab which had re-trapped them.

There was a gap of about three-quarters of an inch between the movable stone and the solid wall of the tunnel. But for the blade of the axe the two would have fitted perfectly.

Now came the crucial test. Had Chris's effort been in vain, or would the barrier give before the chums' united efforts?

Chris thrust his shoulder against the slab. It trembled, but held. Then Alec added his strength, after cautioning Brian to see that the axe did not slip.

Slowly the gap widened. The stone, creaking dismally on its quoins, swung open.

"Enough!" exclaimed Chris.

They relaxed their efforts. The slab remained motionless half-way between the two branches of the Y-shaped passage. Had they moved it much further it might have swung to and effectually cut off their retreat.

In utter silence, followed by Peter, they squeezed round the now open barrier. They wanted to cheer; but, in the knowledge that these forbidding

tunnels swarmed with dangers, they deemed it best to refrain from doing so till they were out of the wood.

Cautiously they proceeded up the inclined way, leading to the second of the rock chambers. Half-way along they noticed what certainly had not been visible before. In the roof was an aperture from which water was still dripping. It was from here that the deluge poured, to be pent up until the slab gave before the relentless pressure.

They could hear the gurgle of water.

The whole thing was an ingenious application of hydraulics on the part of the long-extinct race. Somewhere in the rock a copious spring of water had been tapped, and led into a cistern, whence, on the principle of the automatic siphon, it emptied itself in a torrent down the inclined tunnel, to be stored in another reservoir. This, too, was automatically emptied when the lever in the tank reached a certain height. It was the noise of the lower tank emptying itself that had attracted the chums' attention when they were exploring the catacomb. But where did the water escape?

Shudderingly they stepped over the still prostrate image that had all but destroyed Alec in its fall. Then with feelings of unbounded relief they crossed the two large halls and actually bounded up the steps leading to the open air.

There, in the fierce reaction, they threw themselves on the ground, unable to speak in the transport of joy at their escape. Peter, not knowing what to make of it all, licked each of them in turn.

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-FIRST

THE WRECK

“WE’RE lucky to be alive!” declared Brian solemnly. “I don’t suppose you want to go down the tunnel again, do you?”

“No, I do not,” said Alec emphatically.

“Then can’t we block the entrance?” continued his chum. “We know; others, coming after us, won’t.”

The idea was acted upon. One of the smaller stones, weighing quite four hundredweight, was, by dint of considerable effort, pushed across the mouth of the shaft.

“By the time earth has accumulated and grass has grown, no one will know that such a death-trap exists,” remarked Chris, surveying the result of their joint handiwork. “I say, look at the sun! We’ve been hours. Hadn’t we better get back to the boat?”

“Rather; and I’m beginning to feel peckish,” rejoined Brian, shouldering the coil of rope. “I’ll race you down the three hundred and sixty-five steps.”

“You’ve risked your neck quite enough for to-day,” remarked Alec. “Well, we’ve had our wish. We’ve explored the horrible place.”

Peter leading, the chums made their way down the staircase, and across the shelving ground to the whaler.

The boat was lying just as they had left her, although the tide had ebbed and flowed during their absence.

“Well, what’s the programme?” asked Alec, after they had made up for lost time by enjoying a hearty meal. “Return the same way, or complete the circuit of the island?”

“I vote we take the east passage,” replied Brian. “Then we shall know what the island looks like from all sides. It’s a fair wind, too.”

This course decided upon, they pushed off under oars, making sail directly they were clear of the mouth of the little creek.

There was now quite a fresh breeze, enough for the whaler to carry all sail she possessed with the wind aft. Alec, as skipper of the boat, would not have risked carrying the amount of canvas had the wind been abeam. Running she could bear it well, although the helmsman had to be constantly alert to prevent an accidental gybe.

His chums crouched abaft the stroke thwart. Even Peter was ordered aft, since, when running, a boat invariably steers best when trimmed by the stern.

“This is an easy way to go home,” remarked Brian contentedly. “Jolly sight better than hoofing it over the burnt scrub.”

Before either of his chums could offer any comment, the whaler struck something hard. Her bows lifted clear of the water; then, with a disconcerting sound of splintering wood, she brought up hard and fast on a solid, partly-submerged object.

The sudden jerk sent Alec sprawling on top of the others. Even as he did so he had the presence of mind to let the mainsheet fly, or the mast might have snapped with the enormous strain of the canvas.

As quickly as possible they sorted themselves out. They were none too soon, for water was pouring in through a jagged hole in the starboard strake, just abaft the mast step.

For the present the fiercely flapping mainsail must take care of itself. The first task was to stop the leak, if possible. It was in an awkward place to be got at, and already the volume of water that had rushed in through a hole roughly three inches in diameter was astonishing.

“Up with the bottom-board, lads!” shouted Alec.

They groped in half a foot of water, wrenched the sparred grating clear and passed it aft. In the absence of any suitable material to plug the hole, Chris, who although slow by nature was none the less practical, solved the problem. He sat on the hole! The influx eased down considerably.

While Brian began baling vigorously, Alec lowered sail. Then he leant over the gunwale to investigate the cause of the mishap.

He could hardly believe the evidence of his eyes. The whaler had run upon the jagged, barnacle-encrusted timbers of a wreck. The water was so transparent that, notwithstanding its covering of marine growth, the shape of the hull could be distinctly traced. The ship was lying with a decided list to port, her bows pointing in the direction of the reef. She was of an old type.

That was apparent by her high, towering stern, with its curious quarter-galleries. Her mizzen-mast had broken off close to the poop-deck, while the jagged stumps of fore and main were but a couple of feet or so beneath the surface. In the waist to lee'ard was a jumble of guns and gun-carriages, the tackle of which had rotted and allowed the heavy gear to slide against the port bulwarks.

This much Alec took in by a rapid survey. But for the time being his interest lay, not in the wreck, but in the badly-holed whaler.

She had struck the starboard quarter of the submerged hull. The narrow margin of three feet or so would have cleared the danger.

Brian, still baling, was in ignorance of the nature of the supposed "rock." Alec kept him in ignorance. He knew Brian. The excitable lad would promptly "knock off" to look at the long-forgotten wreck.

"Gaining on it!" reported the youth, when Alec asked how the leak was. "How are you enjoying your hip-bath, Chris?"

"You can take my place when you've finished baling and want to cool down," replied Chris. "Think we'll get her off, Alec?"

"She's lively already," reported the youthful skipper. "Tide's rising."

"This must be a Friday," remarked Brian. "We've had nothing but bad luck all day."

"I don't see that," protested Alec cheerfully. "We've won through all right so far. It's a bit rotten having a hole punched through the boat, but she's not done for yet—not by a long chalk! I think we'll be able to get off now. Wait till I've unshipped the rudder, Brian. Then go for'ard so as to lift the stern a bit. I thought so! Here she goes!"

With a couple of slight bumps, not sufficient to cause any damage, the whaler rasped her keel over the wreckage and glided into deep water.

Re-shipping the rudder, Alec called to Brian to step the mast and hoist the mainsail.

"We won't want the jib," he added. "She's carrying quite enough as it is."

"How goes it, Chris?" enquired Brian, as he stepped past the seated form of his chum.

"Decidedly moist," was the reply. "But the leak's almost stopped. How long before you're ready to take my place?"

“Directly we’re under way,” replied Brian, with a chuckle.

“What are you groaning about?” demanded Chris, with asperity. “You aren’t going to back out, are you?”

“Certainly not,” answered Brian, and, without offering any explanation, went on with his task of hoisting canvas.

This done, he gathered in the jib, folded it neatly and laid it on the thwart against which Chris was leaning.

“Ready?” he enquired. “Good! Shift as sharp as you can before too much water pours through the hole.”

The human leak-stopper, grasping the thwart to counteract the stiffness of his leg-muscles, heaved himself clear of the jagged gap in the planking.

A second later Brian dumped the folded jib over the hole and sat on the canvas.

“Might as well keep dry on the job!” he exclaimed cheerfully.

For some minutes the voyage continued in silence. Then: “Do you know what we bumped on?” asked Alec. “We hit a wreck. It looked like a sixteenth or seventeenth-century ship.”

“Why didn’t you tell us at the time?” asked Brian. “Shall we be able to find the spot again?”

Alec tactfully ignored the first question.

“Yes,” he replied. “I took cross-bearings. We won’t bump the boat on the wreck again, I give you my word! And there’s nothing much to see, either. Only the outline of the craft smothered in weed and barnacles.”

“No chance of exploring her, then?” asked Brian.

“The lowest tide won’t uncover her,” continued his chum. “And, as the place is stiff with sharks—there were a dozen or more nosing in and out of her portholes—I don’t think we’ll be keen on diving. We’ll leave that to some one else.”

“Would there be treasure on board?” asked Chris.

“Doubtful,” was the reply. “It’s my belief that the stuff we found came out of that craft. The crew might have landed it and buried the treasure, intending to come back for it. Before they could get away a hurricane sank the ship whilst she was riding at anchor. That, of course, is supposition. Stand by for a gybe!”

The whaler was now rounding the south-east extremity of the island, where the reef approached to within a hundred yards of the beach.

Gathering in the mainsheet and putting the helm up, Alec allowed the sail to gybe without endangering the boat's stability; then, close-hauled on the starboard tack, the whaler bore up for the mouth of the little creek.

"Nearly there!" remarked the helmsman. "Before we commence to row her in we'll get the throat halliards ready to haul her up the beach. We'll have to be sharp or she'll fill before we heave her clear. Lower away, Chris!"

Running the boat up into the wind and leaving the helm to its own devices, Alec gave a hand with stowing canvas and preparing the tackle for hauling the boat out.

This done, the two lads manned the oars and swept the whaler up the creek.

"Set yourself on fire, Brian?" asked Chris, sniffing.

Brian clapped his hands to his trousers' pockets.

"No, I haven't," he replied, thinking that his chum was having a joke at his expense. "Have you?"

Chris went through the same performance. There was a decided smell of burnt cloth.

As the boat rounded the right-hand extremity of the neck of land, Alec gave a shout of dismay and pointed.

At less than a quarter of a mile away a fierce fire was raging, devouring scrub, coco-palms, and everything else of an inflammable nature that lay in its path.

"The hut!" exclaimed Alec. "It's burnt to ashes!"

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-SECOND

FIGHTING THE FLAMES

THE thought that weeks of labour had been utterly wasted, and that the home on which they had lavished so much care had been devoured by the flames, filled the chums with feelings akin to dismay.

Verily their luck was out!

Another bend of the creek brought the whaler within sight of the rising ground on which the hut had stood—no, was standing! The wall of flames was farther away than it had appeared to be at first sight. Yet it could be but a matter of minutes before the devouring element flung itself upon the hut.

Curiously enough, although the flames shot high into the air, there was very little smoke; while at that distance there were no sounds of crackling and hissing timber. But, gathered in frightened groups on the beach, were scores of pigs and hundreds of fowls. Some of the former, terrified to distraction, had plunged into the sea, where already the sharks were busy.

“Never mind about the boat filling!” shouted Alec, springing ashore and taking the anchor with him. “It’s nearly high-water. She’ll dry out when the tide ebbs. Bring all the gear out, though, or it’ll be washed away.”

They ran the whaler’s forefoot hard on to the gravelly bank, and threw the gear ashore. Already the inrush was considerable, since Brian had abandoned his office of leak-plugger; and by the time the last buoyant object had been removed the water was nearly level with the thwarts.

But that was nothing compared with the danger that threatened the hut. Followed by Peter, whose devotion overcame his dread of fire, they took to their heels and ran through the heated air until they reached the object of their endeavours.



HE ASSISTED HIS CHUMS IN SATURATING THE ROOF AND WALLS OF THE HUT.

“Get water!” ordered Alec. “Wet the thatch.”

While the others were engaged in the task of damping the inflammable roof, Alec, by the aid of his burning-glass, set fire to a piece of resinous wood. With this he commenced a number of subsidiary fires to windward of the hut. These he stamped out before they attained serious dimensions, repeating the process as quickly as he could. He was working against time, with the object of surrounding the hut by a belt of burnt grass before the main conflagration bore down.

He had cleared a belt of about thirty yards before the heat of the approaching flames compelled him to retreat. Even then he was not idle, for snatching up a large gourd, he filled it with water and assisted his chums in saturating the roof and walls of the hut.

Although there had been but little smoke when the chums first noticed the fire, the flames, attacking the coco-nut palms, were now causing dense, suffocating billows of black fumes, through which tongues of red flame darted like forked lightning. Showers of sparks, too, accompanied the smoke.

“Go down to the beach, Peter!” gasped Alec.

It was useless to order the dog to move. Although tormented by the smoke, his pet obstinately declined to obey, but blindly followed his master wherever he went in his endeavours to throw more water over the roof.

Although the sun was well above the horizon, so thick were the fumes that the boys were working in almost total darkness, save for the ruddy glare that at intervals pierced the rolling clouds of black smoke.

Alec and his companions were, indeed, in a desperate plight. Their bodies, bare from the waist upwards, were scorched by the flying embers; dust and fine ashes lodged in their eyes, mouths, ears, and nostrils; and although they splashed water over themselves, their throats burned like lime-kilns. Breathing, too, was a matter of difficulty. Again and again they had to dash down the slope to the beach, refill their tortured lungs with air, and then plunge through the smoke to continue the stubborn defence of their home.

Already the main attack had passed. The scrub to leeward of the hut was blazing fiercely. But the danger was not yet over. Unless the thatch were kept moistened—and it was emitting clouds of watery vapour—their labours would be in vain, since the dying fires to windward ejected masses of sparks whenever the lofty palms came crashing to earth.

“Stick it, lads!” croaked Alec. “We’re winning!”

With the dying down of the flames, the volume of smoke increased. The intervals the chums spent in dashing through the vapour and sprinkling water on and around the hut grew shorter and shorter; but the chief danger was passing. Save for occasional showers of sparks, the fire had spent itself to leeward, and was already decreasing in violence as it swept away from the hut.

Then, just before sundown, the wind suddenly veered, blowing straight from the sea. Usually it was the other way about, the cooler air over the island rushing to meet the warmer stratum over the water; but on this occasion the heat of the immense conflagration had caused a decided current of air to come in from seaward.

With it, the cloud of smoke was carried away from the hut.

The chums were too exhausted to cheer. Drinking copious draughts of water, ash-covered though it was, they threw themselves down to rest in the knowledge that their efforts had not been in vain.

Presently Alec sat up.

“You two had better turn in,” he announced. “I’m keeping watch.”

“What for?” asked Brian.

“In case there is another flare-up.”

“I didn’t mean that,” continued Brian. “What do we want to turn in for and leave you to keep watch? You’re as tired as any of us.”

“Quite,” agreed Alec readily. “But that’s no reason why you fellows shouldn’t get in a few hours’ sleep. We’ve got to be busy to-morrow getting the whaler up and patching that hole in the starboard strake.”

“It’s jolly decent of you, old man,” declared Chris. “But——”

“Nothing of the sort,” protested Alec. “It’s my own hide I’m thinking about. I don’t want to be burnt to death in my sleep. Therefore I keep awake and on the look-out.”

His chums knew that it was useless to expostulate. What was more, they realised that Alec’s precaution was not solely on his account, but on theirs as well.

But at about two hours before dawn Chris got up and went out. He found Alec pacing to and fro under the stars.

“I’m as fresh as paint,” declared Chris. “You jolly well turn in, old son.”

Alec did so. As a matter of fact, he was almost at the limits of his powers of endurance. Blindly stumbling through the open doorway, he threw himself upon his bunk and was almost instantly sound asleep.

With the dawn of another day, Chris could form some idea of the devastating effect of the fire. Acres and acres of vegetation had been consumed. The grove from which the chums had obtained their supplies of coco-nuts, plantains, melons and other fruit had vanished utterly. Not even the trunks of the once graceful palms remained. All had been reduced to fine dust and scattered to the winds.

The whole of the south and south-eastern part of the island had been swept clean. Had it not been for the previous fire, when the lads had deliberately cleared the scrub in the place on which the ruined temple stood, the whole of the island might have been devastated, since no rain had fallen for about two months.

Already the feathered inhabitants were finding their way back to the unscathed vegetation. Whether the pigs had done so was doubtful. Judging by the terrible squeals the lads had heard, they had either perished in the flames or else had been devoured by sharks when, in their panic, they had taken to the water.

“It’ll mean a couple of miles’ tramp to get grub,” said Chris to himself. “I wonder how the whaler is? If she isn’t burnt, it’s a wonder. The gear’s gone, I’ll be bound. Rough luck! but”—glancing at the intact hut wherein the others were sleeping serenely—“it might have been a jolly sight worse!”

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-THIRD

THE LOST BURNING-GLASS

A LEC and Brian awoke almost at the same moment. Each sat up and looked at the other. They then both burst into peals of laughter, Peter joining in with a succession of excited barks.

Chris, startled by the noise, came hurrying to the hut. He, too, joined in the merriment.

The three lads resembled nigger minstrels. Their faces were black with cindery dust, and streaked by rivulets that had trickled down from their singed hair. And—no laughing matter this—their bodies were covered with blisters where the hot embers had obtained momentary hold.

Peter, too, looked in a deplorable condition. His fine coat was badly scorched, so that he resembled a mangy cur. He realised it. Slinking behind his master, he gave vent to a series of dolorous howls.

“Never mind, old boy!” exclaimed Alec, patting the dog’s head. “We aren’t entering you for a show. Go and find some eggs!”

This was one of Peter’s duties. He would scour the bush for hens’ eggs, taking good care to find those that were actually new-laid, and bringing them back one by one without ever cracking the shell.

The dog trotted off.

“Bet he’ll be whacked this trip,” remarked Chris. “Everything’s burnt up for at least a couple of miles. We’ll have an awful swot to get grub. What’s for brekker, anyway?”

Chris, as caterer for the week, had fortunately laid in a supply. Alec went out to start a fire.

Presently he came back.

“Any one seen the burning-glass?” he asked anxiously.

The others shook their heads.

“You had it to kindle a chunk of wood last night,” said Brian.

"I know," admitted Alec. "I thought I brought it in and laid it down when I turned in."

"Try your pockets," suggested Chris.

"I've been through them already," was the rejoinder.

They hunted everywhere. The only implement they had for lighting a fire was lost. Their scanty stock of matches had been used up.

"Cold grub, then," decided Chris, at the conclusion of the unsuccessful search. "Here's Peter, without the eggs; well, it doesn't matter very much, as we've no fire. I told you he'd be done this time."

"Well, what is it, Peter, old boy?" asked his master, noticing that the animal was trying to attract his attention. "No eggs? All right; lie down. You'll get something to eat presently."

But the dog was not satisfied with that assurance. He walked towards the door, looking back beseechingly at his master.

"That dog wants me to go out for something," declared Alec.

"P'raps he's found the burning-glass," suggested Brian hopefully.

"No such luck," rejoined Alec. "Lead on, Peter."

The dog bounded on ahead, stopping to wag his tail and then continuing his way towards the beach.

The chums followed. Directly the dog was satisfied that they were intent upon following him, he ran on to the sand and commenced to bark joyously.

There, half-buried in the sand, was a fair-sized turtle.

"What's to be done?" asked Brian, who had never met with such a creature.

"Help me to get hold of his flappers and capsize him," replied Alec. "He's weighty, but we may manage it without having to use a handspike."

By dint of considerable effort the chums succeeded in turning the turtle on its back. Under where it had lain were about two dozen eggs.

"Pardon, madam, my error!" exclaimed Alec. "Well, Chris, I told Peter to find us some eggs. Here they are."

"They're not hens' eggs," quibbled Chris.

"That wasn't in the contract. I said 'eggs,' " continued Peter's master, as he drew his knife. "And we've turtle soup and cutlets——"

“And no fire,” cut in Brian.

“We’ll try the friction method,” said Chris hopefully. “We may have better luck next time than the last.”

“Cold brekker to-day, anyhow,” declared Alec. “After that we’ve got to haul up and repair the boat.”

“I don’t fancy there’s a boat to repair,” said his chum. “From what I saw this morning, it seems as if the whaler and the gear have gone west in the fire!”

To the surprise of his companions, Alec set off at a run in the direction of the creek, Peter with him. The others, equally anxious concerning the fate of the boat, followed, though not at such a speed. Consternation seemed to have lent Alec wings. He was hardly visible by reason of the dust he raised as he ran over the ash-strewn ground.

Suddenly he halted. Then he half-turned and waved to his chums.

The whaler was safe. Almost miraculously the fire had stopped within fifty yards of the creek; while, owing possibly to the sudden change of wind, the flying embers had been diverted, for on the bank lay the sails and other gear absolutely untouched.

It was not nearly high-water. The boat had swung slightly with her pointed stern submerged.

“We’ll have her out now,” declared Alec. “Breakfast can wait. Get the tackle ready, lads, while I cut some rollers.”

By combining the throat and peak halliard gear, quite a powerful purchase could be obtained. One end of the tackle was made fast to a stout palm—one of the few that had escaped destruction—and the other bent to the boat’s painter.

The whaler’s forefoot was then raised by means of a rough handspike, and one of the rollers placed in position under the keel.

“All together! Heave-oh!” shouted Alec, when the three lads had tailed on to the rope. Slowly the boat, urged by the six purchase tackle, began to move until her stern was clear of the water.

“Avast heaving!” ordered Alec. “Get another roller under her. We’ll have to go slow to let the water run out.”

This caution was very necessary. Hauling up an empty boat was one thing; hauling up one filled with water was an entirely different proposition.

Until the water ran away through the hole in the keelson they ran the risk either of pulling the whaler's bows out of her or of breaking the tackle.

At length, after half an hour's work, the boat was high and dry above high-water mark.

"She'll do," remarked Alec, as he made the tackle fast to prevent the boat slipping back on the rollers. "And now, brekker! We'll start repairs later on."

They returned to the hut, faced with the prospect of a cold repast.

"Give those mats a shake outside, while I get grub, Alec," said Chris.

These were the bed coverings woven from reeds. It was part of the routine when sleeping in the hut to air these every morning.

Rolling Brian's mat, Alec tucked it under his arm, and dragged his own off the bunk to repeat the process. As he did so, something tinkled on the hard coral-cemented floor.

It was the missing burning-glass.

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-FOURTH

THE SCHOONER

“**Y**OU are a nigger-driver, Alec,” declared Brian, when the former began to set off to repair the boat.

“I think you’ve said that before,” he rejoined.

“And I’ll say it again,” retorted Brian. “Can’t we give it a miss to-day? We had a strenuous time yesterday.”

“That’s no excuse if you can work,” declared his chum. “The sooner the boat’s made watertight the better. She might be wanted at any moment.”

Arriving at the bank of the creek, the chums set to work to capsize the stranded whaler. It was a stiff task for three hands, but by dint of careful manœuvring, aided by props and levers, the desired result was obtained.

Thoughtfully Alec surveyed the jagged hole in the starboard strake. Unlike the damage done by the swordfish, it could not be plugged. It had to be patched; but without the necessary materials, how was this to be done?

“Why not cut up one of the copper air-tanks?” suggested Chris. “Some of them are no good for their original purpose. They leak like a sieve.”

“I thought of that,” replied Alec, “but we’ve no nails or tacks.”

“We can do without bottom-boards and side-benches,” continued Chris. “Why not knock out the copper nails and use them?”

The others agreed that it was quite a good idea.

“All the same,” added Alec, “we needn’t have been so smart in turning the boat over. We’ll have to right her again to get to the tanks and bottom-boards.”

This they did, and the rest of the morning was spent in extricating the copper nails, cutting them to the required length, and providing fresh heads to some and new points to others. They also attacked one of the air-tanks, cutting out a rectangular patch sufficient to overlap the hole by a couple of inches all round.

During the extreme heat of the day they were compelled to desist from their labours in the open, for there was no shade where the boat was hauled out.

Yet Alec allowed his chums no rest. He had the seaman's instinctive dislike of a useless boat, and until the whaler was again seaworthy and ready for instant use he would not remain inactive.

Accordingly, Brian and Chris were sent off to that part of the island where resinous trees had escaped the fire. They were told to collect the waterproof substance in readiness for the application of the patch.

While they were gone, Alec, after he had carefully thought out what material he could sacrifice, cut a piece of the painted sail-cover, making it an eighth of an inch longer and wider than the copper patch. Then, since the axe was too heavy for the back to be used as a hammer, he fashioned a suitable tool by lashing one of the boat's belaying pins to a cane handle.

Happening to look up and glance to seaward, Alec was considerably surprised to find that a vessel was in sight.

She was a small fore-and-aft schooner, apparently of about forty tons, with black hull and buff-coloured canvas. She was heading westwards, and was now opposite the hut and roughly a quarter of a mile beyond the reef. What wind there was was northerly, although, even with topsails set, the schooner was hardly making two knots over the ground.

"She's spotted the hut for a dead cert," thought the lad.

And probably he was right. Since the fire had cleared away most of the vegetation, the hut, in spite of the bank of earth in front of it, stood out conspicuously against the background of blackened ground.

Alec's first impulse was to rush from the hut and signal her. By her size it was safe to conclude that she had only a small crew—Kanakas, probably, under a white skipper. Some of these copra-trading vessels were beyond reproach; others were not.

If she beat up for the island and dropped anchor in the lagoon, there would be opportunities to observe her crew and draw conclusions from their appearance and actions. If not, he'd let her go. Hadn't his chums expressed an opinion that they were happy on the island? And on that account had they not refrained from carrying out their original intention of hoisting a distress signal on the plateau?

So he stayed within doors and, keeping under cover, watched the schooner until she was hidden from view by the intervening cliff.

“There’s a schooner just gone past,” he announced when, half an hour later, his chums returned, hot and tired with their long tramp across the treeless belt.

“Didn’t she see your signals?” asked Chris swiftly.

“Never made any.”

“Why not?”

“You fellows said you were quite contented to hang on a bit,” replied Alec.

“That was weeks ago,” rejoined Brian. “Things have changed a lot since then. The fire last night—that’s mucked up everything. Where is she?”

“Heading west or west-nor’-west,” answered his chum. “It may not be too late to attract her attention. She was hardly making way through the water.”

He, too, regretted his inaction in not signalling to the vessel. Each lad had nursed a secret desire to leave the island whenever the opportunity arrived. Now that the chance had slipped by, in their mutual disappointment they had “let the cat out of the bag.”

“We may get to North Point before she brings it abeam,” declared Alec, feeling in his pocket to reassure himself that the burning-glass was there. “Come on, let’s make a rush for it.”

The others in their excitement forgot their weariness. Even Peter pricked up his ears as if sensing what was in the air.

It took them the best part of an hour to make their way by the now well-known route past the ruined temple, and thence to the sloping ground on the north side of Sugar-cube Mountain.

When at length they arrived, hot, tired, thirsty and hungry, the schooner was a mere speck on the horizon. It had picked up a stiff breeze and was bowling through the water, rapidly leaving the island astern.

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-FIFTH

THE RAINY SEASON

“**R**OUGH luck!” exclaimed Brian, and his companions voiced similar sentiments. Had they deliberately missed the chance of leaving the island they might have had mild regrets; but having, in spite of their previous decision, decided to signal the schooner, the fact that she was almost out of sight was galling.

“We’ll get back,” decided Alec, realising that the strenuous events of the last few days had tired them severely and that the inevitable reaction was setting in. “No more work to-day, lads! A good rest, and we’ll be as fit as ninepence.”

They commenced the return journey to the hut, moving slowly and listlessly.

Presently they approached the marshy ground bordering upon what Brian had termed Leech River. To every one’s surprise the stream was in flood, the surging water pouring over the belt of swampy ground on either side. It seemed unaccountable. When, an hour ago, they had crossed the stream it was at its normal level. There had been no rain for weeks. Why, then, the sudden increase in the volume of water?

Usually there were dry patches in the bed of the stream, by means of which the lads were able to cross dry-shod. Now they were two to three feet under the surface.

“I’m not going to wade through,” declared Brian. “I don’t mind decent water, but I draw the line at leeches.”

“Quite,” agreed Chris. “Let’s make our way up stream and see if there’s a chance of getting across.”

This they did, continuing up the right bank until, forcing their way through a patch of scarlet-flowered hibiscus, they found themselves confronted by the cliff forming the east side of the plateau.

“This is another mystery solved,” declared Alec, pointing to a tunnel-like opening in the base of the rock, through which the water was frothing

and foaming. "This is the outlet for the reservoirs above and below the catacombs."

"And if we'd been caught by the rush of water, what was left of us would have been swept down here," added Chris.

"We're no better off now," declared Brian.

"What do you mean?" asked Alec sharply.

"I'm not referring to what might have happened in there," was the reply. "I mean, crossing the stream. It was bad enough at the usual fording-place. Here we'd be swept clean off our feet."

"There's no hurry," declared Chris. "Sit down and take it easy. Directly the water siphons itself away the rush will stop."

And it turned out as Chris had predicted. About ten minutes later the torrent began to ease down in volume and strength, until there was only a comparatively slight flow.

Half an hour later the chums regained the hut.

The next few days passed uneventfully. The whaler was repaired and rendered watertight, but the chums were forced to realise that, with the scanty material at their disposal, the job was but a make-shift. The boat would never be fit for making a sea-passage should they decide to attempt one. They were held to the island more than ever.

Then the rainy season set in suddenly and with a vengeance. For three weeks it rained almost incessantly, with very occasional bursts of sunshine. The burning-glass was not usable sometimes for several days at a stretch, and until Alec devised a lamp with a tow wick and melted tallow, they had often to go without cooked food.

Every day, sometimes twice daily, they had to make their way in blinding rain down to the creek for the disheartening task of baling out the boat. Since the fire had driven the hens and pigs farther afield, and had destroyed all trees within a considerable distance of the hut, all provisions had to be obtained at the cost of a tedious tramp over water-logged ground, and a still harder return journey laden with stores and firing material. Their scanty clothing was hardly ever dry, and notwithstanding the fact that they were in the tropics, the air struck chilly.

When they lighted a fire the wood was damp, and since a fire in the open was impossible, it had to be made on the floor in the centre of the hut. The result of the clouds of smoke issuing from the moist wood within the

confined space was trying both to health and temper. This was a phase of life on a desert island upon which they had not reckoned.

But at length, in due course of events, the rainy season ended. Again the sun shone forth in an unclouded sky. Nature did all she could to compensate for the weeks of discomfort. The rain had washed away the depressing expanse of ash-strewn ground. Young shoots were doing their best to garb the land in a mantle of green. Soft breezes, no longer reeking of burnt wood, blew refreshingly from the salt sea.

The winter of their discontent over, the boys regained their normal spirits. Their flesh took on its usual healthy hue, their muscles grew firm, and their sinews supple.

As for Peter, who during the rainy season had done much to keep his human companions amused, his singed and dilapidated hair had been replaced by a newly-grown coat that improved his appearance beyond anything his master had hoped for. He was a sleek-coated, handsome dog, an animal that any one would be proud to own.

“Let’s have a run out to the wreck,” suggested Alec one morning. “I’ll take jolly good care not to bump the boat on her timbers this time.”

“What then?” asked Chris. “You aren’t going to do any diving, are you?”

Alec shook his head.

“Not this child,” he replied. “It will be something to do. After that we’ll land on the north side and bring back a cargo of nuts and bread-fruits. That’ll save an awful swot.”

Once more the gear was placed in the boat, for during the rainy season the sails and running rigging had been kept in the hut. Then with a gentle breeze filling the canvas, the whaler set out on her trip to the sunken ship.

Thanks to the cross-bearings he had taken, Alec found the spot without difficulty. Then, dropping a short distance to leeward of the jagged timbers, the boat rode to her painter, while the boys peered through the translucent water at the strange sight beneath the surface.

“I’d like to know what’s under her hatches,” remarked Chris. “So far her deck ‘midships seems sound. Wonder if she has treasure on board.”

“You’re greedy,” rejoined Brian chaffingly. “We’ve a heap and don’t know what to do with it. Look at those guns! A dozen of them lying to lee’ard. They’re brass. Iron would have rusted through long ago. There’s treasure, if you like! They’d fetch no end of money at home.”

“That’s a fact,” agreed Alec. “Some day, perhaps, we’ll fish for some of them. A couple of slings under the boat at low water, and there you are!”

“She’s been a frigate, or something of that sort,” said Chris. “She’s pierced for twenty-four guns. I’d like to know her history.”

“Chances are you never will,” rejoined Alec, “but there’s no harm in making up a story concerning her.”

They spent the best part of an hour over the wreck, watching the sharks and other fearsome-looking fish swim lazily in and out of her open ports. There was a peculiar fascination about that coral and weed-encrusted hull. They might have stopped longer, but for the intimation that there was such a thing as hunger, and it was soon after dawn when they had had their last meal.

Re-hoisting sail, they soon made the little creek in the north side of the island. Here they landed and proceeded to gather a good supply of taro, plantain, bread-fruit, and coco-nuts.

“Why not catch a couple of those while we are about it?” suggested Brian, pointing to a number of young porkers scampering about in a glade. “We could build a sty and keep the things till we want ’em.”

Alec shook his head.

“Who’d look after the sty and keep it clean?” he asked. “You wouldn’t; neither would I, and I don’t suppose Chris is cut out for a pork farmer. ‘Sides, I know what it would be! You’d make a fuss of the little beasts, and wouldn’t have the heart to kill them.”

“It’s a frightfully long way to have to come to get pork, poultry, and eggs,” continued Brian.

“Yes; but now the grass is growing again on the south side, the animals will come back,” replied Alec. “I suppose these fires are one of nature’s methods of preventing the place being overrun. Well, we’ve enough to last us a week, I think. Now for grub.”

They had a splendid *al fresco* meal, took things easily for an hour or so, and then re-embarked.

The return voyage took considerably longer, since the wind was ahead and necessitated a dead beat until south-east point was abeam.

Arriving at the anchorage, they ran the whaler ashore and unloaded their cargo. This they intended carrying up to the hut by means of a sort of

stretcher which they had made during odd moments.

“I’ll go and fetch the thing,” volunteered Alec. “You fellows might stow gear and moor the boat while I’m gone. Come along, Peter!”

The dog followed sedately enough until Alec was within fifty yards of the hut. Then, bounding on a few paces, Peter stopped and growled menacingly.

“What’s wrong now!” thought the lad.

The answer came unexpectedly, for at the dog’s unmistakable challenge, a man appeared in the open doorway of the hut.

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-SIXTH

FAREWELL TO THE ISLAND

HE was a short, sturdily-built man of about forty, with a closely-trimmed beard and moustache. He was rigged out in a discoloured and ill-fitting drill coat and trousers and a white-covered uniform cap.

Gazing rather apprehensively at the growling dog, the man let his right hand stray in the direction of his hip pocket.

“Is that brute dangerous?” he asked in a deep bass voice. “Call him off; I’m considered smart with a six-shooter.”

“He’s all right with friends,” replied Alec, fearful for his pet’s safety. Yet he was not going to show the white feather to the intruder. “And I’m fairly quick with an automatic, too. So are my chums down there, if it comes to that. What are you doing here?”



"WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?"

The man laughed. It had rather a pleasant ring about it. At the same time he stepped forward with extended hand.

"Sort of looking round, like," he replied. "I'd a notion that some one would turn up for a palaver. 'Scuse my remark about the dog. I've been bitten once by a stray cur and that makes me careful."

"Well, you needn't be afraid of Peter," rejoined Alec. "But he wouldn't be much use if he allowed any stranger to wander over our property, would he?"

"That's a fact," agreed the man. "I'm all open and above board, but you needn't take my word for it unless you like. That's my schooner"—pointing to a craft at anchor just beyond the headland—"the *Morning Star*. Ask any one down amongst the islands and they'll tell you they know the *Morning Star*. Tweed—James Tweed's my name. What's yours?"

Alec told him, adding that he was one of three survivors of the ship *Cosmos*.

“Heard of her down at Apia,” rejoined Captain Tweed. “Well, you seem fixed up pretty comfortable, all things considering. I’ve been taking a squint round. You see, we put in for fresh water, not thinking we’d have to ask permission. We were blown out of our course, and the engine gave out. Since then it’s been almost a flat calm.”

“As much fresh water as you want, Captain,” replied Alec. “And provisions—bread-fruit and fresh pork. How about grub now? I’ll call my chums. Where’s your crew?”

“Three Kanakas,” said the skipper of the *Morning Star*. “They’re standing by the boat. Thank you for the offer of grub. It’s been tinned stuff for the last ten days, and that gets a bit tedious. Any spirits?”

Alec shook his head.

“Nothing beyond the natural resources of the island,” he replied.

“In that case I’ll send one of my men off for some coffee,” continued Captain Tweed briskly.

He set off towards the beach where three scantily-clothed Kanakas were squatting by the side of a hauled-up dory.

Alec hurried back to the others and told them the exciting news.

“He seems all right,” he added, “but we’d better go slow. Not a word about the treasure, whatever happens!”

They went up to the hut. Captain Tweed had already returned, bringing with him a small tin of coffee, another of condensed milk, and four enamelled iron cups.

“I used my eyes,” he remarked, indicating the last-named articles. “I don’t see much in that line in your cabin.”

They had quite a jolly meal. To the three castaways the coffee—the first they had had for over six months—tasted excellent. More than that, it was a link with civilisation once again.

“‘Spose you’re wanting to get home?” remarked the skipper of the *Morning Star* tentatively. “I don’t blame you. There’s nothing much in this place, and it’s too far from anywhere to be made to pay as a copra depot. Well, I’m short-handed. Lost a couple of Kanakas a week ago. You’ll help work your passage to Suva. There’ll be the New Zealand mail-boat to take you to England. How about the dog?”

“I wouldn’t go without him,” declared Alec, and he meant it.

“Dogs are an awful trouble to get home,” continued Captain Tweed. “Not only the expense, but six months quarantine. He’s a fine animal. How old?”

“Two years—about,” replied his master.

“H’m. Dogs don’t live long in Fiji. ‘Bout five’s their limit. More if they live afloat. Tell you what: give you a sovereign for him.”

“Sorry, I can’t part with him,” said Alec decidedly.

“I wouldn’t ill-use him,” continued the skipper. “I’m fond of animals. Make it five pounds. It’ll save you a sight of trouble.”

“Money wouldn’t buy Peter,” rejoined his master in a tone of finality. “Where I go he goes. Sorry, Captain Tweed, but I think you understand.”

“Good enough,” remarked the skipper of the *Morning Star*, after a decided pause. “Good enough! I wouldn’t give a brass rag myself for a fellow who goes back on his pal, be that pal man or beast. Now, then, what about the fresh water?”

“If you like we’ll bring our whaler alongside,” suggested Alec. “Then we can put your watering gear on board and go round to the creek.”

To this suggestion Captain Tweed agreed. The party broke up, the Kanakas being ordered to row back to the schooner, while the boys returned to the place where their boat was moored.

Under oars they brought her alongside the *Morning Star*, and the canvas bags used to carry water from shore to the schooner’s tanks were placed in her.

“Lump of a craft that,” remarked the skipper as he dropped into the stern-sheets of the whaler. “I’ll tell two of my hands to take the oars.”

Replenishing the tanks took the rest of the afternoon. Then the captain returned to the hut with the three boys.

“I reckon to get under way by noon,” he announced. “You’ll get what gear you want ready by then. I’ll send my men ashore early for the fresh provisions.”

“We were wondering what we should do with the whaler,” said Alec. “I suppose she’s of no use to you?”

Captain Tweed shook his head.

“Too heavy to hoist inboard,” he replied. “It’s a pity. She’d fetch a tidy sum at Suva. If you left her in case any other people get cast ashore here she wouldn’t be worth much. Hauled up, the sun would tear her to bits in a month. If you left her at the bottom of the creek, the worms would eat through her planks in no time. The best thing I can think of is to haul her up under those palms, fill her with water, and trust to luck. Well, I must be getting back. See you in the morning.”

Left to themselves, the boys began to realise that their stay on the island was drawing to a close. Although Captain Tweed seemed perfectly straight, they decided to say nothing about the treasure buried under the floor, nor anything concerning the mysterious subterranean passages under the plateau. They had some of the gold in their belt-pouches.

Early on the following morning they set to work with the aid of the Kanakas to haul the whaler up and flood her. The sails and gear they brought up to the hut, together with the tools they had brought from the raft.

Presently the captain came ashore and despatched his crew to secure some pigs, fowls, and fruit.

“What is the name of this island?” asked Chris.

“It hasn’t one,” replied the skipper of the *Morning Star*. “For years it was shown on the chart with P.D. against it—position doubtful, that is. According to my reckoning”—and pulling out a note-book he gave them the latitude and longitude—“the island is fifteen miles east of that shown on the latest charts. Do you know anything about motors?”

They all did.

“Then perhaps you can get my infernal box of tricks to go,” continued Captain Tweed. “It beats me—not my job. A Kanaka can keep the engine running when it does run. When it doesn’t he’s whacked. If you can coax that scrap of dud metal into gee-ing, I’ll be more than grateful.”

The Kanakas returned laden with the spoils of the chase and the products of the groves.

Whilst the skipper was engaged in getting the provisions off to the schooner, Chris found a slab of clean-grained wood. On it he carved these words:—

“This hut was built by and belongs to the undersigned:—

ALEC BAINBRIDGE,

BRIAN CURTISS,

CHRISTOPHER ALDERSON.”

This notice they set up in a conspicuous position over one of the bunks.

“That’s all, I think,” remarked Chris in a low voice. “There’s the dory putting off for us.”

“Come on, Peter,” exclaimed Alec.

They went out, shutting the door, perhaps for the last time.

Ten minutes later they boarded the schooner *Morning Star*.

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-SEVENTH

HOME AGAIN

ONCE again the *Morning Star* set her dun-coloured canvas. The anchor was broken out of its bed in the clear lagoon, heaved close up and secured. Then, with a brown-skinned Kanaka perched in the fore cross-trees to con her through the uncharted gap in the reefs, the schooner gathered way and was soon curtseying to the long Pacific swell.

Three hours later the flat-topped plateau dipped beneath the horizon.

“Wonder if we’ll ever see it again,” remarked Brian. “I’m sorry to leave the island for some reasons; for others—I say, let’s tackle that motor!”

There are worse methods of distracting one’s mind!

It did not take them very long to rectify the fault—a broken pin of one of the inlet valves—thereby earning Captain Tweed’s thanks and praise.

“It won’t matter if the wind drops now,” he added, knowing that with the engine running there was no fear of drifting helplessly for days.

Although the boys did their share in working the ship, the task was an easy one. As for Peter, he spent most of the time curled up on deck, ever with a watchful eye on the companion-way whenever his master was below.

But on the eighth day the dog sat up and took notice. Going to the rail he sniffed appreciatively. Land was not far off. Before sunset the *Morning Star* dropped anchor off Suva.

Three days later the survivors of the ship *Cosmos* found themselves on board a homeward bound mail-boat, and in due course set foot once more on Britain’s shores.

Then came the worst part of the whole business. In spite of Alec’s declaration that his pet had not been in company with any other dog for at least six months, the port authorities insisted on Peter being placed in quarantine. Sadly Alec and his chums parted with the faithful dog, promising to fetch him at the end of the stipulated period.

“Rotten red tape!” declared Brian hotly, as they made their way to the railway-station.

While they were getting their tickets, Alec was nearly hurled against the wall of the booking-office by a terrific push from behind.

There was Peter, frantic with joy and with six inches of chain dangling from his collar. As far as Alec was aware, the dog had never been in that port before; yet, guided solely by the sense of scent, he had followed his master and, what was more, had found him.

With an easy conscience Alec purchased a dog ticket.

A week later they met by appointment at Alec’s uncle’s office. Very attentively Lawyer Bainbridge listened to their story, up to a certain point.

Then he rang a bell.

“Bring me the large atlas,” he said, addressing a clerk.

The atlas was brought. Deliberately the experienced man of law marked the position given on the map.

“There’s no island within a hundred miles of the spot,” he remarked. “The depth about there is given as a hundred fathoms.”

“Then the atlas is at fault, Uncle,” declared Alec. “Do you think we’re telling you a fairy tale?”

“All tales are fairy tales as far as I am concerned,” replied the lawyer grimly, “unless definite proof is forthcoming.”

“Well, then, here’s proof,” rejoined his nephew, placing some of the gold coins on the table. “All we want is to charter a small vessel, make the island, and ship the treasure. We know exactly where it is.”

“But that’s not so easy as you think,” said Mr. Bainbridge. “Capital is necessary, and capital is difficult to find for such a purpose. Hundreds of reckless speculators have been badly bitten lately over so-called treasure expeditions. If you invite capital, naturally you’ll have to give definite information and proof. Then the cat will be out of the bag, and you’ve the risk of rival expeditions, for treasure-hunting isn’t a monopoly. To whom does the island belong?”

“To us, I suppose,” replied Alec. “We found it.”

His uncle grunted.

“Findings aren’t keepings, especially as far as individual ownership of stray islands is concerned. Some Power either lays definite claim to it, or declares that it is in its sphere of influence—which is practically two ways of expressing the same thing. You’d have to obtain a concession. That would mean fifty per cent to the Government. Then, even supposing you recovered the treasure, the vessel carrying it might be lost on the way home—and no company would insure bullion and specie without proof of its existence.”

“But, sir,” interposed Brian, “we were told by Captain Tweed that the island was shown as ‘position doubtful’ on his chart. No Government can claim a place that doesn’t exist, and the supposed latitude and longitude makes the island to be fifteen miles from where it actually is. What’s to prevent us removing the treasure without asking any one’s permission?”

The lawyer smiled.

“Because it is an irregular proceeding,” he replied. “Supposing you did as you suggest: what explanation have you to offer to the Customs Officers at the first home port you touch to account for say half a million of bullion and specie under hatches? It’s quite a simple job for a novelist, I know; but in reality one has to act circumspectly.”

“You’ll help us, won’t you?” asked Alec.

“Certainly,” was the reply. “I’ll make careful and guarded inquiries, and let you know.”

Six weeks elapsed. Lawyer Bainbridge gave no sign. But during that period the chums had much to occupy their time. There was the Board of Trade inquiry into the loss of the *Cosmos*, for example.

At length the chums were summoned to Southampton, whither Alec’s uncle had gone a week previously.

“I think it will be all right,” said the lawyer, when they met at an hotel. “I’ve obtained the Government concession; I’ve found the capital—eight thousand pounds. An old friend of mine whom I can trust implicitly, Captain Manly, has undertaken to navigate a vessel to the island, and he’s chartered the 200-ton auxiliary yacht *Serapis*. She’s lying in the river at Northam. You’d better come along and inspect her and meet Captain Manly.”

To bring this narrative to a close, it must be stated that S.Y. *Serapis* left Southampton yesterday.

Whether she succeeds in returning with the treasure depends upon circumstances, but it is to be hoped that Alec, Brian, and Chris take with

them the best wishes of those who have followed their adventures on The Mystery Island of the Pacific.

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THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

In cases where the same words appear with, as well as without hyphens, hyphenation has been left as per the original book.

[The end of *Mystery Island* by Percy F. Westerman]