

The wreckers gave no heed to Eric, who went over and sat on the side of his bunk, whence he could command the whole room without being in anybody's way. They were a very unpromising looking lot of men, and he scanned face after face in the vain attempt to find one which did not bear the stamp of cruelty and vice. Indeed one might have ransacked the prisons of England and America without being able to get together a more villainous set of scoundrels than those to whose society Eric was now condemned for he knew not how long a time.

Listening to their speech and studying their countenances, he made out that some were fellow-countrymen, and some were Frenchmen. There was also one negro, a stalwart bull-headed fellow with a very repulsive face, upon whom evidently devolved the duty of preparing the dinner, as he was busily engaged with pans and kettles at the fire-place.

The whole party seemed to be in excellent humor, and Eric soon made out that the reason of this was the very rich prize the *Francis* had proved to be. Each man had some valuable find to boast of, and they vied with each other in relating with great gusto their successful efforts to secure the wreckage. From what they let fall, Eric gathered that the *Francis* did not break up after striking. Her stout oak frame resisted the fiercest attempts of the billows to tear it asunder, and the storm having blown itself out during the night the men were able in the morning to make their way to the wreck and strip the ill-starred vessel of such of her contents as took their fancy.

The thousands of valuable books, and the hold full of costly furniture they contemptuously left to the mercy of wind and wave, but the great store of gold and silver plate, the casks of finest wine, the barrels of best biscuits, these, with the racks of muskets, swords and other weapons, were very much to their liking. Moreover, each man had helped himself to such articles of clothing as he lighted upon in his ransacking of the state rooms, the consequence being that they had such a fit out of brilliant uniforms as would have made them objects of liveliest interest should they dare to don them on the mainland. Little did Prince Edward imagine when ordering his surgeon to bring out with him abundant additions to his wardrobe, that these resplendent garments were destined to be worn to tatters on the backs of the wreckers of Sable Island.

Eric listened very attentively to all that was said, although the profuse profanity of the speakers shocked and sickened him, in the hope of picking up something about his father. But whether because the wreckers suspected that the man and woman Evil-Eye had given his attention to were the parents of the lad in their midst, or because the despatching of half-drowned castaways was too common an occurrence to occasion any special remark, no mention whatever was made of the matter, and Eric was fain to surrender the last lingering remnant of hope that his father might possibly have found his way ashore alive, and been spared by the wreckers as he had been himself.

The negro, who was known as Black Bill, presently announced that dinner was ready, and all fell to at once with ravenous appetites.

The table looked curiously out of harmony with its surroundings of squalid hut, and coarse boorish men, for it was laid with a cloth of finest damask intended for a royal dining room, and spread with china, glass and cutlery of corresponding elegance. Eric recognized instantly these sumptuous furnish-

ings, and it filled him with disgust and indignation to see the wreckers hacking their meat with ivory handled knives, impaling their potatoes upon silver forks, and quenching their thirst by copious draughts out of cut glass goblets, all of which seemed to suffer desecration from their touch.

Ben motioned him to a seat beside himself, and helped him bountifully. Ill at ease as Eric felt, he felt very hungry too, and was glad to do full justice to the plentiful if coarse fare provided. The wine he would not touch, although strongly pressed by Ben to do so. Cold water sufficed for him, and to this he helped himself from the water-butt that stood near the door.

When dinner was over, the noisy party broke up, some lay down in their bunks for a snooze, others lit their pipes, and replenished their flagons as though they proposed to tarry yet longer over the wine, while the rest put on their coats again and went out. Among the latter was Ben, and feeling very loath to be left in such uncongenial society as now possessed the room, Eric no sooner saw him move than he picked up his hat, and ran after him, Prince following close at his heels.

"Feel like an airing now, my lad?" said Ben. "All right, come along with me. I'm not going far this afternoon."

The sun was high in the heavens, the sky almost cloudless, and the wind blew softly from the south as though it had never raged with fatal fury upon the unfortunate *Francis*. Eric's spirits, which had been woefully depressed by the events of the past two days, began to rise a little, and he looked about him with lively interest, as following in Ben's wake he trudged along through the soft dry sand of which the whole island seemed to be composed.

Although he had approved of Eric's accompanying him, Ben showed a decided disinclination to talk, and stalked on ahead in moody silence, puffing hard at the pipe, which only left his lips during meal-time, and while he slept. Prince manifested great delight at getting out of doors, frisking and barking vigorously in the exuberance of his glee. One good night's rest had been sufficient to restore him completely after his exhausting struggle with the billows. He looked and no doubt felt equal to anything that might be required of him, and was a source of comfort inexpressible to the heavy-hearted boy, who possessed no other friend so true or fond or brave in all that New World whose *avant-courier* had given him so harsh a reception.

Half-an-hour's walking brought Ben to the highest point of a sand ridge where he seated himself, and waited for Eric, who had lagged behind a little, to come up.

"Sit ye down, lad," said he, when Eric reached him. "You're tired, no doubt."

Eric was tired, and very glad indeed to sit down beside Ben, who continued to puff away at his pipe, as though he had nothing more to say. Thus left to himself, the boy let his eyes wander over the strange and striking scene that surrounded him on all sides.

He was upon the crest of a sandhill, a hundred feet or more in height, which straight before him sloped by slow gradations to the beach, upon whose glistening sands the great billows were breaking in steady succession, although the day was clear and calm; and far out beyond the serried lines of white-maned breakers the ocean could be seen sleeping peacefully, until its blue bosom merged and mingled with the azure of the skies. Here and there upon the bars that were now revealed and now submerged as the waves waxed and waned, the hulls of ships in varying stages of destruction, some mere shattered

skeletons, others still sturdy hulks, told plainly how common was the fate which had befallen the *Francis*, and how rich a field the wreckers enjoyed for the carrying on of their nefarious occupation.

Turning to his right Eric saw a long, narrow lake, occupying the centre of the island at its broadest part, whose banks were densely grown with rushes and lily plants, and upon whose surface flocks of duck were making themselves merry. The whole valley of the lake presented a curious contrast to those portions of the island that looked seaward, for it was thickly carpeted with coarse grass, wild pea, and cranberry vine, which, although they already felt the blight of nearing winter, were still green enough to be grateful to the eye turning away in weariness from the unrelieved barrenness of the sand-dunes.

Upon the left the island undulated in alternate rise and fall of sand-hill and dale until, far away, a faint line of white showed where it once more touched the ocean, and made excuse for other lines of roaring surges which no doubt did their share of harm to vessels so unluckily as to come within their reach.

All this and more had Eric time to take in ere Ben broke the silence between them. He had been looking at him for a while with a very thoughtful expression of countenance, and at last he spoke.

"Well, lad," said he. "I've been thinking much about ye, and though I saved your life I'm not so clear in my mind but that it 'ud 've been best to have let you go with the others."

Eric gave a start of mingled surprise and alarm.

"Why, Mr. Ben! What makes you say that?"

"Well, you see it's just this way," replied Ben slowly as though he were puzzling out the best way to state the case. "You're in a mighty bad box, and no mistake. Evil-Eye does not fancy you, and would take the first chance to put you out of his way if he dared. Dead men tell no tales, is what he goes by, and if the people over there," jerking his thumb in the direction of the mainland, knew what goes on over here they'd be pretty sure to want to put a stop to it. Now I don't imagine you want to join us, and I'm no less certain that Evil-Eye 'll take precious good care not to let you go—and it just bothers me to make out what's to be the end of the business."

As the words fell one by one from Ben's lips Eric for the first time realized how perilous was his situation. In his gladness at escape from the wreck, and sorrow at the fate of his parents, he had taken no thought for the future, and now he was abruptly brought face to face with a condition of affairs which made that future almost helplessly foreboding.

Utterly bewildered, he gazed at Ben with an expression in which pathetic appeal was so mingled with harrowing dread that it touched this strange man to the heart. He sprang to his feet, dashed his pipe out of his mouth, clenched his huge fists, and shouted aloud:

"By G—d, I saved ye, and I'll stand by ye. If any one wants to do you harm he'll have to reckon with me first, and let the consequences be what they may, I'll get you off this cursed place somehow."

Then, recovering his self-control by an evident effort, he sat down upon the sand again, picked up his pipe, relit it, and resumed puffing vigorously, while Eric, not less astonished than relieved by this unexpected outburst, turned his eyes ocean-ward, and wondered what was coming next. Ben did not speak again until every trace of his excitement had disappeared, when, looking hard at Eric, he asked in a quiet natural tone: