

The Stowaway

By LOUIS TRACY.
Author of the "Pillar of Light," "The Wings of the Morning" and "The Captain of the Kansas."

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(CONTINUED.)

The gunners on shore had not allowed for the drifting of the ship. That second shell was meant to demolish the mainmast and clear the bridge of its occupants. Striking high and forward, it had riddled the Andromeda of her last chance.

CHAPTER V. SHOWING WHAT BECAME OF THE ANDROMEDA.

THE island artillery did not succeed in hitting the crippled ship again. Three more shells were fired, but each projectile seemed harmlessly far out at sea. A trained gunner, noting these facts, would reason that the shore battery made good practice in the first instance solely because its ordnance was

trained at a known range. Indeed, he might even hazard a guess that the Andromeda's main reception was arranged long before her masts and funnel rose over the horizon. That the islanders intended nothing less than her complete destruction was self-evident. Without the slightest warning they had tried to sink her, and now that she was escaping the further attentions of the fieldpieces a number of troops stationed on South point and the Isle des Eregates began to pelt her with bullets.

Iris, when the first paralysis of fear had passed, when her stricken senses resumed their sway and her limbs lost their palsy, flung from this new danger and sank sobbing to her knees behind the canvas shield of the bridge. Somehow this flimsy shelter, which sailors call the "dogger," gave some sense of safety. Her throbbing brain was incapable of lucid thought, but it was borne in on her mistily that the world and its occupants had suddenly gone mad. The omen of the blood red water had justified itself most horribly. The dead carpenter was sprawling over the forecastle windlass. His hand still clutched the brake. The sailor at the wheel had been shot through the throat and had fallen limply through the open doorway of the chart room. He lay there, coughing up blood and froth and gasping his life out. The two men wounded by the second shell were creeping down the forward companion in the effort to avoid the hail of lead that was beating on the ship. Hozier was raising himself on hands and knees, his attitude that of a man who is dazed, almost insensible.

Watts had gone from the bridge. He might have been whirled to death over the side like the unfortunate foremast hand she had seen tossed from off the forecastle. But Coke, whose charmed life apparently entitled him to act like a lunatic, was actually balancing himself on top of the starboard rails of the bridge by clinging to a stay, having climbed to that exposed position in order to hurl oaths at the soldiers on shore. He had gone frantic with rage. His cap had either fallen off or been torn from his head by a bullet. His squat, powerful figure was shaking with frenzy. He emphasized each curse with a passionate gesture of the free hand and arm. He said, among other things and with no lack of forcible adjectives, that if he could only come to close quarters with some of the Portygee assassins on the island he would tear their sanguinary livers out.

The Andromeda, uncontrollable as destiny and careless as heedlessness of her human freight, swung round with the current until her bows pointed to the islet occupied by the marksman. All at once Coke suspended his flow of invectives and rushed into the chart room, where Iris heard him tearing lockers open and throwing their contents on the deck. To enter he was obliged to leap over the body of the dying man. The action was grotesque, callous, almost inhuman. It jarred the girl's agonized transports back into a species of spiritual calm, a mental state akin to the fatalism often exhibited by Asiatics when death is imminent and not to be denied. The apparent madness of the captain was now more distressing to her than the certain loss of the ship or the invisible missiles that clanged into white patches on the iron plates, cut sudden holes and scars in the woodwork or whirled through the air with a buzzing whistle of singularly menacing sound. She began to be afraid of remaining on the bridge. Her fear was not due to the really vital fact that it was so exposed. It arose from the purely feminine consideration that she was sure Coke had become a raving maniac, and she dreaded meeting him when, if ever, he reappeared.

A bullet struck the front frame of the chart room, and several panes of glass were shattered with a fearful din. That decided her. Coke, if he were not killed, would surely be driven out. She sprang to her feet and literally ran down the steep ladder to the saloon deck. Through the open door of the officers' mess she witnessed another bizarre act—an act quite as

extraordinary in its way as Coke's jump over the steersman's body. In the midst of this drama of death and destruction Watts was standing there, with head thrown back and uplifted arm, gulping down a tumblerful of some dark colored liquid, draining it to the dregs, while he held a black bottle in the other hand.

Then from somewhere she heard a gruff voice:

"Hev' ye shut off steam, Macfarlane?"

"On ay. It's a' snag below till the water reaches the furnaces," came the answer.

So some of the men were doing their duty. Thank God for that! Undeterred by the fact that a live shell had burst among the engines, the oil stanked, grim looking engineers had not quitted their post until they had taken such precautions as lay in their power to insure the ship's safety. A light broke in on the fog in the girl's mind. Even now, at the very gate of eternity, one might try to help others. She thought brought a ray of comfort.

She was about to look for the speakers when a bullet drilled a hole in a panel close to her side. She began to run again, for a terrified glance through the forward gangway showed that the ship was quite close to the land, where men in blue uniforms, wearing curiously shaped hats and white gaiters, were scattered among the rocks, some standing, some kneeling, some crawling.

It was a most surprising sight. Hozier, who had been lying on his right arm, sprang to his feet, and in his forebrain he was trying to rise. With an intuition that was phenomenal under the circumstances Iris realized that he was screened from observation for the moment by the windlass and the corpse that lay across it. But the ship's ever increasing speed and the curving course of her drifting would soon bring him into sight, and then those merciless riddens would shoot him down.

"Oh, not that, not that!" she wailed aloud.

An impulse stronger than the instinct of self preservation caused the blood to tingle in her veins. She had wanted to take that one look, and now, bent double so as to avoid being seen by the soldiers, she sidled back through the gangway, gained the open deck, crouched close to the bulwarks on the port side and thus reached unscathed the foot of the companion down which the wounded men had crawled. The nine plates on the steps were slippery with their blood, but she did not falter at the sight. Up she went, stooped over Hozier and placed her strong young arms round his body.

"Quick!" she panted. "Let me help you. You will be killed if you remain here!"

Her voice seemed to rouse him as from troubled sleep.

"I was hit," he muttered. "What is it? What is wrong?"

"Oh, come, come!" she screamed, for some unseen agency tore a transverse gash in the planking not a foot in front of them.

He yielded with broken expostulations. She dragged him to the top of the stairs. Clinging to him, she half walked, half fell, down the few steps. Iris was still supporting Hozier, whose weight was almost more than she could manage, but she clung to him desperately, saved him from a headlong plunge to the deck and literally carried him into the forecastle, where she found some of the crew who had scurried there like rabbits to their burrow when the first shell crashed into the engine room.

Iris' fine eyes darted lightning at them.

"You call yourselves men," she cried shrilly, "yet you leave one of your officers lying on deck to be shot at by those fiends!"

"We didn't know he was there, miss," said one.

The frigate now appeared to increase in volume and accuracy. Several bullets clanged against the funnel or broke huge splinters of the boats.

"Great heavens, listen to that!" growled a voice. "An' we cooped up here, blazed at by a lot of rotten dogger, with not a gun to our name!"

Iris was still supporting Hozier, whose head and shoulders were pillowed against her breast as she knelt behind him.

"Can nothing be done?" she asked.

"I believe Captain Coke has been killed. Mr. Hozier is badly injured. I fear. Bring some water, if possible."

"Yes, see water. Only a knock on the head. How did it happen? And what is that noise of firing?"

Hozier's scattered wits were returning, though neither he nor Iris remembered that the Andromeda was waterless. He looked up at her, then at the men, and he smiled as his eyes met hers again.

"Funny thing!" he said, with a natural tone that was reassuring. "I thought the windlass smashed itself into smithereens. But it couldn't. What was it that banged?"

"A shell fired from the island," said the girl.

Hozier straightened himself a little. He was hearing marvels, though far from understanding them as yet.

"A shell!" he repeated vacantly. Had she said "a comet" it could not have sounded more incredible.

"Yes. It might have killed you. Several of the men are dead. I myself saw three of them killed outright, and two others are badly wounded."

"Here you are, sir—drink this," said a fireman, offering a pannikin of beer. It was unpalatable stuff, but it tasted like the nectar of the gods to one who had sustained a blow that would have felled an ox. Hozier had almost emptied the tin when an exclamation from an Irish stoker drew all eyes to the after part of the ship.

"Why war! Will ye look at that!" shouted the man. "Sure the skipper isn't dead at all, at all!"

Iris had failed to grasp the meaning of Coke's antics in the chart room, but they were now fully explained. The bulldog breed of this self confessed rascal had taken the upper hand of him. Though he had not scrupled to plot the destruction of the ship and thus rob a marine insurance company

of a considerable sum of money, though at that very instant there was actual proof of his scheme in the preparation, he had made to jam the steering gear when the anchor was raised after the tanks were replenished. It was not in the man's nature to skulk into comparative safety because a foreigner, a pirate, a not-to-be-mentioned-in-polite-society Portygee, opened fire on him in this murderous fashion. Moreover, Coke's villainy would have sacrificed no lives. The intended object was converted into scrap iron and thereby give back, by perverted arithmetic, the money invested in her, but her white decks would not be stained with blood.

Whatever risk was incurred would be his, the responsible captain's, his only. It was a vastly different thing that shot and shell should be rained on an unarmed ship by the troops of a civilized power when she was seeking the lowest form of hospitality. No wonder if the hull necked skipper foamed at the mouth at such words forwarded by the catchism, no wonder if he tried to express his helpless fury in one last act of defiance.

He rummaged the lockers for a union jack and the four flags that showed the ship's name in signal letters. He determined that she would go down with colors flying if he were not put out of action by a bullet before he could reach the main hatchway.

The swerve in the ship's course as she passed the island gave him an opportunity. In justice to Coke it should be said that he recked naught of this, but it would have been humanly impossible otherwise for the soldiers to have missed him. And now, while the vessel lay with straight keel in the set of the current, the national emblem of Britain, with the Andromeda's code flags beneath, fluttered up the mainmast.

There are many imaginable conditions under which Coke's deed would be regarded as sublime; there are none by which could deny his splendid audacity. The soldiers, who seemed to be actuated by the utmost malevolence, redoubled their efforts to hit the squat Hercules who had belloved at them and their fellow artists from the bridge. Bullets struck the deck, lodged in the masts, splintered the roof and panels of the upper structure, but not one touched Coke. He coolly made fast each flag in its turn and hauled away till the union jack had reached the truck; then, drawn forward by a loose clew that came from the forecastle, he turned his back on the enemy and swung himself down to the fore deck.

As he lumbered along the deck he mopped his face vigorously with a pocket handkerchief, and this comely action helped to convince Iris that she was mistaken in thinking him mad. His words, too, when he caught sight of her were not those of a maniac.

"Well, missy," he cried, "wo'till they say in Liverpool now? I s'pose they'll 'ear me some day, an' I'll be a thumb backward 'n indicate the unceasing hail of bullets that poured into the after part of the ship."

The girl looked at him with an air of surprise that would have been comical under less grievous conditions. She knew with a vague definiteness that death was near, perhaps unavoidable, and it had never occurred to her that she or any other person on board need feel any concern about the view entertained by Liverpool as to their fate. Before she could frame a reply, however, Hozier seemed to recover his faculties. He stood up, walked unaided to the side of the ship and glanced ahead.

"Shouldn't we try to lower a boat, sir?" he asked instantly.

"No!" growled Coke. "O's goin' to lower boats while them blighters on the island are pumpin' lead into us? An' we're good are the boats w'en they're lowered? They've been drilled full of lead!"

Iris was still supporting Hozier, who might as well try to float a sieve.

"Are none of the boats seaworthy?"

"Not one. They are knocked to pieces. Sorry for you, Miss Yorke. But we're all booked for kingdom come. In 'arf a minnit or less, we'll be on the reef, an' the ship must begin to break up."

Coke was telling the plain truth, but Hozier ran aft to make sure that he was right in assuming the extent of the boats' damages. It was common knowledge that the vessel must be lost and the those who sought to live when she struck would have the alternative of being drowned or beaten to pieces against the frowning rocks or shot from the mainland like so many stranded seals if some alliance of luck and strength secured a momentary foothold on one of the tiny islets that barred the way.

Some one threw a cork jacket over the girl's shoulders and bade her fasten its straps around her waist. She obeyed without a word. Indeed, she seemed to have lost the power of speech. In a curiously detached way she wondered why Hozier did not re-

turn. The prayers and curses of the men surrounding her fell unheeded on her ears. Where was Hozier? What was he doing? Why did he not come to her? She felt a strange confidence in him. If he had not been struck down by that calamitous shell he would have saved the ship—surely he would have devised some means of saving their lives. Perhaps even now he was attempting some desperate expedient. The thought nerved her for an instant. Then a grinding noise was followed by a sudden swerve and roll of the ship that sent her staggering against a bulkhead. An outburst of cries and shouting rang through her brain, and a shriek was wrung from her parched throat.

But the Andromeda righted herself again, though there was another sound of tearing metal, and the deck heaved perceptibly under a shock.

"Ah, kind heaven! Here come Hozier, running, thundering some loud order. 'The port lifeboat—seaworthy!'"

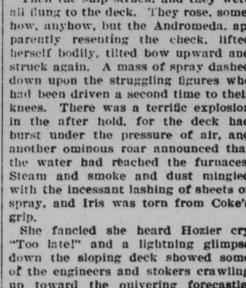
"There was a fierce rush, in which she joined. She was knocked down. A strong hand dragged her to her feet. It was Coke, swearing horribly. She saw Hozier leap against the flood of men.

"'Curse you, the woman first!' she heard him say, and he sent the leaders of the mob sprawling over the hatches of the forehold.

Coke, almost carrying her in his left arm, butted in among the crew like an infuriated bull. Some of the men, shamefaced, made way for them. Hozier reached her. She thought he said to the captain, "There's a chance if we can swing her clear."

Then the ship struck, and they were all flung to the deck. They rose, somehow, anyhow, but the Andromeda, apparently resenting the check, lifted herself bodily, tilted bow upward and struck again. A mass of spray dashed down upon the struggling figures who had been driven a second time to their knees. There was a terrific explosion in the after hold, for the deck had burst under the pressure of air, and another ominous roar announced that the water had reached the furnaces. Steam and smoke and dust mingled with the incessant lashing of sheets of spray, and Iris was torn from Coke's grip.

She fancied she heard Hozier cry "Too late!" and a lightning glimpse down the sloping deck showed some of the engineers and stokers crawling up toward the quivering forecastle.



"I CANNOT BREATHE!" SHE SOBBED.

She felt herself clasped in Hozier's arms and knew that he was climbing. After a few breathless seconds she realized that they were standing on the forecastle, where the captain and many of the crew were clinging to the windlass and anchor and cable and bulwarks to maintain their footing. Below, beyond a stretch of unbroken deck, the sea raged against all that was left of the ship. The bridge just showed above the froth and spume of sea level. The funnel still held by its stays, but the mainmast was gone and with it the string of flags.

The noise was deafening, overpowering. It sounded like the rattle of some immense factory, yet a voice was audible through the din, for Hozier was telling her not to abandon hope, as the fore part of the ship was firmly wedged in a cleft in the rocks. They might still have a chance when the tide dropped.

So that explained why it was so dark where a few moments ago all was light. Iris pressed the salt water out of her burning eyes and tried to look up. On both sides of the narrow triangle of the forecastle rose smooth overhanging walls, black and dripping. They were festooned with seaweed, and every wave that curled up between the ship's plates and the rocks was thrown back over the deck, while streams of water fell constantly from the masses of weed. She gasped for breath. The mere sight of this dismal cleft with its supersaturated air space made active the choking sensation of which she was just beginning to be aware.

"I cannot breathe!" she sobbed, and she would have slipped off into the water of angry foam beneath had not Hozier tightened a protecting arm round her waist.

"Stoop down," he said.

She had a dim knowledge that he unbuttoned his coat and drew one of its folds over her head. Ah, the blessed relief of it! Freed from the stifling showers of spray, she drew a deep breath or two. "So good he was to her. How sure she was now that if he had been spared by that dimbling shell he would have saved them all!

Bent and shrouded as she was, she could see quite clearly downward. The ship was breaking up with inconceivable rapidity.

(Continued next week)

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lucky, and everybody hoped that other such services might supervene. The National Anthem, with the familiar companion verse, concluded the enjoyment.

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Notice to Ratepayers

Conjunctly with the Election of Mayor and Aldermen for the Town of Newcastle, to be held on Tuesday the 16th day of April, next, a vote of the ratepayers of the said Town will be taken on the expediency of approving and accepting an Act providing:

1. That after April 16th, 1918, the Town Council of the Town of Newcastle shall consist of a Mayor and Six Aldermen.
2. That the Mayor shall be elected annually.
3. That of the Six Aldermen elected on April 16th, 1918 the three receiving the lowest number of votes shall go out of office at the end of the first year, and thereafter Three Aldermen shall be elected for the said Town at every annual election of Aldermen.

Balfors "For" and Against the said expediency may be had at the polling booths and at the Town Office on the day of said Election.

Dated this 27th day of March, A. D. 1918
J. E. T. LINDON,
Town Clerk.

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