

Eustace, the Outcast.

CHAPTER XV.

The two vessels were now nearing each other—in fact they had come as near as they could with safety, and a dangerous rush was made to have the boats of the Cornets lowered. A panic had evidently seized the French sailors, and they seemed determined to secure in the first instance their own safety. It was in vain that Dunsmore, Eustace and their own captain remonstrated with them, and represented that such headlong precipitancy would lead to the very catastrophe they dreaded—that if they persisted in running into such confusion few or none would be saved, whereas, by calm, orderly procedure, there would be time for getting every soul transferred to the frigate. In vain, we say, were the efforts to calm and restrain them. The boats were dashed over the side and filled in a moment, and it was not till the first overboarded one put off and smamped, that anything like prudence or caution was manifested. The work of embarkation was a difficult and dangerous one, independent of this panic of the men, for the sea still ran very high, and the darkness was gathering fast, and with the approach of night the wind was again freshening into a gale. It was no easy matter to get over the side of the pitching vessel into the boats and through the surging sea to the frigate. The boats of the latter had been sent to assist in the transfer, and several trips were made, each more difficult than the preceding, owing to the increasing violence of the storm and the deepening of the darkness.

Between two and three hours had been spent in the work. The French sailors had all left the Cornete, and a large portion of the British had been shipped into the ark of safety. Captain Dunsmore would not, of course, quit the sinking vessel till the last, but he earnestly urged Eustace to make good his escape.

'My duty keeps me here,' he urged, 'but you have no such plea. Go, then, my friend. For my sake go, while it is not too late.'

'I will not,' answered Eustace, resolutely. 'I think I can by remaining here expedite the transfer, and I will wait with you till the last—we will quit the Cornete together.'

Dunsmore knew it was useless to insist further, and after a boat were dispatched while the friends now remained on the post of duty. Willy Somerville kept by the side of Eustace all the time, resolved also not to quit the vessel till he went, and Jack Murdoch stuck by them both. Eustace would much rather have had it otherwise, but like Dunsmore with himself, he knew it was useless to urge their departure, though he knew better than anyone how imminent the danger was becoming. He had just been down below, and found that the water from the leaks had fearfully increased—so great indeed as to cause the vessel steadily to sink. Dunsmore knew that this was so by the steadiness with which the Cornete now lay in the water. The sea was rougher than ever, yet she did not pitch and toss as before—a very significant sign to him that she was fast filling. At length the boats returned for the last time, and they were all filled but two, when it was found that these two would scarcely contain those that were left. One of them was a very small boat; the other was a six-oared gig. The latter was filled first, and Dunsmore, Eustace, Willy and Jack alone remained to be provided for. At this moment the cry was raised that the Cornete was settling to go down.

'Quick, Dunsmore!' exclaimed Eustace. 'You go in there, and I, with Willy and Jack, will take the small boat. As he spoke he took Dunsmore firmly by the shoulders and pushed him into the boat beside the rest, cutting at the same moment the rope by which it was fastened to the ship. By the shifting light of the one lantern which hung over the yellow sides of the sinking Cornete, they saw the boat with its full load lurch off on a wave and vanish in the darkness as if the sea had swallowed it.

'Now, Willy,' shouted Eustace, 'we have not a moment to lose. The vessel is going down, and if we don't get clear off we will go down with her.'

'By the Lord Harry, she's settling for the plunge,' roared Jack Murdoch. 'Into the boat, both of you, and I'll follow in a twinkling.'

Quick as thought, Eustace leapt into the only remaining boat. Willy sprang close in behind him, and Jack, cutting the rope with his cutlars, made a spring the same moment and alighted in the stern sheeta.

A huge wave bore them at once from the ship's side but had not carried them many yards when, looking back, they saw the swinging lantern make a sweep downwards, and the huge hull of the Cornete plunged towards the bows. The next instant they felt the boat whirled down with fearful velocity, and each of them instinctively grasped the gunwale with a sickening sensation of despair rushed to their hearts. They knew the boat had been caught in the vortex of the

sinking ship, and expected every minute to find the rushing waters close over them. Down, down went the boat, sliding as it were over an almost perpendicular watery slope till a terrible depth seemed to have been reached. Though hope had utterly failed from every one of them they hung on the side of the boat, which by a miracle began to mount up again, and with the swiftness of an arrow it shot once more to the surface, where, tho' half filled with water, it was carried forward over the lofty waves.

'Hurray, safe yet, messmates,' shouted Jack. 'Handle the cars, my hearties, and I'll steer for the frigate. I seem her light getting to windward. Quick, my lads, or we'll have a strong pull for it.'

'My God, the cars are gone!' exclaimed Eustace, in tones of horror, and Willy gave utterance to the same appalling truth at almost the same instant.

'Gone!' echoed Jack, in hopeless consternation.

'Gone—yes, gone,' repeated Eustace. 'Then heaven protect us for we are helpless,' groaned the sailor, as he clasped his hands with a gesture of despair.

'See,' cried Willy, 'we are drifting awa' frae the lights o' the ship.'

They were drifting, and that fast, for the sea was still tempestuous, and the wind had again increased to a hurricane. The lights of the frigate grew every minute more distant and they drifted on and on through the long darkness of the starless night.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE DESERT LAND—AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

The knowledge of the dreadful calamity that had overtaken them struck the three occupants of the boat dumb with dismay. Cast adrift on the stormy sea, without provisions and without the means of directing their boat. Even had land been within reach, they were now hopelessly doomed to death, and in the bitterness of their feelings thought it might have been as well had they been engulfed with the ship and perished swiftly and painlessly. They had escaped this fate only to encounter a far worse—viz., death by hunger and starvation. As they sat in silent horror in the boat, which rose and fell on the wild waves, they had sufficient evidence that they were being carried rapidly over the watery waste by the lessening lights of the French vessel which had saved their companions. These lights grew every minute smaller and more distant, till they twinkled like faint, far-off stars, and at last were lost to view altogether. They were alone in the black midnight darkness—a gloomy sky above, and a stormy, boundless ocean around them. They were numbed with cold, drenched with water and the boat was half filled with the same. Though they sat close together, they could not see each other's faces, so dense was the gloom, and for many minutes they did not attempt to converse—until the lights of the ship could no longer be seen, when Jack Murdoch suddenly exclaimed:

'Well, messmates, here we are afloat on what I take to be our last cruise. By daylight we'll be far enough out of sight of the ship, and that is the only port for us in these outlandish waters.'

'There is no land near us, then?' said Eustace in mournful tones.

'Not as I know en,' returned Jack, 'not for hundreds of miles.'

'Then, God help us, we are lost!' groaned the youth.

'We may come across some other ship,' suggested Willy, who was loathe to entertain the idea that there was no hope for them.

'That ain't a bit likely,' said Jack. 'The gale drove the Cornete afore it out of her course all yesterday, and these waters into which we have got are out of the track o' ships.'

'But mair nor the Cornete may have been driven before the wind,' observed Willy. 'There was that ship that ta'en the others on board—she maun have been forced out o' her course too, and who knows but there's dizens o' them.'

'One craft will be enough if we can come across her,' rejoined Joe, 'and if she's bound for England all the better. But I say, mates, would we not feel a little more comfortable if we bailed out the water?'

To this work Joe at once proceeded, and Willy helped him, the water in the boat was soon reduced to a few inches.

All through the hours of that long, dark night Eustace sat in the stern indulging in sad and bitter thoughts. To all appearances he and Lilia were destined never to meet again, on earth and to perish thus, on the very threshold of life, while his heart was full of love and his soul buoyant with hope, was a sore experience. In view of it, he, in the anger of his heart, cursed the sinful pride and cruelty of his father, which had brought all the evils upon him, and a wild gust of fury passed over his soul because he would now perish as a victim without the power of retaliation. Oh, how his proud, passionate nature chafed and fumed at being denied the opportunity of avenging his wrongs and making his power felt on those who had injured him. This was not a commendable feeling in the solemn circumstances in which they were placed, with death staring

them grimly in the face, but it was a feeling due to his love, to his youth and to his passionate nature. It was intensely galling to such a soul as his to be denied the power of striking one blow in return for the wrongs that had crushed and destroyed him, and it was also a bitter reflection to know that villainy had triumphed over justice in a world which he had believed to be governed by a being all-wise and good.

The morning light which all three so ardently longed for began at length to show itself by a faint streak in a portion of the sky which they knew to be the east. By this time the storm had greatly moderated and the wind had fallen considerably. The boat was no longer tossed from wave to wave with a velocity which caused them to cling to its sides, but rose and fell on the crests with a smoother motion, which indicated that the sea was once more settling into calmness.

On the faint streak of light they fixed their eyes till it spread farther up the sky, and fell like a grey mist upon the water, whose white foam was now seen to shift to and fro in the dim morning twilight. Steadier and stronger grew the dawn till the sea and sky became fully visible, and the three lonely voyagers could see each other's faces and commune by sight as well as by speech.

Naturally enough their eager gaze was directed on all sides in search of a sail, but, alas, this blessed sight did not meet their anxious view. No one but themselves seemed to be moving over that watery wilderness. Far away was the dull circle of the horizon surrounding them, and within that circle of which they were the centre nothing could be seen but the eternal sea settling once more to its rest. What an experience was this for them of lonely desolation, and how completely it deprived them of the hope that they had cherished that a vessel might be in their vicinity, or that perchance, land might be near. Within the circle of their vision neither ship nor shore could be discerned, nothing but an awful stretch of solitary desolation.

They said nothing at first, but the look of despair on each other's countenance revealed the sinkings of their hearts.

'It's a bad business, Joe,' remarked Eustace at length, with a smile of tearful bitterness.

'Uncommon bad,' was Joe's assenting rejoinder.

'If we could do anything to help ourselves,' said the youth, 'it would lessen the horror of the situation, but we can't. We can't even send the boat in any particular direction; and if we saw the land on the starboard or larboard either we could make no effort to reach it. Here we must sit and look at each other and drift about, the sport of the wind and tide.'

'Maybe the ship will come sailin' by in search o' us,' observed Willy, who would on no account let hope die out in his bosom.

'Not a bit likely,' exclaimed Joe, 'they would conclude we had foundered, and have gone off on the other tack hours ago. Very curious, ain't it, messmates? We three had made it out to leave the service together on the first opportunity and here we are out of it, tho' just not in the fashion we thought of.'

'If the worst comes to the worst,' said Eustace, gloomily, 'we can easily put an end to our misery.'

'By going to Davy Jones in a jiffy? Why, yes, so we can; but none of us will make up our minds to do that as long as body and soul hold together. It's not in nature to go to death, but to let death come, and keep out of its way, though we can't give it a wide berth.'

Joe was right. Though hour after hour passed, and the interminable circle of water remained unbroken, they kept their places in the boat, hoping each moment would bring what the last had denied them—the sight of a sail. Hunger and thirst had now assailed them. They had tasted nothing since early on the previous day and the terrible labor they had since undergone made sustenance all the more necessary. But no food was within their reach—none. Neither had they a drop of water they could drink and the terrible battle between want and nature had begun.

As it had now begun, but how or when would it terminate? The grave was by their side any moment when they might make up their mind to descend into it; but how could they resolve to change hope, even with suffering for the certainty of a hopeless doom. It was possible that at any moment a vessel might come in sight to effect the deliverance, and with this possibility, however faint, before them, how should they ever forget it? How, indeed? Life in young hearts has its intensest vitality, and the love of it is not to be extinguished by the severest sufferings.

Eustace had a watch, but it had stopped—They therefore knew not the hour but by the position of the sun, dimly seen struggling through the clouds, they judged it to be an hour or so past noon when Joe stood up in the boat and gazed earnestly to leeward. The action naturally drew the attention of the others in the same direction, and they saw what they took to be a large

loud or mass of fog lying on the horizon.

'Is you another gale coming, Joe?' asked Eustace, bitterly.

'I don't think it,' replied the sailor, as he still fixed a steady, earnest gaze on the distant object that marked with a little more distinctness the line between sky and water.

'I wish a squall would come,' remarked Eustace, 'for then it might take the settlement of the question out of our hands, and give us that release which we have not the courage to take! Are you sure, Joe, that you faintly dark object is not a stern making up?'

'It can't be that,' answered Joe. 'If it lay to windward, I might have thought so, but its right on the lee, and must be one of two things.'

'What things?' asked Eustace and Willy in a breath.

'Why,' replied Joe, very slowly, 'it's either the stern we have had drifted along there, or—'

'Or it is land,' was Joe's further deliverance.

'Land!' echoed Eustace, starting up, which action he was followed by Willy, and they both looked with wild eagerness towards the point where lay the object, whatever it might turn out to be.

What fearful suspense was that to which they were now subjected! Was it land they were bearing down upon, and was deliverance near? or was it but a cloud hanging over a shoreless sea, mocking them with a hope which it would cruelly betray?

For full half an hour all three sat silently watching the dark line, which did not diminish or decrease in density, but seemed rather to bulk more on the sight and become more defined in outline, standing out more decidedly from the sky above the sea below.

'It's land!' exclaimed Willy, joyfully.

He was the first to give utterance to the thought, but the others had by this time come to the same conclusion.

'What say you, Joe?' asked Eustace.

'Land it is,' was the seaman's answer.

'Hurray!' shouted Willy, waving his arms wildly in the air in the extravagance of his joy.

'But what land?' asked the less excited Eustace.

'An uninhabited island, mayhap; I don't think there's a bit of land in any other shape hereabouts.'

'Never mind, it's better than the open sea, if we can only reach it, and sure enough it is rising on us. If I had a glass I could make it out easily.'

But as they had no glass they were forced to sit still and wait till the boat drifted nearer. As it did so the land gradually assumed a more distinct appearance. Rugged peaks rose up here and there, and something white gleamed and flashed along their base.

'Sinking his head in a dubious manner, Joe said:

'Be it so,' said Eustace. 'Unless the water is all the more shallow this little boat will get through them. If we could only drift among them before it got dark.'

'That won't make much difference since we have got no oars,' remarked Joe.

'True, but it will enable us to get out, and haul the boat ashore at the first possible moment, I say, Joe, that is an island.'

'Of course it is, sir. There ain't nothing else in the way o' land here.'

'And suppose we drift past it?'

'That's just what I have been thinking for the last five minutes—it is getting more to windward for us.'

'That will be dreadful,' said Eustace, beginning to search about in the bottom of the boat. His hand came upon a foot-board, and with desperate energy he began to tear it from its fastening.

Joe and Willy both saw the object he had in view, and simultaneously went to his assistance. By the combined strength of the three the board was wrenched from its place, and Joe, thrusting it over the lee side, began to work it energetically. Eustace seconded his endeavors at the helm, and soon they had the satisfaction of seeing that the boat was to some extent under their control, and was being made to move slightly to windward in a line with the island they were approaching.

The island, so far as they could judge, was small, sterile and desolate. It looked like little more than a mass of splintered rock shot up from the bottom of the sea, over which no vegetation had grown, and whose surface presented little the promise either of shelter or food. Yet in their desperate circumstances it formed a desirable object to reach, and they strained every nerve to turn the boat towards its rough and reefy shores.

In this effort the prospect of success was not very assuring. The wind had now died away and the sea was well fallen, but a current was setting along the front of the island, and the current threatened to carry them past, and once more into the open sea. As they drew near the outside of the reef, they saw that they were also approaching the south side of the island, and if they were

unable to land at once they would assuredly be floated away again into the void of waters, and lose the faint chance which the island offered of their existence being preserved till a vessel might pass and rescue them.

They were now within two hundred yards of the reef, but the current was growing stronger; and do all they would the boat was gliding to the south, and the island was getting every moment less upon their lee.

'Joe, we'll fail,' cried Eustace, in a tone of despair.

'It is an uncommon stiff job,' returned Joe, as he labored with might and main to work the boat to windward.

'Lash keep us a', yonder's a man,' cried Willy, pointing to one of the little eminences on the island.

The others looked in the direction indicated, and sure enough they descried a human form standing on a ledge of rock on the verge of the island. He had descried them likewise, and was wildly waving something in his hand to attract their attention. He might also be shouting, but the sound of the surf prevented his shouts from being heard.

TO BE CONTINUED.

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