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BALLANTYNE**

PHILOSOPHER JACK

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R. M. Ballantyne

Philosopher Jack

Chapter One

Treats of our Hero and Others

If the entire circuit of a friend's conversation were comprised in the words "Don't" and "Do,"—it might perhaps be taken for granted that his advice was not of much value; nevertheless, it is a fact that Philosopher Jack's most intimate and valuable—if not valued—friend never said anything to him beyond these two words. Nor did he ever condescend to reason. He listened, however, with unwearied patience to reasoning, but when Jack had finished reasoning and had stated his proposed course of action, he merely said to him, "Don't," or "Do."

"For what end was I created?" said the philosopher, gloomily.

Wise and momentous question when seriously put, but foolish remark, if not worse, when flung out in bitterness of soul!

Jack, whose other name was Edwin, and his age nineteen, was a student. Being of an argumentative turn of mind, his college companions had dubbed him Philosopher. Tall, strong, active, kindly, hilarious, earnest, reckless, and impulsive, he was a strange compound, with a handsome face, a brown fluff on either cheek, and a moustache like a lady's eyebrow. Moreover, he was a general favourite, yet this favoured youth, sitting at his table in his own room, sternly repeated the question—in varied form and with increased bitterness—"Why was I born at all?"

Deep wrinkles of perplexity sat on his youthful brow. Evidently he could not answer his own question, though in early life his father had carefully taught him the "Shorter Catechism with proofs," while his good old mother had enforced and exemplified the same. His taciturn friend was equally unable, or unwilling, to give a reply.

After prolonged meditation, Jack relieved his breast of a deep sigh and re-read a letter which lay open on his desk. Having read it a third time with knitted brows, he rose, went to the window, and gazed pathetically on the cat's parade, as he styled his prospect of slates and chimney cans.

"So," said he at last, "my dreams are over; prospects gone; hopes collapsed—all vanished like the baseless fabric of a vision."

He turned from the cat's parade, on which the shades of evening were descending, to the less romantic contemplation of his empty fire-grate.

"Now," said he, re-seating himself at his table and stretching his long legs under it, "the question is, What am I to do? shall I kick at fate, throw care, like physic, to the dogs, cut the whole concern, and go to sea?"

"Don't," said his taciturn friend, speaking distinctly for the first time.

"Or," continued Jack, "shall I meekly bow to circumstances, and struggle with my difficulties as best I may?"

"Do," replied his friend, whose name, by the way, was Conscience.

For a long time the student sat gazing at the open letter in silence. It was from his father, and ran thus:—

"Dear Teddie,—It's a long time now that I've been thinkin' to write you, and couldn't a-bear to give you such a heavy disappointment but can't putt it off no longer, and, as your mother, poor soul, says, it's the Lord's will and can't be helped—which, of course, it shouldn't be helped if that's true—but—well, howsomever, it's of no use beatin' about the bush no longer. The seasons have been bad for some

years past, and it's all I've been able to do to make the two ends meet, with your mother slavin' like a nigger patchin' up the child'n's old rags till they're like Joseph's coat after the wild beast had done its worst on it—though we *are* given to understand that the only wild beasts as had to do with that coat was Joseph's own brothers. Almost since ever I left the North of England—a small boy—and began to herd cattle on the Border hills, I've had a strange wish to be a learned man, and ever since I took to small farmin', and perceived that such was not to be my lot in life, I've had a powerful desire to see my eldest son—that's you, dear boy—trained in scientific pursuits, all the more that you seemed to have a natural thirst that way yourself. Your mother, good soul, in her own broad tongue—which I've picked up somethin' of myself through livin' twenty year with her—was used to say she 'wad raither see her laddie trained in ways o' wisdom than o' book-learnin', which I'm agreed to myself, though it seems to me the two are more or less mixed up. Howsomever, it's all up now, my boy; you'll have to fight your own battle and pay your own way, for I've not got one shillin' to rub on another, except what'll pay the rent; and, what with the grey mare breakin' her leg an' the turnips failin', the look-out ahead is darkish at the best.”

The letter finished with some good advice and a blessing.

To be left thus without resources, just when the golden gates of knowledge were opening, and a few dazzling gleams of the glory had pierced his soul, was a crushing blow to the poor student. If he had been a true philosopher, he would have sought counsel on his knees, but his philosophy was limited; he only took counsel with himself and the immediate results were disastrous.

“Yes,” said he, with an impulsive gush, “I'll go to sea.”

“Don't,” said his quiet friend.

But, regardless of this advice, Edwin Jack smote the table with his clenched fist so violently that his pen leapt out of its ink-bottle and wrote its own signature on one of his books. He rose in haste and rang the bell.

“Mrs Niven,” he said to his landlady, “let me know how much I owe you. I'm about to leave town—and—and won't return.”

“Ech! Maister Jack; what for?” exclaimed the astonished landlady.

“Because I'm a beggar,” replied the youth, with a bitter smile, “and I mean to go to sea.”

“Hoots! Maister Jack, ye're jokin'.”

“Indeed I am very far from joking, Mrs Niven; I have no money, and no source of income. As I don't suppose you would give me board and lodging for nothing, I mean to leave.”

“Toots! ye're haverin',” persisted Mrs Niven, who was wont to treat her “young men” with motherly familiarity. “Tak' time to think o't, an' ye'll be in anither mind the morn's mornin'. Nae doot ye're—”

“Now, my good woman,” interrupted Jack, firmly but kindly, “don't bother me with objections or advice, but do what I bid you—there's a good soul; be off.”

Mrs Niven saw that she had no chance of impressing her lodger in his present mood; she therefore retired, while Jack put on a rough pilot-cloth coat and round straw hat in which he was wont at times to go boating. Thus clad, he went off to the docks of the city in which he dwelt; the name of which city it is not important that the reader should know.

In a humble abode near the said docks a bulky sea-captain lay stretched in his hammock, growling. The prevailing odours of the neighbourhood were tar, oil, fish, and marine-stores. The sea-captain's room partook largely of the same odours, and was crowded with more than an average share of the stores. It was a particularly small room, with charts, telescopes, speaking-trumpets, log-lines, sextants, portraits of ships, sou'-westers, oil-cloth coats and leggings on the walls; model ships suspended from the beams overhead; sea-boots, coils of rope, kegs, and handspikes on the floor; and

great shells, earthenware ornaments, pagodas, and Chinese idols on the mantel-piece. In one corner stood a child's crib. The hammock swung across the room like a heavy cloud about to descend and overwhelm the whole. This simile was further borne out by the dense volumes of tobacco smoke in which the captain enveloped himself, and through which his red visage loomed over the edge of the hammock like a lurid setting sun.

For a few minutes the clouds continued to multiply and thicken. No sound broke the calm that prevailed, save a stertorous breathing, with an occasional hitch in it. Suddenly there was a convulsion in the clouds, and one of the hitches developed into a tremendous cough. There was something almost awe-inspiring in the cough. The captain was a huge and rugged man. His cough was a terrible compound of a choke, a gasp, a rend, and a roar. Only lungs of sole-leather could have weathered it. Each paroxysm suggested the idea that the man's vitals were being torn asunder; but not content with that, the exasperated mariner made matters worse by keeping up a continual growl of indignant remonstrance in a thunderous undertone.

"Hah! that *was* a splitter. A few more hug—sh! ha! like that will burst the biler entirety. Polly—hallo!"

The lurid sun appeared to listen for a moment, then opening its mouth it shouted, "Polly—ahoy!" as if it were hailing the maintop of a seventy-four.

Immediately there was a slight movement in one corner of the room, and straightway from out a mass of marine-stores there emerged a fairy! At least, the little girl, of twelve or thereabouts, who suddenly appeared, with rich brown tumbling hair, pretty blue eyes, faultless figure, and ineffable sweetness in every lineament of her little face, might easily have passed for a fairy or an angel.

"What! caught you napping?" growled the captain in the midst of a paroxysm.

"Only a minute, father; I couldn't help it," replied Polly, with a little laugh, as she ran to the fireplace and took up a saucepan that simmered there.

"Here, look alive! shove along! hand it up! I'm chokin'!"

The child held the saucepan as high as she could towards the hammock. The captain, reaching down one of his great arms, caught it and took a steaming draught. It seemed to relieve him greatly.

"You're a trump for gruel, Polly," he growled, returning the saucepan. "Now then, up with the pyramid, and give us a nor'-wester."

The child returned the saucepan to the fireplace, and then actively placed a chair nearly underneath the hammock. Upon the chair she set a stool, and on the top she perched herself. Thus she was enabled to grasp the lurid sun by two enormous whiskers, and, putting her lips out, gave it a charming "nor'-wester," which was returned with hyperborean violence. Immediately after, Polly ducked her head, and thus escaped being blown away, like a Hindoo mutineer from a cannon's mouth, as the captain went off in another fit.

"Oh! father," said Polly, quite solemnly, as she descended and looked up from a comparatively safe distance, "isn't it awful?"

"Yes, Poll, it's about the wust 'un I've had since I came from Barbadoes; but the last panful has mollified it, I think, and your nor'-wester has Pollyfied it, so, turn into your bunk, old girl, an' take a nap. You've much need of it, poor thing."

"No, father, if I get into my crib I'll sleep so heavy that you won't be able to wake me. I'll just lie down where I was before."

"Well, well—among the rubbish if ye prefer it; no matter s'long as you have a snooze," growled the captain as he turned over, while the fairy disappeared into the dark recess from which she had risen.

Just then a tap was heard at the door. "Come in," roared the captain. A tall, broad-shouldered, nautical-looking man entered, took off his hat, and stood before the hammock, whence the captain gave him a stern, searching glance, and opened fire on him with his pipe.

“Forgive me if I intrude, Captain Samson,” said the stranger; “I know you, although you don’t know me. You start to-morrow or next day, I understand, for Melbourne?”

“Wind and weather permittin’,” growled the captain. “Well, what then?”

“Have you completed your crew?” asked the stranger.

“Nearly. What then?” replied the captain with a touch of ferocity, for he felt sensations of an approaching paroxysm.

“Will you engage *me*?” asked Philosopher Jack, for it was he.

“In what capacity?” demanded the captain somewhat sarcastically.

“As an ordinary seaman—or a boy if you will,” replied Edwin, with a smile.

“No,” growled Samson, decisively, “I won’t engage you; men with kid gloves and white hands don’t suit me.”

From the mere force of habit the young student had pulled on his gloves on leaving his lodging, and had only removed that of the right hand on entering the captain’s dwelling. He now inserted a finger at the wrist of the left-hand glove, ripped it off, and flung it with its fellow under the grate. Thereafter he gathered some ashes and soot from the fireplace, with which he put his hands on a footing with those of a coal-heaver.

“Will you take me now, captain?” he said, returning to the hammock, and spreading out his hands.

The captain gave vent to a short laugh, which brought on a tremendous fit, at the conclusion of which he gasped, “Yes, my lad, p’r’aps I will; but first I must know something about you.”

“Certainly,” said the philosopher, and at once gave the captain a brief outline of his circumstances.

“Well, you know your own affairs best” said Captain Samson when he had finished; “I’m no judge of such a case, but as you’re willin’ to ship, I’m willin’ to ship you. Come here before ten to-morrow. Good night. There, it’s a-comin’—hash—k—!”

In the midst of another furious paroxysm Edwin Jack retired.

Not long after, the captain raised himself on one elbow, listened intently for a few seconds, and, having satisfied himself that Polly was asleep, slipped from his hammock—as only seamen know how—and proceeded to dress with the utmost caution. He was evidently afraid of the little sleeper among the rubbish. It was quite interesting to observe the quiet speed with which he thrust his great limbs into his ample garments, gazing anxiously all the time at Polly’s corner.

Issuing from his own door with the step of an elephantine mouse, the captain went rapidly through several streets to the house of an intimate friend, whom he found at supper with his wife and family.

“Evenin’, Bailie Trench; how are ’ee, Mrs T? how’s everybody?” said the captain, in a hearty rasping voice, as he shook hands right and left, while one of his huge legs was taken possession of, and embraced, by the bailie’s only daughter, a pretty little girl of six.

“Why, Samson,” exclaimed the bailie, after quiet had been restored, and his friend had been thrust into a chair with little Susan on his knee, “I thought you were laid up with influenza—eh?”

“So I was, bailie, an’ so I am,” replied the captain; “leastwise I’m still on the sick-list, and was in my hammock till about half an hour ago, but I’m gettin’ round fast. The night air seems to do me a world o’ good—contrariwise to doctor’s expectations.”

“Have some supper?” said Mrs Trench, who was a weakish lady with watery eyes.

“No supper, Mrs T, thank ’ee; the fact is, I’ve come on business. I should be on my beam-ends by rights. I’m absent without leave, an’ have only a few minutes to spare. The passenger I spoke of has changed his mind and his berth is free, so I’m glad to be able to take your son Ben after all. But he’ll have to get ready quick, for the *Lively Poll* sails the day after to-morrow or next day—all bein’ well.”

The eyes of young Benjamin Trench sparkled. He was a tall, thin, rather quiet lad of eighteen.

“I can be ready to-night if you wish it, Captain Samson,” he said, with a flush on his usually pale face.

Beside Mrs Trench there sat a sturdy little boy. He was the bosom friend of Ben—a bright ruddy fellow of fourteen, overflowing with animal spirits, and with energy enough for three lads of his size. This youth’s countenance fell so visibly when Ben spoke of going away, that Mrs Trench could not help noticing it.

“Why, what’s the matter, Wilkins?” she asked.

“Oh, nothing!” returned the boy, “only I don’t like to hear Ben speak of leaving us all and going to Australia. And I would give all the world to go with him. Won’t you take me as a cabin boy, Captain Samson?”

“Sorry I can’t, lad,” said the captain, with a grin, “got a cabin boy already.”

“Besides, your father would not let you,” said Mrs Trench, “and it would never do to go without his leave. Only misfortune could come of that.”

“Humph! it’s very hard,” pouted the boy. “I wanted him to get me into the navy, and he wouldn’t; and now I want him to get me into the merchant service, and he won’t. But I’ll go in spite of him.”

“No, you won’t, Watty,” said Ben, laying his hand on his friend’s shoulder.

“Yes, Ben, I will,” returned little Wilkins, with such an air of determination that every one except Ben laughed.

“Now, bailie,” said the captain, rising, “I’m off. The truth is, I wouldn’t have come if it had not been important to let you know at once to get your boy ready; but I had no one to send except Polly, and I wouldn’t send her out at night by herself for all the wealth of Indy. Moreover, *she* wouldn’t have let me out to-night for any consideration whatever. She’s very strict with me, is my little keeper. I wouldn’t for the world she should wake and find me gone. So, good-night all.”

Ten minutes more, and the guilty man entered his dwelling on tiptoe. In order to get into his hammock with extreme caution he forsook his ancient method of a spring, and mounted on an empty cask. The cask was not equal to the emergency. He went through the head of it with a hideous crash! Spurning it from him, he had just time to plunge into his place of repose and haul the clothes over him, when Polly emerged from her lair with wondering eyes.

“What ever was that, father?”

“Nothin’, my dear, nothin’ in partickler—only a cask I kicked over. Now, then, Poll, since you’re keepin’ me awake in this fashion, it’s your dooty to soothe me with an extra panful, and another nor’-wester—so, up wi’ the pyramid; and after you’ve done it you must turn into your crib. I’ll not want you again to-night; the cough’s much better. There—thank ’ee. Pollyfy me now—that’s right. Good-night.”

Oh, base mariner! little did you merit such a pleasant termination to your evening’s work; but you are not the only wicked man in this world who receives more than he deserves.

Two days after the incidents just related a noble ship spread her canvas to a favouring breeze, and bowing farewell to her port of departure, commenced the long long voyage to the Antipodes.

She was not a passenger ship, but a trader; nevertheless there were a few passengers on her quarter-deck, and among these towered the colossal figure of Captain Samson. Beside him, holding his hand, stood a fairy-like little creature with brown curls and pretty blue eyes. Not far from her, leaning over the bulwarks, Benjamin Trench frantically waved a handkerchief and wiped his eyes. The signal was responded to, with equal feeling, by the bailie, his wife, and little Susan. A good number of people, young and old, assembled at the pier-head, among whom many waved handkerchiefs, and hands, and scarfs, and hats to the crew.

Among the sailors who gazed wistfully towards the pier was one who made no farewell signal, and received no parting wave. Philosopher Jack had concealed his intention of going to sea from all his college chums, and a bitter feeling of loneliness oppressed his heart as he thought of his old father and mother, and the lowly cottage on the Border hills. He had not, indeed, acted in direct opposition

to the wishes of his parents, but he had disobeyed the well-known Scripture command to do them “honour,” for he had resolved on his course of action without consulting them, or asking their advice. He felt that he had very selfishly forsaken them in their old age; in the hour of their sore distress, and at a time when they stood woefully in need of his strong muscles, buoyant spirit, and energetic brain. In short, Edwin Jack began to feel that he required all his philosophy, and something more, to enable him to face the future with the unflinching courage of a man.

So the ship moved slowly on, revealing on her stern the “*Lively Poll*” in letters of burnished gold—past the pier-head, down the broad river, out upon the widening firth, beyond lighthouse, buoy, and beacon, until at last the fresh Atlantic breezes filled her snowy sails.

And ever as she rose and sank upon the rolling waves, their swish and thud fell strangely on the ear of one who lay deep down in the recesses of the hull, where—among barrels of pork, and casks of tar, and cans of oil, and coils of rope, and other unsavoury stores—he consorted with rats and mice and an uneasy conscience, in thick darkness. This was a “stowaway.” He was a sturdy, bright, ruddy little fellow of fourteen. Down in that unwholesome place, with a few ship-biscuits and a bottle of water to keep him alive, he would have looked like a doubled-up overgrown hedgehog if there had been light enough to reveal him.

Thus, with its little world of hopes and fears, its cares and pleasures, and its brave, trembling, trusting, sorrowing, joyful, anxious, reckless hearts, the good ship passed from the shores of Britain, until her sails quivered like a petrel’s wings on the horizon, and then vanished into the boundless bosom of the mighty sea.

Chapter Two

Tells of a Ghost and an Overwhelming Disaster

It may seem strange, nevertheless it is true, that ignorance is a misfortune which now and then results in good. Of course we do not make this remark in commendation of ignorance, but if Baldwin Burr had not been ignorant and densely stupid, Philosopher Jack would not have had the pleasure of instructing him, and the seaman himself would not have enjoyed that close intimacy which frequently subsists between teacher and pupil. Even Polly Samson derived benefit from Baldwin's want of knowledge, for, being remarkably intelligent for her years, and having been well taught, she took great pleasure in enlightening his darkness.

"How is it," she asked one day, while sitting on the cabin skylight and looking up in the man's rugged countenance, "how is it that you are so stupid?"

Burr, who was steering, gave the wheel a turn, looked up at the mast-head, then round the horizon, then down at his questioner with a bland smile, and said—

"Well now, Miss Polly, d'ee know, that's wot I can't exactly tell. P'r'aps it's 'cause of a nat'ral want of brains, or, maybe, 'cause the brains is too much imbedded in fat—for I'm a fleshy man, as you see—or, p'r'aps it's 'cause I never went to school, my parients bein' poor, uncommon poor, though remarkably honest. I've sometimes thought, w'en meditatin' on the subject, that my havin' bin born of a Friday may have had somethin' to do with it."

"Oh, Baldwin," said Polly with a little laugh, "surely you can't believe that. Father says it's all nonsense about Friday being an unlucky day."

"P'r'aps it is, an' p'r'aps it ain't," returned the cautious seaman. "I regard your father, my dear, as a deeply learned man, and would give in, if I could, to wotever he says, but facts is facts, and opinions is opinions, you can't change that, nohow you fix it. Wot's the cap'n's opinions, now, as to ghosts?"

"He don't believe in 'em at all," was Polly's prompt answer. "No more do I, for father knows everything, and he's always right."

"He's a lucky man to have you, Polly, and there's a lucky boy knockin' about the world somewheres lookin' out for you. A good daughter, it's said, invariably makes a good wife; which you don't understand just now, but you'll come to in course of time. Hows'ever, as I wos observin', I've been of the same opinion as your father till two nights ago, when I heard a ghost right under the deck, it seemed to me, blow my hammock, where there's nothin' but ship's stores and rats."

"Heard a ghost!" exclaimed Polly, with opening eyes.

"Ay, an' seed 'im too," said Burr. "Night before yesterday I heer'd 'im as plain as I hear myself. He wos groanin', an' it's quite impossible that a tar-barrel, or a cask, or a rat, could groan. The only thing that puzzled me wos that he seemed to snore; more than that he sneezed once or twice. Now, I never heard it said that a ghost could sleep or catch cold. Did you, Polly?"

Polly laughed and said that she never did, and asked eagerly what the ghost was like.

"It was verry much like an or'nary man of small size," said the seaman, "but it were too dark to make out its face. I know the figure of every soul in the ship by this time, an' I could swear before a magistrate, or a bench of bishops, that the ghost is neither one of the crew nor a passenger."

"Why didn't you speak to it?" asked Polly.

"So I did speak to it, but it wouldn't answer; then I made a grab at it, but it was as active as a kitten, dodged round the mainmast, flew for'ed on invisibile wings, and went slap down the fore-scuttle, head first, with a crash that would have broke the neck of anything but a ghost."

At this interesting point the conversation was interrupted by Edwin Jack, whose turn it was to relieve the man at the wheel. He nodded to Polly as he came up, took his post, and received the ship's "course" from Burr, who thrust his hands into his pockets, and left the quarter-deck.

Edwin was by this time a considerably changed man, although but a few days at sea. The rough blue trousers, guernsey, and pea-jacket, took as naturally to his strong limbs as if he had been born and bred a sailor; and already some huge blisters, a few scars, and not a little tar, had rendered his hands creditable.

Steering at the time was a mere matter of form, as a dead calm prevailed. Our philosopher therefore amused himself and Polly with commentaries on the ghost-subject which Burr had raised.

Late that night, when the stars were shining in a cloudless sky, and winking at their reflections in the glassy ocean, the ghost appeared to Edwin Jack. It was on this wise:

Jack, being one of the watch on deck, went to the port bulwarks near the foremast shrouds, leant over, and, gazing down into the reflected sky, thought sadly of past, present, and future. Tiring at last of his meditations, he went towards a man who appeared to be skulking under the shadow of the long-boat and remarked that it was a fine night, but the man made no reply.

“A most enjoyable night, shipmate,” he said, going closer.

“I’m glad you think so,” said the ghost, “it’s anything but enjoyable to *me*. The state of the weather hasn’t much effect, either one way or another, on a fellow who is half-dead with hunger, half-choked with a cold caught among the rats and stores, and half-killed by a tumble down the fore-scuttle, or whatever may be the name of that vile ladder that leads to the regions below.”

“Surely,” exclaimed Jack in surprise, seizing the ghost by the shoulders and looking close into its face, “I have heard your voice before now, and, eh?—no, I don’t know you.”

“Yes, Philosopher Jack, you do know me,” returned the ghost; “I’ve had the honour of playing cricket with you on the green, though you’ve forgotten me, and no wonder, for I’ve suffered much from bad air and sea-sickness of late. My name is Walter, more familiarly Watty Wilkins.”

“Little Wilkins!” exclaimed Jack, in surprise, “well, you *are* changed; you don’t mean to say that you’ve run away from home?”

“That’s just what I’ve done,” said the poor lad in a tone of despondency; “but you’ve no occasion to shake your head at me so solemnly, for, to all appearance, you have run away too.”

“No, Wilkins, you are wrong, I have walked away, being my own master, and I have done it openly, though I admit somewhat hastily—”

Jack was interrupted at that moment by Ben Trench laying a hand on his shoulder.

“It strikes me,” he said, in some surprise, “that I recognise the voice of a townsman—Mister Jack, if I mistake not?”

“No, sir,” replied the philosopher, “not *Mister*, only Edwin Jack, seaman aboard the *Lively Poll*. You are right, however, in styling me townsman. Allow me to introduce you to another townsman, Mr Watty Wilkins, stowaway on board of the same vessel!”

Trench had not, in the darkness, recognised his friend. He now seized him by both shoulders, and peering into his face, said—

“O Watty, Watty, have you really done it? I had thought better of you.”

“I *said* I would do it, and I’ve *done* it,” returned the little youth somewhat testily; “and now I want to know what is to be done next.”

“Report yourself and take the consequences,” said Jack, promptly.

This advice being seconded by Ben Trench, Watty Wilkins went aft to the captain, who had just come on deck, touched his cap, and confessed himself.

For some moments the captain spoke not a word, but looked at the young culprit with a portentous frown. Then, uttering something like a deep bass growl, he ordered the lad to follow him into his private cabin. When there, Captain Samson seated himself on a locker, and with a hand on each knee, glared at his prisoner so long and so fiercely from under his shaggy brows, that Watty, in spite of his recklessness, began to feel uneasy.

“So, youngster, you’ve run away?” he said at length, in deep solemnity.

“Yes, sir,” replied Wilkins.

“And you think yourself a fine clever fellow, no doubt?”

“No, sir, I don’t,” said Watty, with much humility.

“I knew your father, boy,” continued the captain, assuming a softer and more serious tone, “and I think he is a good man.”

“He is, sir,” returned the boy promptly.

“Ay, and he is a kind man; he has been kind to *you*, I think.”

Watty hung his head.

“He has fed you, clothed you, educated you since you was a babby; nursed you, maybe, in sickness, and prayed for you, no doubt that God would make you a good, obedient and loving son.”

The boy’s head drooped still lower.

“And for all this,” continued the captain, “you have repaid him by running away. Now, my lad, as you have made your bed you shall lie on it. I’ll clap your nose to the grindstone, and keep it there. Steward!”

A smart little man answered to the call.

“Take this boy for’ed, and teach him to clean up. Don’t spare him.”

In obedience to this order the steward took little Wilkins forward and introduced him to the cook, who introduced him to the coppers and scrubbing brushes. From that day forward Master Watty became deeply versed in the dirty work and hard work of the ship, so that all the romance of a sea life was driven out of him, and its stern realities were implanted. In less than three weeks there was not a cup, saucer, or plate in the ship that Watty had not washed; not a “brass” that he had not polished and re-polished; not a copper that he had not scraped; not an inch of the deck that he had not swabbed. But it must not be supposed that he groaned under this labour. Although reckless, hasty, and inconsiderate, he was not mean-spirited. Making up his mind to do his best in the circumstances, he went cheerfully to his dirty work, and did it well.

“You see,” said he to Philosopher Jack, as they chanced one dark night to have a few minutes’ talk together near the weather gangway, where Watty paused on his way to the caboose with a soup-tureen, “as the captain says, I’ve made the bed myself, so I must lie on it and I’m resolved to lie straight, and not kick.”

“Right, Watty, right,” said Jack, with a sigh; “we have both been fools, so must grin and bear it.”

Watty greeted this remark, to Jack’s surprise, with a sudden and unexpected yell, as he received a cut from a rope’s-end over the back.

“What, idling, eh?” cried the steward, flourishing the rope’s-end again.

In a burst of rage the poor boy raised the soup-tureen, and would infallibly have shattered it on the man’s head if Jack had not caught his arm.

“Come, Wilkins, mind what you’re about,” he said, pushing him towards the forepart of the ship to prevent a scuffle.

A moment’s reflection sufficed to convince Wilkins of the folly, as well as uselessness, of rebellion. Pocketing his pride and burning with indignation, he walked forward, while the tyrannical steward went grumbling to his own private den.

It chanced that night that the captain, ignorant of what had occurred, sent for the unfortunate stowaway, for the mitigation of whose sorrows his friend Ben Trench had, more than once, pleaded earnestly, but in vain. The captain invariably replied that Watty had acted ungratefully and rebelliously to a kind father, and it was his duty to let him bear the full punishment of his conduct.

Watty was still smarting from the rope’s-end when he entered the cabin.

“Youngster,” said the captain, sternly, “I sent for you to tell you of a fact that came to my knowledge just before we left port. Your father told me that, being unwilling to disappoint you in your desires, he had managed to get a situation of some sort for you on board a well-known line of ocean steamers, and he only waited to get the thing fairly settled before letting you know about it. There, you may go for’ed and think what you have lost by running away.”

Without a word of reply Watty left the cabin. His day's work had just been completed. He turned into his hammock, and, laying his head on his pillow, quietly wept himself to sleep.

"Ain't you rather hard on the poor boy, father?" said Polly, who had witnessed the interview.

"Not so hard as you think, little woman," answered the captain, stroking the child's head with his great hand; "that little rascal has committed a great sin. He has set out on the tracks of the prodigal son you've often read about, an' he's not sufficiently impressed with his guilt. When I get him into a proper frame o' mind I'll not be so hard on him. Now, Polly, go putt your doll to bed, and don't criticise your father."

Polly seized the huge whiskers of her sire, and giving him an unsolicited "nor'-wester," which was duly returned, went off to her little cot.

We do not mean to trouble the reader with all the incidents of a prolonged voyage to southern latitudes, during which Philosopher Jack formed a strong friendship with Ben Trench and Watty Wilkins; continued his instruction of the amiable and unfathomable Baldwin Burr, and became a general favourite with the crew of the *Lively Poll*. Suffice it to say that all went well, and the good ship sailed along under favouring breezes without mishap of any kind until she reached that great ocean whose unknown waters circle round the Southern Pole.

Here, however, good fortune forsook them, and contrary-gales baffling the *Lively Poll* drove her out of her course, while tumbling billows buffeted her severely.

One night a dead calm prevailed. The air became hot, clouds rose rapidly over the sky, and the barometer—that faithful friend of the mariner—fell unusually low.

"How dreadfully dark it is getting," said Polly, in a low, half-frightened tone to Baldwin Burr, who was at the wheel.

"We're going to have a night of it, my dear," replied the seaman.

If he had said that the winds and waves were going to "have a night of it" Baldwin Burr would have been more strictly correct. He had scarcely uttered the words when the captain gave orders to close-reef the top-sails. Our philosopher, springing aloft with his comrades, was out on the top-sail yard in a few seconds. Scarcely had the sails been reefed when the gale burst upon the ship, and almost laid her flat upon the foaming sea. At first the very violence of the wind kept the waves down, but they gradually rose until the ship was tossed on their crests and engulfed in their hollows like a cork. As the force of the gale increased sail was further reduced, until nothing but a mere rag was left and even this at last was split and blown to ribbons. Inky clouds soon obscured the sky, and, as night descended on the wild scene, the darkness became so intense that nothing could be seen except the pale gleam of foaming billows as they flashed past over the bulwarks. In the midst of the turmoil there came a blinding flash of lightning, followed instantly by a terrible crash of thunder. This was succeeded by a sound of rending which was not the result of elemental strife.

"Foremast gone, sir," cried one of the men, staggering aft.

Seizing an axe, the captain sprang forward. Edwin Jack followed. They found the ship's-carpenter already at work cutting the shrouds and other ropes that held the wreck of the mast. As flashes of lightning followed in quick succession they revealed a scene of ruin on the forepart of the vessel, with the tall figure of Edwin as he stood on the bulwarks wielding an axe. At last the wreck was cleared, but the seas were now bursting over the decks and sweeping away everything not made fast. Among other things the long-boat was carried away, and ere long all the other boats were torn from their fastenings or destroyed. It was a fearful night. Even the most reckless among the sailors were overawed by such a display of the terrors of God. At such times scoffers are wont to become tremblers, and those who "trust in God" find Him "a very present help in trouble."

The gale was as short-lived as it was fierce. By the dawn of the following day it had abated considerably, and it was found that less damage had been done to the ship than might have been expected.

“We’re all right, Polly, thank God!” said the captain, earnestly, when he ventured to open the companion hatch and go below. “You prayed for us, dear, didn’t you?”

“Yes, father, I did; I prayed that our lives might be spared, if He pleased.”

“Well, Polly, our prayers have been answered,” said the captain; “our lives are spared and the ship is safe, though we’ve lost the foremast and the boats. However, that can be putt to rights; we’ll rig up a jury-mast and get on famously, so keep up your heart, old girl, and give us a nor’—. There, you’d better stay below yet awhile; it’s dirty on deck.”

The weather was not long of improving. A profound calm followed the storm. Bright sunshine banished the thunder-clouds. The contrast between the dangers just past and the peaceful condition that prevailed had the effect of raising the spirits of all on board the *Lively Poll* to an unusual height, so that snatches of song, whistling, and cheery remarks, were heard on all sides among the busy crew as they rigged up a new mast, bent on new sails, and repaired the various damages. When night put a stop to their labours, and every one sought repose, except the watch and the captain and the man at the wheel, the same peaceful calm continued. Only the long undulating swell of ocean remained to tell of the recent storm, while the glassy surface reflected a universe of stars.

It was at this time of profound repose and fancied security that the death-knell of the *Lively Poll* was sounded. In the southern seas there is a little creature, named the coral insect (of which we shall have more to say hereafter), which is ever at work building walls and ramparts on the bottom of the sea. These rise by degrees to the surface,—rise above it—and finally become some of the fairest isles of the Pacific. Charts tell of the isles, but no charts can tell the locality of coral reefs which have just, or barely, reached the surface. The *Lively Poll* was forging slowly ahead under a puff of air that only bulged her top-sails as she rose and sank on the majestic swell. Presently she rose high, and was then let down on a coral reef with such violence that the jury-mast with the main-topmast and all the connected rigging, went over the side. Another swell lifted her off, and flung her on the ocean’s breast a total wreck.

The scene that followed may be imagined. Whatever could be done by an able and active seaman in such an emergency was done by Captain Samson. Water was rushing in through the shattered hull. To pass a sail under the ship’s bottom and check this was the first act. Then the pumps were rigged and worked by all on board. Besides Ben Trench there were three gentlemen passengers. These took their turn with the rest, but all was of no avail. The ship was sinking. The utmost efforts of those whose lives seemed dependent on her only delayed the final catastrophe.

“There is no hope,” said the captain in a low tone to his chief mate, to whom he gave some rapid orders, and went below.

It was daybreak, and the first gleam of light that leaped over the glassy sea tinged the golden curls of Polly Samson as she lay sleeping on one of the cabin sofas. She awoke and started up.

“Lie still, darling, and rest as long as you may,” said the captain in a low tender voice, “and pray, Polly, pray for us again. God is able to save to the uttermost, my pet.”

He said this without pausing, as he went to his berth and brought out a sextant, with which he returned on deck.

Standing near the foot of the companion-ladder, Watty Wilkins had heard the words, “There is no hope,” and the few sentences addressed to the child. His impressionable spirit leapt to the conclusion that the fate of all on board was sealed. He knew that the boats had all been swept away, and a feeling of profound despair seized him. This was quickly followed by contrition for his past conduct and pity for his father, under the impulse of which he sat down in a corner of the steward’s pantry and groaned aloud. Then he wrote a few lines in pencil on a piece of paper, bidding farewell to his father. Often had he read of such messages from the sea being wafted ashore in bottles, but little did he expect ever to have occasion to write one. He had just put the paper in a bottle, corked it up, and dropped it out of one of the cabin windows, when he was summoned on deck, and found that a raft was being hastily prepared alongside. Already some casks of biscuits and water had been

lowered on it, while the carpenter and several men were busily at work increasing its size and binding it together with iron clamps, hawsers, and chains.

There was urgent need for haste, as the ship was fast settling down.

“Now then, my lads, look alive!” cried the captain, as he lifted his little daughter over the side.

“The ship can’t float much longer. Here, Jack, catch hold.”

Edwin sprang to the side of the raft, and, standing up, received Polly in his arms.

“Take care of her! Hold her tight!” cried the anxious father.

“Trust me,” said Philosopher Jack.

The child was placed on the highest part of the raft with the passengers, and partially covered with a shawl. The crew were then ordered to leave the ship. Having seen every one out of it Captain Samson descended and gave the order to shove off. This was quickly done, and the distance was slowly increased by means of two large oars. The huge mass of spars and planks moved gradually away from the doomed vessel, whose deck was by that time little above the level of the sea. They had not got more than a few hundred yards off, when Baldwin Burr, who pulled one of the oars, uttered an exclamation. Edwin Jack and Ben Trench, who knelt close to him fastening a rope, looked up and saw the captain standing on the high part of the raft near Polly and little Wilkins, waving his right hand. He was bidding farewell to the old ship, which suddenly went down with a heavy roll. Another moment, and only a few ripples remained to mark the spot where the *Lively Poll* had found an ocean tomb.

Chapter Three

Adrift on the Great Ocean

Sunshine gladdens the heart of man and causes him more or less to forget his sorrows. The day on which the *Lively Poll* went down was bright and warm, as well as calm, so that some of those who were cast away on the raft—after the first shock had passed, and while busily employed in binding the spars and making other needful arrangements—began to feel sensations approaching almost to hilarity.

Polly Samson, in particular, being of a romantic turn of mind, soon dried her eyes, and when called on to assist in the construction of a little place of shelter for herself on the centre of the raft, by means of boxes and sails, she began to think that the life of a castaway might not be so disagreeable after all. When this shelter or hut was completed, and she sat in it with her father taking luncheon, she told him in confidence that she thought rafting was “very nice.”

“Glad you find it so, Polly,” replied the captain with a sad smile.

“Of course, you know,” she continued, with great seriousness of look and tone, “I don’t think it’s nice that our ship is lost. I’m very very sorry—oh, you can’t think how sorry!—for that, but this is such a funny little cabin, you know, and so snug, and the weather is *so* fine; do you think it will last long, father?”

“I hope it may; God grant that it may, darling, but we can’t be sure. If it does last, I daresay we shall manage to reach one of the islands, of which there are plenty in the Southern Seas, but—”

A roar of laughter from the men arrested and surprised the captain. He raised the flap of sail which served as a door to the hut—Polly’s bower, as the men styled it—and saw one of the passengers dragged from a hole or space between the spars of the raft, into which he had slipped up to the waist. Mr Luke, the passenger referred to, was considered a weak man, mind and body,—a sort of human nonentity, a harmless creature, with long legs and narrow shoulders. He took his cold bath with philosophic coolness, and acknowledged the laughter of the men with a bland smile. Regardless of his drenched condition, he sat down on a small keg and joined the crew at the meal of cold provisions which served that day for dinner.

“Lucky for us,” said one of the sailors, making play with his clasp-knife on a junk of salt pork, “that we’ve got such a fine day to begin with.”

“That’s true, Bob,” said another; “a raft ain’t much of a sea-goin’ craft. If it had blowed hard when we shoved off from the ship we might ha’ bin tore to bits before we was well fixed together, but we’ve had time to make all taut now, and can stand a stiffish breeze. Shove along the breadbasket, mate.”

“You’ve had your allowance, Bob; mind, we’re on short commons now,” said Baldwin Burr, who superintended the distribution of provisions, and served out a measured quantity to every man. “There’s your grog for you.”

Bob Corkey growled a little as he wiped his knife on his leg, and accepted the allowance of “grog,” which, however, was only pure water.

“Are you sure the raft can stand a storm?” inquired Watty Wilkins of Philosopher Jack, who sat eating his poor meal beside him.

“Sure?” responded Jack, “we can be sure of nothing in this life.”

“Except trouble,” growled Corkey.

“Oh yes, you can be sure of more than that,” said Baldwin Burr; “you can always be sure of folly coming out of a fool’s mouth.”

“Come, come, Baldwin, be civil,” said Philosopher Jack; “it’s cowardly, you know, to insult a man when you can’t fight him.”

“Can’t fight him?” repeated Burr with a grin; “who said I couldn’t fight him, eh? Why, I’m ready to fight him now, right off.”

“Nevertheless, you can’t,” persisted the philosopher; “how could two men fight on a raft where there’s not room for a fair stand-up scrimmage between two rats? Come now, don’t argue, Burr, but answer little Wilkins’s question if you can.”

“Stowaways don’t deserve to have their questions answered,” said Corkey; “in fact, they don’t deserve to live. If I had my way, I’d kill little Wilkins and salt him down to be ready for us when the pork and biscuit fail.”

“Well, now, as to the safety of this here raft in a gale, small Wilkins,” said Baldwin, regardless of Corkey’s interruption, “that depends summat on the natur’ o’ the gale. If it was only a half-gale we’d weather it all right, I make no doubt; but, if it should come to blow hard, d’ee see, we have no occasion to kill and eat you, as we’d all be killed together and eaten by the sharks.”

“Sharks!” exclaimed Mr Luke, whose damp garments were steaming under the powerful sun like a boiler on washing-day; “are there sharks here?”

“Ay,” said Corkey, pointing to the sea astern, where the glassy surface was broken and rippled by a sharp angular object, “that’s a shark a-follerin’ of us now, leastwise the back fin of one. If you don’t believe it, jump overboard and you’ll soon be convinced.”

This reference to the shark was overheard by Polly, who came out of her bower to see it. The monster of the deep came close up at that moment, as if to gratify the child, and, turning on its back, according to shark habit when about to seize any object, thrust its nose out of the water. For one moment its double row of teeth were exposed to view, then they closed on a lump of pork that had been accidentally knocked overboard by Corkey.

“Is that the way you take care of our provisions?” said the captain, sternly, to Baldwin.

“We’ve got a big hook, sir,” said Edwin Jack, touching his cap; “shall we try to recover the pork?”

“You may try,” returned the captain.

Little Wilkins uttered something like a war-whoop as he leaped up and assisted Jack to get out the shark-hook. It was soon baited with another piece of pork. Ben Trench, who had a strong leaning to natural history, became very eager; and the men generally, being ever ready for sport, looked on with interest and prepared to lend a hand. The shark, however, was cautious. It did indeed rush at the bait, and seemed about to swallow it, but suddenly changed its mind, swam round it once or twice, then fell slowly astern, and finally disappeared.

Although the fish was not caught, this little incident served to raise the spirits of every one, and as the calm sunny weather lasted the whole day, even the most thoughtful of the party found it difficult to realise their forlorn condition; but when evening drew near, the aspect of things quickly changed. The splendid ocean-mirror, which had reflected the golden crags and slopes, the towers and battlements of cloud-land, was shivered by a sudden breeze and became an opaque grey; the fair blue sky deepened to indigo; black and gathering clouds rose out of the horizon, and cold white crests gleamed on the darkening waves. The men gathered in anxious groups, and Polly sat in the entrance of her bower gazing on the gloomy scene, until her young heart sank slowly but steadily. Then, remembering her father’s advice, she betook herself to God in prayer.

Young though she was, Polly was no sentimentalist in religion. She believed with all her heart in Jesus Christ as a living, loving Saviour. Her faith was very simple, and founded on experience. She had prayed, and had been answered. She had sought Jesus in sorrow, and had been comforted. The theologian can give the why and how and wherefore of this happy condition, but in practice he can arrive at it only by the same short road. One result of her prayer was that she went to sleep that night in perfect peace, while most of her companions in misfortune sat anxiously watching what appeared to be a gathering storm.

Before going to rest however, Polly had an earnest little talk with her father.

“Polly,” said Captain Samson, sitting down under the shelter of the tarpaulin, and drawing the child’s fair head on his breast, “I never spoke to you before on a subject that p’r’aps you won’t understand, but I am forced to do it now. It’s about money.”

“About money!” exclaimed Polly in surprise; “oh, father, surely you forget! The very last night we spent on shore, you spoke to me about money; you gave me a half-sovereign, and said you meant to give a blow-out to old Mrs Brown before leaving, and told me to buy—stay, let me see—there was half a pound of tea, and four pounds of sugar, and three penn’orth of snuff, and—”

“Yes, yes, Polly,” interrupted the captain, with a smile, “but I meant about money in a business way, you know, because if you chanced, d’ee see, ever to be in England without me, you know,—it—”

“But I’ll never be there without you, father, will I?” asked the child with an earnest look.

“Of course not—that’s to say, I *hope* not—but you know, Polly, that God arranges all the affairs of this world, and sometimes in His love and wisdom He sees fit to separate people—for a time, you know, *only* for a time—so that they don’t always keep together. Now, my darling, if it should please Him to send me cruising to—to—anywhere in a different direction from you, and you chanced ever to be in England alone—in Scotland, that is—at your own home, you must go to Bailie Trench—you know him—our old friend and helper when we were in shoal water, my dear, and say to him that I handed all my savings over to Mr Wilkins—that’s Watty’s father, Poll—to be invested in the way he thought best. When you tell that to Bailie Trench he’ll know what to do; he understands all about it. I might send you to Mr Wilkins direct but he’s a very great man, d’ee see, and doesn’t know you, and might refuse to give you the money.”

“To give me the money, father! But what should I do with the money when I got it?”

“Keep it, my darling.”

“Oh! I see, keep it safe for you till you came back?” said Polly.

“Just so, Poll, you’re a clever girl; keep it for me till I come back, or rather take it to Bailie Trench and he’ll tell you how to keep it. It’s a good pot o’ money, Poll, and has cost me the best part of a lifetime, workin’ hard and spendin’ little, to lay it by. Once I used to think,” continued the captain in a sad soliloquising tone, “that I’d live to cast anchor near the old spot, and spend it with your mother, Polly, and you; but the Lord willed it otherwise, and He does all things well, blessed be His name! Now you understand what you’re to do about the money, don’t you, if you should ever find yourself without me in Scotland, eh?”

Polly did not quite clearly understand, but after a little further explanation she professed herself to be quite prepared for the transaction of that important piece of financial business.

Poor Captain Samson sought thus to secure, to the best of his ability, that the small savings of his life should go to Polly in the event of her being saved and himself lost. Moreover, he revealed the state of his finances to Philosopher Jack, Ben Trench, and Watty Wilkins, whom he found grouped apart at a corner of the raft in earnest conversation, and begged of them, if they or any of them should survive, to see his daughter’s interest attended to.

“You see, my lads, although I would not for the world terrify the dear child uselessly, by telling her that we are in danger, it must be clear to you that if a gale springs up and our raft should be broken up, it’s not likely that all of us would be saved. Yet Polly might escape, and some of you also. We are all in the Lord’s hands, however, and have nothing to fear if we are His followers.”

Ah! that “if” went home. The captain did not lay stress on it; nevertheless stress was laid on it somehow, for the three youths found it recurring again and again to memory that night, though they did not speak of it to each other.

As the night advanced, the threatening gale passed away; the stars came out in all their splendour, and the morning sun found the glassy sea again ready to reflect his image. Thus they floated for several days in comparative peace and comfort. But it came at last.

One evening a squall came rushing down on them, turning up the sea, and converting it to ink and foam as it approached. The rag of sail with which they had previously courted the breeze in

vain was hastily taken in; the fastenings of everything were looked to. Polly was placed in her canvas bower, and the whole structure of the raft was strengthened with a network of hawsers and cordage.

When the squall struck them, the raft appeared to tremble. The seas broke clean over them, several articles not properly secured were swept off, and weak points in the main fastenings were made plain, as the spars, beams, and planks writhed and struggled to get free.

But Captain Samson and his men were equal to the occasion; an iron clamp here, and an extra turn of a chain or hawser there, made all fast, so that before the squall had time to raise the sea, the raft held well together, and yielded, without breaking, to the motions of the waves.

Of course every one was drenched, including poor little Polly, for although the tarpaulin turned off the waves and spray above, it could not prevent the water spiriting up between the spars from below. But Polly was, according to Baldwin, “a true chip of the old block;” she bore her discomforts with heroism, and quite put to shame poor Mr Luke, whose nervous temperament caused him great suffering.

Thus was spent a night of anxiety. The next day was little better, and the night following was worse. In addition to the violence of the wind and constant breaking over them of heavy seas, the darkness became so intense that it was difficult to see where damage to the fastenings occurred, and repairs became almost impossible.

About midnight there was a terrible rending of wood in that part of the raft lying farthest from Polly’s bower, and a great cry of fear was heard. The more courageous among the men sprang, by a natural impulse, to assist those in distress. It was found that a large portion of the raft had broken adrift, and was only held to it by a single rope. On this portion were two passengers and one of the crew. The former were apparently panic-stricken; the latter made frantic but futile attempts to haul in on the rope.

“Bear a hand, boys!” cried Edwin Jack, as he laid hold of the inner end of the rope.

Strong and willing hands were ready, but before they could lay hold the rope parted, and Jack was dragged violently into the sea. He rose like a cork. Little Wilkins lay down, and stretched out a helping hand. Jack caught it, and would infallibly have dragged the little fellow into the water if Ben Trench had not thrown himself on his legs and held on. Baldwin Burr seized hold of Ben, and the captain coming up at the moment, lent his powerful aid. Jack was saved, but the broken part of the raft, with its hapless occupants, was swept away and lost sight of.

This sad event had naturally a very depressing effect on every one. True, the portion of the raft which had broken away was large enough to sustain the unfortunates who were on it. Moreover, some of the provisions had also gone with them, so that there was hope of their holding out for a time and being picked up by a passing ship, but the hope was slight, and in the event of rougher weather, their fate would be certain.

For six days and nights the raft was tossed about on the open sea. It could scarcely be said that it sailed, although as large a mast and piece of canvas as they could set up urged it slowly though the water when the wind was strong. As to steering, that was next to impossible, and in truth it did not matter much how they steered.

Constant exposure by night and by day now began to tell on the less robust of the crew. Little Polly, however, was not one of these. She possessed a naturally good constitution, and was, besides, specially cared for by her father, who devoted all the powers of an inventive mind to the strengthening and improving of “the bower.” In this he was ably assisted by Philosopher Jack, whose love for the child deepened daily as he watched the sweet contented manner with which she received every drenching—and she got many—and the anxious way in which she inquired for, and sought to help, those of the party whose health began to fail.

Among these latter was Ben Trench.

“Ah! Polly,” said Ben one sultry forenoon when she brought him a glass of sweetened lime-juice and water, “you’re a kind little nurse. I really don’t know how I should get on without you.”

“Upon my word,” said little Wilkins, pouting, “you’re a grateful fellow! Here have I been nursing you all the morning, yet you seem to think nothing of that in comparison with Polly’s glass of lime-juice.”

“Come, Watty, don’t be jealous,” said Ben; “it’s not the glass of lime-juice, but Polly’s sympathetic face beaming behind it, that does me so much good. Besides, you know, Polly’s a girl, and a girl is always a better nurse than a man; you must admit that.”

Watty was not at all prepared to admit that, but his being spoken of as a man did much to mollify his hurt feelings.

“But I do hope you feel better to-day,” said Polly, observing with some anxiety the short, half-breathless manner in which the invalid spoke.

“Oh yes! I feel better—that is to say, I think I do. Sometimes I do, and sometimes I don’t. You know, Polly, I came on this voyage chiefly on account of my health, and of course I must expect to be a little damaged by so much exposure, though your good father has indeed done his best to shelter me. Why, do you know, I sometimes think the berth he has made for me between the logs here is a greater triumph of his inventive genius than your bower. I often think they spoiled a splendid engineer when they made your father a sailor.”

Polly laughed at this, and Watty Wilkins tried to laugh, just by way of keeping up his friend’s spirits and being what Baldwin called good company; but poor Watty could not laugh. He had loved and played with Ben Trench since ever he could remember, and when he looked at his pale face and listened to his weak voice, a dread foreboding came over him, and brought such a rush of feeling to his heart that he was fain to leap up and spring to the farthest end of the raft, where he fell to hauling and tightening one of the rope-fastenings with all the energy of his little body and soul.

“Land ho!” shouted one of the men at that moment from the top of a cask, which formed the outlook, where, every day and all day, a man was stationed to watch for a sail or a sign of land.

An electric shock could not have produced greater excitement than these two words.

“Where away?” exclaimed the captain, leaping up beside the look-out.

“On the port-bow, sir,—there!” pointing eagerly.

“I don’t see it—oh—yes—no. It’s only a cloud. Who ever heard of the port-bow of a raft? Bah! your eyes have been squintin’. Not a bit of it, I see it—low lyin’; why, I see the palms—and I see the nuts—ah, and the monkeys, no doubt a-eatin’ of ’em—hip, hip, hurrah!”

Such were some of the exclamations, ending in a long, deep-toned, British cheer, with which the discovery of land was greeted.

In a short time all uncertainty was removed, and the land was clearly made out to be a small coral island with its narrow outlying reef, and a few cocoa-nut palms waving thereon.

The joy of the shipwrecked crew was excessive—somewhat in proportion to their previous depression. They shook bands, laughed, cheered, and in some cases wept, while a few clasped their hands, looked up, and audibly thanked God.

“You’ll soon get ashore,” said Polly, laying her hand on Ben Trench’s arm.

“Ay, and the cocoa-nut milk will set you up and make you fat in no time,” added Watty Wilkins.

“So it will,” returned Ben, who had not risen like the others; “we’ll have jolly times of it, won’t we? Like Robinson Crusoe. Oh! how I wish that sister Susan was here! She would enjoy it so much. It’s an island, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” said Edwin Jack, coming forward at the moment, “a coral island, with plenty of vegetation on it. So cheer up, Ben, we shall soon be ashore.”

Not so soon, however, as they expected, for the wind was light, although favourable, the raft was heavy, and the two oars had but little influence on it. The sun sank and rose again before they drew near to the reef. Inside the reef, between it and the island-shore, there was a lake or lagoon of calm water, but outside, on the reef itself, a heavy swell broke with continuous roar. To get involved in those giant breakers would have been destruction to the raft, and probably death to most of those

on board. One narrow opening, marked by a few shrubs and palms on either side, formed the only portal to the calm lagoon. The captain himself took the steering oar, and summoned our philosopher to his assistance.

“Give way now, lads, with a will.”

As many men as could grasp the two oars laid hold of them, and bent their backs till the strong wood cracked again. Gradually the raft neared the opening. As it did so the ground-swell began to act on it. By degrees the towering billows—which seemed to rise out of a calm sea and rush to their destruction like walls of liquid glass—caught it, dragged it on a little, and then let it slip. At last one great wave began to curl in hissing foam underneath, caught the raft fairly, carried it forward on its boiling crest, and launched it with lightning speed into the opening. The space was too narrow! One of the projecting spars touched the reef. Instantly the fastenings were rent like pack-thread, and the raft was hurled forward in disconnected fragments. One of these turned completely over with several men on it. Another portion passed through the opening and swung round inside. The steering oar was wrenched from Jack’s hands, and struck the captain into the water. As if by instinct, Jack sprang to the “bower,” caught Polly in his arms, and leaped into the sea. At the same moment Wilkins ran to the rescue of his friend Ben. These two were on the part that had swung round to the calm side of the reef, and Watty waded to it with Ben on his back. The captain and all the rest were washed in a cataract of foam and wreckage through the opening into the lagoon, and pitched by curling eddies on the shore. In a few minutes they all stood in safety, panting, but uninjured, on the white sands of the coral reef.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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