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BALLANTYNE

SUNK AT SEA

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Sunk at Sea

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R. M. Ballantyne

Sunk at Sea

Chapter One.

Treats of Our Hero's Early Life, and Touches on Domestic Matters

William Osten was a wanderer by nature. He was born with a thirst for adventure that nothing could quench, and with a desire to rove that nothing could subdue.

Even in babyhood, when his limbs were fat and feeble, and his visage was round and red, he displayed his tendency to wander in ways and under circumstances that other babies never dreamt of. He kept his poor mother in a chronic fever of alarm, and all but broke the heart of his nurse, long before he could walk, by making his escape from the nursery over and over again, on his hands and knees; which latter bore constant marks of being compelled to do the duty of feet in dirty places.

Baby Will never cried. To have heard him yell would have rejoiced the hearts of mother and nurse, for that would have assured them of his being near at hand and out of mischief—at least not engaged in more than ordinary mischief. But Baby Will was a natural philosopher from his birth. He displayed his wisdom by holding his peace at all times, except when very hard pressed by hunger or pain, and appeared to regard life in general in a grave, earnest, inquiring spirit. Nevertheless, we would not have it understood that Will was a slow, phlegmatic baby. By no means. His silence was deep, his gravity profound, and his earnestness intense, so that, as a rule, his existence was unobtrusive. But his energy was tremendous. What he undertook to do he usually did with all his might and main—whether it was the rending of his pinafore or the smashing of his drum!

We have said that he seldom or never cried, but he sometimes laughed, and that not unfrequently; and when he did so you could not choose but hear, for his whole soul gushed out in his laugh, which was rich, racy, and riotous. He usually lay down and rolled when he laughed, being quite incapable of standing to do it—at least during the early period of babyhood. But Will would not laugh at everything. You could not make him laugh by cooing and smirking and talking nonsense, and otherwise making an ass of yourself before him.

Maryann, the nurse, had long tried that in vain, and had almost broken her heart about it. She was always breaking her heart, more or less, about her charge, yet, strange to say, she survived that dreadful operation, and ultimately lived to an extreme old age!

“Only think,” she was wont to say to Jemima Scrubbins, her bosom friend, the monthly nurse who had attended Will's mother, and whose body was so stiff, thin, and angular, that some of her most intimate friends thought and said she must have been born in her skeleton alone—“Only think, Jemimar, I give it as my morial opinion that that hinfant 'asn't larfed once—no, not once—durin' the last three days, although I've chirruped an' smiled an' made the most smudgin' faces to it, an' heaped all sorts o' blandishments upon it till—. Oh! you can't imagine; but nothink's of any use trying of w'en you can't do it; as my 'usband, as was in the mutton-pie line, said to the doctor the night afore he died—my 'art is quite broken about it, so it is.”

To which Jemima was wont to reply, with much earnestness—for she was a sympathetic soul, though stiff, thin, and angular—“You don't say so, Maryhann! P'raps it's pains.”

Whereupon Maryann would deny that pains had anything to do with it, and Jemima would opine that it was, “koorious, to say the least of it.”

No, as we have said, Baby Will would not laugh at everything. He required to see something really worth laughing at before he would give way, and when he did give way, his eyes invariably

disappeared, for his face was too fat to admit of eyes and mouth being open at the same time. This was fortunate, for it prevented him for a little from seeing the object that tickled his fancy, and so gave him time to breathe and recruit for another burst. Had it been otherwise, he would certainly have suffocated himself in infancy, and this, his veracious biography, would have remained unwritten!

To creep about the house into dangerous and forbidden places, at the risk of life and limb, was our hero's chief delight in early childhood. To fall out of his cradle and crib, to tumble down stairs, and to bruise his little body until it was black and blue, were among his most ordinary experiences. Such mishaps never drew tears, however, from his large blue eyes. After struggling violently to get over the rail of his crib, and falling heavily on the floor, he was wont to rise with a gasp, and gaze in bewilderment straight before him, as if he were rediscovering the law of gravitation. No phrenologist ever conceived half the number of bumps that were developed on his luckless cranium.

We make no apology to the reader for entering thus minutely into the character and experiences of a baby. That baby is the hero of our tale. True, it is as a young man that he is to play his part; but a great philosopher has told us that he always felt constrained to look upon children with respect; and a proverb states that, "the child is the father of the man."

Without either pinning our faith to the philosopher or the proverb, we think it both appropriate and interesting to note the budding genius of the wanderer whose footsteps we are about to follow.

Baby Will's mother was a gentle and loving, but weak woman. His father, William Horace Osten by name, was a large, hearty, affectionate, but coarse man. He appreciated his wife's gentle, loving nature, but could not understand her weakness. She admired her husband's manly, energetic spirit, but could not understand his roughness. He loved the baby, and resolved to "make a man of him." She loved the baby, and wished to make him a "good boy." In the furtherance of their designs the one tried to make him a lion, the other sought to convert him into a lamb. Which of the two would have succeeded can never be known. It is probable that both would have failed by counteracting each other, as is no uncommon experience when fathers and mothers act separately in such a matter. If the one had succeeded, he would have made him a bear. The other, if successful, would have made him a nincompoop. Fortunately for our hero, a higher power saved him, and, by training him in the school of adversity, made him both a lion and a lamb. The training was very severe and prolonged, however.

It was long before the lion would consent to lie down in the same breast with the lamb. Certainly it was not during the season of childhood. The lion appeared to have it all his own way during that interesting epoch, and the father was proportionately gratified, while the mother was dismayed.

Boyhood came, and with it an increased desire to rove, and a more fervent thirst for adventure. At school our hero obtained the name that stuck to him through life—"Wandering Will." The seaport town in the west of England in which he dwelt had been explored by him in all its ramifications. There was not a retired court, a dark lane, or a blind alley, with which he was unfamiliar. Every height, crag, cliff, plantation, and moor within ten miles of his father's mansion had been thoroughly explored by Will before he was eight years of age, and his aspiring spirit longed to take a wider flight.

"I want to go to sea, father," said he one evening after tea, looking in his father's face with much more of the leonine gaze than the father had bargained for. His training up to that point had been almost too successful!

This was not the first time that the boy had stated the same wish; his gaze, therefore, did not quail when his father looked up from his newspaper and said sternly—"Fiddlesticks, boy! hold your tongue."

"Father," repeated Will, in a tone that caused Mr Osten to lay down his paper, "I want to go to sea."

"Then the sooner you give up the idea the better, for I won't let you."

"Father," continued Will, "you remember the proverb that you've often told me has been your motto through life, 'Never venture never win?'"

“Certainly; you know that I have often urged you to act on that principle at school. Why do you ask the question?”

“Because I mean to act on it now, and go to sea,” replied Will firmly.

“What? without permission, without clothes, and without money; for you shan’t have a six-pence from me?”

“Yes,” replied Will.

Mr Osten was one of those stern, despotic men who cannot bear to be thwarted. He was a rich merchant, and almost the king of the little town in which he dwelt. His greatest ambition was to make his only son a thorough man of business. To be spoken to in such a tone by that rebellious son was too much for him. He lost his temper, leaped up, and, seizing Will by the collar, thrust him out of the room.

The boy ran to his own bedroom, and, seating himself in front of the dressing-table, hit that piece of furniture with his clenched fist so violently that all its contents leaped up and rattled.

“Dear, dear Will,” said a gentle voice at his side, while a loving hand fell on his shoulder, “why do you frown so fiercely?”

“How can I help it, mother, when he treats me like that? He is harsh and unfair to me.”

“Not so unfair as you think, dear Will,” said his mother.

We will not detail the arguments by which the good lady sought to combat her son’s desires. Suffice it to say that she succeeded—as only mothers know how—in lulling the lion to sleep at that time, and in awakening the lamb. Wandering Will went back to school with a good grace, and gave up all idea of going to sea.

Chapter Two. Records a Sudden Departure, and Maryann's Opinion Thereon

There is a fallacy into which men and women of mature years are apt to fall—namely, that the cares and sorrows of the young are light.

How many fathers and mothers there are who reason thus—“Oh, the child will grow out of this folly. 'Tis a mere whim—a youthful fancy, not worthy of respect,”—forgetting or shutting their eyes to the fact, that, light though the whim or fancy may be in their eyes, it has positive weight to those who cherish it, and the thwarting of it is as destructive of peace and joy to the young as the heavier disappointments of life are to themselves.

True, the cares and sorrows of the young are light in the sense that they are not usually permanent. Time generally blows them away, while the cares of later years often remain with us to the end. But they are not the less real, heavy, and momentous at the time on that account.

Those troubles cannot with propriety be called light which drive so many young men and women to rebellion and to destruction. Well would it have been for Mr Osten if he had treated his son like a rational being, instead of calling him a “young fool,” and commanding him to “obey.”

Will, however, was not an untractable young lion. He went through school and entered college, despite his unconquerable desire to go to sea, in obedience to his father's wishes. Then he resolved to study medicine. Mr Osten regarded the time thus spent as lost, inasmuch as his son might have been better employed in learning “the business” to which he was destined; still he had no great objection to his son taking the degree of MD, so he offered no opposition; but when Will, at the age of eighteen, spoke to him of his intention to take a run to the north or south seas, as surgeon in a whaler, he broke out on him.

“So, it seems that your ridiculous old fancy still sticks to you,” said Mr Osten, in great wrath, for the recurrence of the subject was like the lacerating of an old sore.

“Yes, father; it has never left me. If you will listen for a few moments to my reasons—”

“No, boy,” interrupted his father, “I will *not* listen to your reasons. I have heard them often enough—too often—and they are foolish, false, utterly inconclusive. You may go to Jericho as far as I am concerned; but if you do go, you shall never darken my doors again.”

“When I was a boy, father,” said Will earnestly, “your speaking sharply to me was natural, for I was foolish, and acted on impulse. I am thankful now that I did not give way to rebellion, as I was tempted to do; but I am not now a boy, father. If you will talk calmly with me—”

“Calmly!” interrupted Mr Osten, growing still more angry at the quiet demeanour of his son; “do you mean to insinuate that—that—. What do you mean, sir?”

“I insinuate nothing, father; I mean that I wish you to hear me patiently.”

“I *won't* hear you,” cried Mr Osten, rising from his chair, “I've heard you till I'm tired of it. Go if you choose, if you dare. You know the result.”

Saying this he left the room hastily, shutting the door behind him with a bang.

A grave, stern expression settled on the youth's countenance as he arose and followed him into the passage. Meeting his mother there, he seized her suddenly in his arms and held her in a long embrace; then, without explaining the cause of his strong emotion, he ran down stairs and left his father's house.

In a dirty narrow street, near the harbour of the town, there stood a small public-house which was frequented chiefly by the sailors who chanced to be in the port, and by the squalid population in its immediate neighbourhood. Although small, the Red Lion Inn was superior in many respects to its surroundings. It was larger than the decayed buildings that propped it; cleaner than the locality

that owned it; brighter and warmer than the homes of the lean crew on whom it fattened. It was a pretty, light, cheery, snug place of temptation, where men and women, and even children assembled at nights to waste their hard-earned cash and ruin their health. It was a place where the devil reigned, and where the work of murdering souls was carried on continually,—nevertheless it was a “jolly” place. Many good songs were sung there, as well as bad ones; and many a rough grasp of hearty friendship was exchanged. Few people, going into the house for a few minutes, could have brought themselves to believe that it was such a *very* broad part of the road leading to destruction: but the landlord had some hazy notion on that point. He sat there day and night, and saw the destruction going on. He saw the bleary-eyed, fuddled men that came to drown conscience in his stalls, and the slatternly women who came and went. Nevertheless he was a rosy, jocund fellow who appeared to have a good deal of the milk of human kindness about him, and would have looked on you with great surprise, if not scorn, had you told him that he had a hand in murdering souls. Yes! the Red Lion might have been appropriately styled the Roaring Lion, for it drove a roaring trade among the poor in that dirty little street near the harbour.

The gas was flaring with attractive brilliancy in the Red Lion when Will Osten entered it, and asked if Captain Dall was within.

“No, sir,” answered the landlord; “he won’t be here for half-an-hour yet.”

“A pot of beer,” said Will, entering one of the stalls, and sitting down opposite a tall, dark-countenanced man, who sat smoking moodily in a corner.

It was evident that our hero had not gone there to drink, for the beer remained untouched at his elbow, as he sat with his face buried in his hands.

The dark man in the corner eyed him steadily through the smoke which issued from his lips, but Will paid no attention to him. He was too deeply absorbed in his own reflections.

“A fine night, stranger,” he said at length, in a slightly nasal tone.

Still Will remained absorbed, and it was not until the remark had been twice repeated that he looked up with a start.

“I beg pardon; did you speak?” he said. “Well, yes,” drawled the dark man, puffing a long white cloud from his lips, “I did make an observation regardin’ the weather. It looks fine, don’t it?”

“It does,” said Will.

“You’re waitin’ for Captain Dall, ain’t you?”

“Why, how did *you* come to know that?” said Will.

“I didn’t come to know it, I guessed it,” said the dark man.

At that moment the door opened, and a short thick-set man, in a glazed hat and pea-jacket, with huge whiskers meeting under his chin, entered.

His eye at once fell upon the dark man, whom he saluted familiarly—“All ready, Mr Cupples?”

“All ready, sir,” replied the other; “it’s now more than half-flood; in three hours we can drop down the river with the first of the ebb, and if this breeze holds we’ll be in blue water before noon to-morrow.”

“Hallo, doctor, is that yourself?” said the captain, whose eye had for some moments rested on Will.

“It is,” said the youth, extending his hand, which the other grasped and shook warmly.

“What! changed your mind—eh?”

“Yes, I’m going with you.”

“The governor bein’ agreeable?” inquired the captain.

Will shook his head.

“Hope there ain’t bin a flare-up?” said the captain earnestly.

“Not exactly,” said Will; “but he is displeased, and will not give his consent, so I have come away without it.”

At this the jovial skipper, who was styled captain by courtesy, sat down and shook his head gravely, while he removed his hat and wiped the perspiration from his bald forehead.

“It’s a bad business to run agin the wishes of one’s parents,” he said; “it seldom turns out well; couldn’t you come round him nohow?”

“Impossible. He won’t listen to reason.”

“Ah, then, it’s of no manner of use,” said the captain, with a pitying sigh, “when a man won’t listen to reason, what’s the consequence? why he’s unreasonable, which means bein’ destitoot of that which raises him above the brutes that perish. Such bein’ the case, give it up for a bad job, that’s my advice. Come, I’ll have a bottle o’ ginger-beer, not bein’ given to strong drink, an’ we’ll talk over this matter.”

Accordingly the beer was ordered, and the three sat there talking for a couple of hours in reference to a long, long voyage to the southern seas.

After that they rose, and, leaving the Red Lion, went down to the pier, where a boat was in waiting. It conveyed them to a large ship, whose sails were hanging in the loose condition peculiar to a vessel ready to set sail. An hour after that the anchor was raised, and wind and tide carried the ship gently down to the sea. There seemed to Will something very solemn and mysterious in the quiet way in which, during these still and dark hours of the night, the great ship was slowly moved towards her ocean cradle. At length she floated on the sea, and, soon after, the moon arose on the distant horizon, streaming across the rippling surface as if to kiss and welcome an old friend. The wind increased; the ship became submissive to the breeze, obedient to the helm, and ere long moved on the waters like “a thing of life,” leaving Old England far behind her.

It was then that young Osten, leaning over the taffrail and looking wistfully back at the point where he had seen the last glimpse of the chalk cliffs, began to experience the first feelings of regret. He tried to quiet his conscience by recalling the harsh and unjustifiable conduct of his father, but conscience would not be quieted thus, and faithful memory reminded him of the many acts of kindness he had experienced at his father’s hands, while she pointed to his gentle mother, and bade him reflect what a tremendous blow this sudden departure would be to her.

Starting up and shaking off such thoughts, sternly he went below and threw himself into his narrow cot, where conscience assailed him still more powerfully and vividly in dreams. Thus did Wandering Will leave his native land.

Commenting on his sudden departure, two days afterwards, Maryann said, in strict confidence, to her bosom friend “Jemimar,” that she “know’d it would ’appen—or somethink simular, for, even w’en a hinfant, he had refused to larf at her most smudgin’ blandishments; and that she knew somethink strange would come of it, though she would willingly have given her last shilling to have prevented it, but nothink was of any use tryin’ of w’en one couldn’t do it, as her ’usband, as was in the mutton-pie line, said to the doctor the night afore he died,—and that her ’art was quite broken about it, so it was.”

Whereupon Jemima finished to the dregs her last cup of tea, and burst into a flood of tears.

Chapter Three.

Tells of the Sea, and some of the Mysteries Connected Therewith

For many days and nights the good ship *Foam* sailed the wide ocean without encountering anything more than the ordinary vicissitudes and experiences of sea-life. Dolphins were seen and captured, sharks were fished for and caught, stiff breezes and calms succeeded each other, constellations in the far north began to disappear and new constellations arose in the southern skies. In fact, during many weeks the voyage was prosperous, and young Will Osten began to experience those peculiar feelings with which all travellers are more or less acquainted—he felt that the ship was “home”; that his cabin with its furniture, which had appeared so small and confined at first, was quite a large and roomy place; that all the things about him were positive realities, and that the home of his childhood was a shadow of the past—a sort of dream.

During all this time the young doctor led a busy life. He was one of those active, intelligent, inquiring spirits which cannot rest. To acquire information was with him not a duty, but a pleasure. Before he had been many days at sea he knew the name and use of every rope, sail, block, tackle, and spar in the ship, and made himself quite a favourite with the men by the earnestness with which he questioned them in regard to nautical matters and their own personal experiences. George Goff, the sail-maker, said he “was a fust-rate feller;” and Larry O’Hale, the cook, declared, “he was a trump intirely, an’ ought to have been born an Irishman.” Moreover, the affections of long Mr Cupples (as the first mate was styled by the men) were quite won by the way in which he laboured to understand the use of the sextant, and other matters connected with the mysteries of navigation; and stout Jonathan Dall, the captain, was overjoyed when he discovered that he was a good player on the violin, of which instrument he was passionately fond. In short, Will Osten became a general favourite on board the *Foam*, and the regard of all, from the cabin-boy to the captain, deepened into respect when they found that, although only an advanced student and, “not quite a doctor,” he treated their few ailments with success, and acted his part with much self-possession, gentleness, and precision.

Larry O’Hale was particularly eloquent in his praises of him ever after the drawing of a tooth which had been the source of much annoyance to the worthy cook. “Why, messmates,” he was wont to say, “it bait everything the way he tuk it out. ‘Open yer mouth,’ says he, an’ sure I opened it, an’ before I cud wink, off wint my head—so I thought—but faix it wor only my tuth—a real grinder wi’ three fangs no less—och! he’s a cliver lad intirely.”

But Will did not confine his inquiries to the objects contained within his wooden home. The various phases and phenomena of the weather, the aspects of the sky, and the wonders of the deep, claimed his earnest attention. To know the reason of everything was with him a species of mania, and in pursuit of this knowledge he stuck at nothing. “Never venture never win,” became with him as favourite a motto as it had been with his father, and he acted on it more vigorously than his father had ever done.

One calm evening, as he was leaning over the side of the ship near the bow, gazing contemplatively down into the unfathomable sea, he overheard a conversation between the cook and one of the sailors named Muggins. They were smoking their pipes seated on the heel of the bowsprit.

“Larry,” said Muggins, “I think we have got into the doldrums.”

“Ye’re out there, boy,” said Larry, “for I heerd the capting say we wos past ’em a long way.”

The men relapsed into silence for a time.

Then Muggins removed his pipe and said—

“Wot ever caused the doldrums?”

“That’s more nor I can tell,” said Larry; “all I know about them is, that it’s aisy to git into them, but uncommon hard to git out again. If my ould grandmother was here, she’d be able to tell us, I make no doubt, but she’s in Erin, poor thing, ’mong the pigs and the taties.”

“Wot could *she* tell about the doldrums?” said Muggins, with a look of contempt.

“More nor ye think, boy; sure there isn’t nothin’ in the univarse but she can spaik about, just like a book, an’ though she niver was in the doldrums as far as I knows, she’s been in the dumps often enough; maybe it’s cousins they are. Anyhow she’s not here, an’ so we must be contint with spekilation.”

“What’s that you say, Larry?” inquired the captain, who walked towards the bow at the moment.

The cook explained his difficulty.

“Why, there’s no mystery about the doldrums,” said Captain Dall. “I’ve read a book by an officer in the United States navy which explains it all, and the Gulf Stream, and the currents, an’ everything. Come, I’ll spin you a yarn about it.”

Saying this, the captain filled and lighted his pipe, and seating himself on the shank of the anchor, said—

“You know the cause of ocean currents, I dare say?”

“Niver a taste,” said Larry. “It’s meself is as innocent about ’em as the babe unborn; an’ as for Muggins there, *he* don’t know more about ’em than my ould shoes—”

“Or your old grandmother,” growled Muggins.

“Don’t be irriverent, ye spalpeen,” said Larry.

“I ax her reverence’s pardon, but I didn’t know she wos a priest,” said Muggins.—“Go on, Cap’n Dall.”

“Well,” continued the captain, “you know, at all events, that there’s salt in the sea, and I may tell you that there is lime also, besides other things. At the equator, the heat bein’ great, water is evaporated faster than anywhere else, so that there the sea is salter and has more lime in it than elsewhere. Besides that it is hotter. Of course, that being the case, its weight is different from the waters of the cold polar seas, so it is bound to move away an’ get itself freshened and cooled. In like manner, the cold water round the poles feels obliged to flow to the equator to get itself salted and warmed. This state of things, as a natural consequence, causes commotion in the sea. The commotion is moreover increased by the millions of shell-fish that dwell there. These creatures, not satisfied with their natural skins, must needs have shells on their backs, and they extract lime from the sea-water for the purpose of makin’ these shells. This process is called secretin’ the lime; coral insects do the same, and, as many of the islands of the south seas are made by coral insects, you may guess that a considerable lot of lime is made away with. The commotion or disturbance thus created produces two great currents—from the equator to the poles and from the poles to the equator. But there are many little odds and ends about the world that affect and modify these currents, such as depth, and local heat and cold, and rivers and icebergs, but the chief modifiers are continents. The currents flowin’ north from the Indian Ocean and southern seas rush up between Africa and America. The space bein’ narrow—comparatively—they form one strong current, on doublin’ the Cape of Good Hope, which flies right across to the Gulf of Mexico. Here it is turned aside and flows in a nor’-easterly direction, across the Atlantic towards England and Norway, under the name of the Gulf Stream, but the Gulf of Mexico has no more to do with it than the man in the moon, ’xcept in the way of turnin’ it out of its nat’ral course. This Gulf Stream is a *river of warm water* flowing through the cold waters of the Atlantic; it keeps separate, and wherever it flows the climate is softened. It embraces Ireland, and makes the climate there so mild that there is, as you know, scarcely any frost all the year round—”

“Blissin’s on it,” broke in Larry, “sure that accounts for the purty green face of Erin, which bates all other lands in the world. Good luck to the Gulf Stream, say I!”

“You’re right, Larry, and England, Scotland, and Norway have reason to bless it too, for the same latitudes with these places in America have a rigorous winter extendin’ over more than half the

year. But what I was comin' to was this—there are, as you know, eddies and stagnant places in ornary rivers, where sticks, leaves, and other odds and ends collect and remain fixed. So, in this great ocean river, there are eddies where seaweed collects and stagnates, and where the air above also stagnates (for the air currents are very much like those of the sea). These eddies or stagnant parts are called sargasso seas. There are several of them, of various sizes, all over the ocean, but there is one big one in the Atlantic, which is known by the name of the 'Doldrums.' It has bothered navigators in all ages. Columbus got into it on his way to America, and hundreds of ships have been becalmed for weeks in it since the days of that great discoverer. It is not very long since it was found out that, by keeping well out of their way, and sailing round 'em, navigators could escape the Doldrums altogether."

The captain paused at this point, and Larry O'Hale took the opportunity to break in.

"D'ye know, sir," said he, "that same Gulf Strame has rose a lot o' pecooliar spekilations in my mind, which, if I may make so bowld, I'll—"

Here the mate's voice interrupted him gruffly with—

"Shake out a reef in that top-gall'n s'l; look alive, lads!"

Larry and his comrades sprang to obey. When they returned to their former place in the bow, the captain had left it, so that the cook's "pecooliar spekilations" were not at that time made known.

Chapter Four.

A Storm and its Consequences

In course of time the *Foam*, proceeding prosperously on her voyage, reached the region of Cape Horn—the cape of storms. Here, in days of old, Magellan and the early voyagers were fiercely buffeted by winds and waves. In later days Cook and others met with the same reception. In fact, the Cape is infamous for its inhospitality, nevertheless it shone with bright smiles when the *Foam* passed by, and a gentle fair-wind wafted her into the great Pacific Ocean. Never, since that eventful day when the adventurous Castilian, Vasco Nunez de Balboa, discovered this mighty sea, did the Pacific look more peaceful than it did during the first week in which the *Foam* floated on its calm breast. But the calm was deceitful. It resembled the quiet of the tiger while crouching to make a fatal spring.

Will Osten reclined against the top of the mainmast, to which he had ascended in order to enjoy, undisturbed, the quiet of a magnificent evening.

The sun was setting in a world of clouds, which took the form of mountains fringed with glittering gold and with shadows of pearly grey.

Oh what castles young Osten did build on these mountains, to be sure! Structures so magnificent that Eastern architects, had they seen them, would have hung their heads and confessed themselves outdone. But you must not imagine, reader, that the magnificence of all of these depended on their magnitude or richness. On the contrary, one of them was a mere cottage—but then, it was a pattern cottage. It stood in a palm-wood, on a coral island near the sea-shore, with a stream trickling at its side, and a lake full of wild fowl behind, and the most gorgeous tropical plants clustering round its open windows and door, while inside, seated on a couch, was a beautiful girl of fifteen (whom Will had often imagined, but had not yet seen), whose auburn hair shone like gold in the sun, contrasting well with her lovely complexion, and enhancing the sweetness of a smile which conveyed to the beholder only one idea—love. Many other castles were built in the clouds at that time by Will, but the cottage made the most lasting impression on his mind.

“Sleepin’?” inquired Cupples, the mate, thrusting his head through that orifice in the main-top which is technically called the “lubber’s hole.”

“No, meditating,” answered Will; “I’ve been thinking of the coral islands.”

“Humph,” ejaculated the mate contemptuously, for Cupples, although a kind-hearted man, was somewhat cynical and had not a particle of sentiment in his soul. Indeed he showed so little of this that Larry was wont to say he “didn’t believe he had a soul at all, but was only a koorious specimen of an animated body.”

“It’s my opinion, doctor, that you’d as well come down, for it’s goin’ to blow hard.”

Will looked in the direction in which the mate pointed, and saw a bank of black clouds rising on the horizon. At the same moment the captain’s voice was heard below shouting— “Stand by there to reef topsails!” This was followed by the command to close-reef. Then, as the squall drew rapidly nearer, a hurried order was giving to take in all sail. The squall was evidently a worse one than had at first been expected.

On it came, hissing and curling up the sea before it.

“Mind your helm!—port a little, port!”

“Port it is, sir,” answered the man at the wheel, in the deep quiet voice of a well-disciplined sailor, whose only concern is to do his duty.

“Steady!” cried the captain.

The words had barely left his lips, and the men who had been furling the sails had just gained the deck, when the squall struck them, and the *Foam* was laid on her beam-ends, hurling all her crew into the scuppers. At the same time terrible darkness overspread the sky like a pall. When the

men regained their footing, some of them stood bewildered, not knowing what to do; others, whose presence of mind never deserted them, sprang to where the axes were kept, in order to be ready to cut away the masts if necessary. But the order was not given.

Captain Dall and Will, who had been standing near the binnacle, seized and clung to the wheel.

“She will right herself,” said the former, as he observed that the masts rose a little out of the sea.

Fortunately the good ship did so, and then, although there was scarcely a rag of canvas upon her, she sprang away before the hurricane like a sea-gull.

Terrible indeed is the situation of those who are compelled to “scud under bare poles,” when He who formed the great deep, puts forth His mighty power, causing them to “stagger and be at their wits’ end.” For hours the *Foam* rushed wildly over the sea, now rising like a cork on the crest of the billows, anon sinking like lead into the valleys between. She was exposed to double danger; that of being cast upon one of the numerous coral reefs with which the Pacific in some parts abounds, or being “pooped” and overwhelmed by the seas which followed her.

During this anxious period little was said or done except in reference to the working of the ship. Men snatched sleep and food at intervals as they best might. At length, after two days, the gale began to abate, and the sea to go down.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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