

The Trail of the Dead:

THE STRANGE EXPERIENCE
OF DR. ROBERT HARLAND

By B. FLETCHER ROBINSON and J. MALCOLM FRASER

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CHAPTER XVIII.—(Continued.)

I do not know how we lived through that first furious hour. Isaac Treherne made no second mistake, but crouched at the tiller, tricking the succession of great seas that swung upon us out of the throbbing blackness. Stung by passing hailstorms, drenched to the skin, and aching with cold, I tolled with a tin pannikin, baling, baling until my back creaked with stiffness and my hands could scarcely feel the handle. Graden and the sailor worked beside me, so that we managed to keep the water under. Now and again a slit in the rushing dark above us showed me Marnac lying by the steersman's side. Was he alive or dead? I did not know, nor did I stay my labor to make inquiry.

The daylight came at last, the God-given light for which all poor mariners must pray in their hours of danger. With it came a lessening of the wind and a falling sea. Yet there had been an angry menace in the brilliant colors that lit the eastern sky, and I stared eagerly over the muddy green of the hurrying surges. Indeed, I was the first to see a steamer's smudge of smoke on the western skyline.

"Her be making for we, gentlemen," remarked our steersman, after a long stare at the distant vessel. "Happen her would take 'e aboard, if you be so minded. The weather be blowing up again, and it's a long reach back to Polleven."

"I don't like deserting the ship, Isaac," said Graden; "though, to tell the truth, I don't relish another day in the chops of the Channel."

"Bain't no desertion, sir. Me and Jake can take her whoam; and, to tell 'e the truth, he'll ride the lighter for the want of him!"

He pointed to where Marnac sat crouching under an oilskin coat. Save for occasional shivers, the old man seemed to be no worse for his handshake with Death. He received the sailor's remark with a benevolent smile. "Doan't 'e go grinning at me, you wicked-minded old toad!" cried Isaac. "'Twas only through special mercies that Providence forgot you was on board. We'd ha' been sunk for zarten, else."

Within half an hour we could see the steamer clearly, an ancient tramp of the seas, bluff in the bows, square in the flank, with a coloring of soot and rusty iron. She answered our signals with a melancholy toot and stood towards us. Graden, who had been watching her approach at my side, turned and walked aft.

"I have already dropped your revolver overboard, Professor Marnac," he said; "but I must trouble you to hand me your pocket-book. Money, you know, is often the most valuable of weapons."

The professor obeyed with a gentle cluck of amusement.

"I trust, Sir Henry, that the notes are not damaged," he said in the low, musical tones with which I was so familiar. "Indeed, I was assured that the case was waterproof."

"Now, your loose gold, if you please," "Here it is, Sir Henry, with my watch and chain. Observe that my pockets are now completely empty. Ah, Mr. Harland, forgive me if I did not notice you before. I fear that these nautical adventures will interrupt your course of studies. Did you hear whom the university have appointed in my stead? I should be sorry if my students, amongst whom I always held you to be the most studious, if not the most able, should be long without a lecturer—like sheep that have lost their shepherd, Mr. Harland."

I turned from him with a feeling of nausea. Mad or sane, he had done such deeds as placed him beyond the intercourse of humanity.

The steamer was close upon us now, and as she came rolling down the heave of the swell we were hailed from the bridge in a tongue that was strange to me. Before we could reply, a seaman had sprung to the bulwarks and sent the coils of a line spinning over us. This Isaac made fast, allowing a fair space to intervene between his little craft and the rusty metal fabric that towered above us.

"Good-bye, Isaac," said Graden, shaking the little Cornishman warmly by the hand. "I will see to your check the moment I get to London."

"Doan't 'e mention it, zur. I was right proud to take 'e. Nor do 'e trouble about we uns. Jake and I will be making Polleven by midnight at latest—please be."

CHAPTER XIX.

It was an anxious scramble—they had to swing out a chair for Marnac—but the trawler was as handy as a row-boat, and at last the three of us stood on the deck of the stranger. A more ill-assorted trio of bedraggled voyagers never ranged in line.

But if we were strange to look upon, so were the group of men who confronted us. They were of the degenerate Latin breed, dark, small, uncertain in temper, and dirty by nature and training. Their seafaring dress seemed as ill-suited to them as a sash and a colored cloak would be to a British shellback.

"Engleshe?" asked one whom I took to be the mate. "Engleshe? What say?"

"We are Englishmen who were driven out to sea by last night's storm. If I may see the captain, I will explain," said my cousin.

The man grinned his lack of comprehension. Plainly his vocabulary was of the smallest.

"These men are Portugese, Sir Henry," said Marnac, stepping quickly forward. "I know their tongue. Allow me to explain the situation."

But he got no further. My cousin's long arm shot out, gripping his collar firmly from behind. With a gentle heave, he swung the professor from his feet and dropped him behind us.

"Please to keep silence, Professor Marnac. Your explanations might be somewhat biased," said he, with a grim smile. And then turning to the sailors, who had been watching the little scene with evident surprise—

"Do none of you speak English?" he asked.

They seemed to understand the question, for some talk, eked out by much gesticulation, ended in one of their number trotting up the ladder to the bridge, where he disappeared into the wheelhouse. An instant later a long, red-headed man emerged and came running towards us.

"And shure wud Oi not have greeted yer honors before now," he exclaimed in the most strenuous of brogues; "but 'twas me trick at the wheel, and niver a wan of these spalpeens wud relieve me. An' what can Oi do fer ye now at all?"

"What boat is this?"

"The Portugaise ship, San Joseph, fr'm Buenos Ayres to Hamburg, wid a mixed cargo, and a very mixed crew, sorr. If it hadn't been fer a back answer whin the wine was in me, faith! it's not in this greasy flat-iron that Tim Blake wud be after serving."

"Do you speak the language, my man?"

"Indade an' Oi do, sorr; an' good ralsion, seeing that 'tis fower years come Christmas that Oi've been steward on th' yacht iv wan iv th' Portugaise nobility."

"That's good news. And now where is the captain?"

"Faith! but 'twas a jool iv a time we were after havin' in the Bay last night, sorr, an' the old man's turned in. The second mate has gone aft, gatherin' his courage in both hands fer to wake him. Indade, sorr, 'tis a r-resolution that wud put the fear iv the Lord into a better man than him."

"Rather a Tartar, eh?"

"A strong man, sorr, an' a good seaman fer a greaser, though his temper is not pro-digious. But see, here he comes, like a dook out iv a theater."

He was indeed a fine figure of a man, fully six feet in height and proportionately broad. His skin was very dark, and his eyes of the deep blackness that I have since observed in Indian races, but very soft and glowing. His hair, which he wore at a greater length than is customary amongst sailors, showed under his cap in glossy curls; and his mustache was twisted back almost to his ears.

He bowed to us with a deliberate courtesy, muttering a greeting in his own tongue. He spoke no English, and it was through the medium of Tim Blake that he offered us hospitality. It was no time for explanations, so, guarding Marnac between us, we hurried down to a large cabin where warm garments and steaming cups of hot coffee and sugar were brought by the worthy Irishman, to whose care we had been assigned. As far as could be judged, I had not contracted so much as a cold in the head, despite my long exposure. When we had completed our change of clothes, my cousin beckoned me outside the cabin, closing the door on our prisoner.

"I have asked Blake to take me to the captain, for it is right that he should know the true position of affairs," he whispered. "While I am gone, you must sit with Marnac. Remember, do not let him out of your sight for a moment."

"Very well," I said, and he strode off down the dark alley of the passageway.

When I re-entered the cabin I found Marnac muffled to the chin, under the blankets of a bunk. He gave me one of his quick, evil glances, that was unpleasantly reminiscent of an aged rat surprised in an iron gin. I had so great a horror and detestation of the man that his mere presence was a source of physical discomfort to me; and when, sitting up amongst his wraps, he commenced to pester me with questions, I could endure it no longer. I retired outside the cabin, seating myself with my back to the door. I was as well there, I argued, as in the interior, and in a position infinitely more satisfactory to myself.

The garments they had lent me were thick and warm; the dose of brandy had been considerable. I was weary from the toll of a sleepless night. Those are my excuses for the fact that in the course of the next five minutes I fell soundly asleep.

It was Graden who woke me, a very angry and exasperated Graden who shook my senses into with with unnecessary violence. I started up, protesting against his treatment.

"I thought better of you than this," he said, with his hand still fixed in my collar.

"My back was against the door. He could not pass without waking me. What does it matter?" I grumbled, with every sign of irritation.

"I told you to watch him, to stay in-

side the cabin, and I find you snoring here. No more excuses, please. You know the ability of the man. Let us hope he has not taken advantage of any chances you gave him."

He opened the door cautiously, peeped in, and then flung it wide with a great oath. The cabin was empty!

Yet there was no doubt as to his manner of escape. In the middle of the flooring there gaped a little hole, with a heavy square of wood lying beside it. On examination we found that this entrance had also been barred by a grating, which now swung downwards on its hinges, disclosing a wooden ladder, the foot of which was indistinguishable in the gloom below.

"He is in the hold!" I cried. "He is hiding somewhere amongst the cargo! We shall never find him without the help of the crew."

Amongst the excellent points in my cousin's character was that of perfect self-control. There was no anger in his voice to remind me of my blunder when he spoke again.

"It's not the hold, Cousin Robert," he said. "This is the ship's lazarette, where the food is stored. There are usually two entrances, each similar to this. If he has escaped by the second, it's a bad business. It will mean he has found a friend, for these gratings should be secured. But it may be that he is lurking amongst the pork and biscuits. If so, we ought to find him easily enough. I don't want to bring the crew into this affair if I can help it. It will be enough if the captain knows."

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