

FORTY YEARS BETWEEN

By LLOYD OSBOURNE
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"Ah, if it had been any one but him!" exclaimed Captain Hadow.

"It's horrible to call him a deserter," said Francis.

"Don't let's do it," said the captain.

"We have to say something, sir," replied the first lieutenant helplessly.

"One can always lie, I suppose," said Hadow.

"There's nothing I wouldn't do myself for Jack Garrard," said Mr. Francis.

"Why not say he was kidnapped here by the hill tribes?" said Hadow. "We aren't certain sure he wasn't, and no one can deny but what he might have been."

"But the admiral would be bound to inquire into it," said Mr. Francis. "Sooner or later he'd send a ship."

"Trust Jack to do his own lying when she gets here," said Hadow.

"Besides, he'll be sick of the whole thing and only too glad to step aboard."

"But won't we be asked why we didn't rescue him?" asked Francis.

"No, no; I have it!" cried the captain.

"It's certainly a case for stretching a point, sir," said Mr. Francis.

"Enter in the log," said the captain, speaking very slowly and thoughtfully.

"That passed Midshipman John de Vigne Garrard, failing to report himself at the expiration of his leave, was afterward discovered to have been kidnapped by the hill tribes of Borabora Island. On my threatening to land a party to recover him I was dissuaded by King George, who cleared himself of any personal responsibility in the matter and who promised, if only I would give him time, to recover the man without bloodshed or any cost to his majesty's government. The king urged that the use of force would imperil the officer's life, which otherwise he had every confidence would be spared."

"Very good, sir," said Mr. Francis.

"You'll give old George a flaming character," added Hadow.

"Very good, sir," said Mr. Francis.

"File it on about his reverence for the queen and the way he gave beef to the ship," said Hadow.

"And what then, sir?" inquired Mr. Francis.

"Well, you know," said Hadow, "my orders here leave me a pretty wide latitude. You can't tie down a surveying ship in wild waters the way you can a simple patrol. By George, sir, I'll lay the ship back here in nine months and retake Master Johnny Garrard."

"You may count, Captain Hadow, on our most loyal and hearty support," said Mr. Francis.

"Thank you," said the captain, "and you will pass the word along that the subject is not one to be discussed."

"Quite so, sir," said the first lieutenant.

"Not a word!" exclaimed the captain.

"Though you might coach the king a bit about the hill tribes; but, of course, not a whisper that we're ever coming back."

"No, sir," said Mr. Francis.

"This must go no farther than you and me," said Hadow.

"It shall not, sir," returned the first lieutenant.

"We shall sail tonight at the turn of the tide," said the captain.

"Very good, sir," said Mr. Francis.

It was not nine months—it was fifteen and some days to spare—before the Dauntless again raised the peak of Borabora and backed her mainyard off the settlement.

It was morning when Hadow raised the island, a fleecy speck of cloud against the sky line, and he shortened sail at once and lingered out the day, so as to bring him up to it by dark. After supper every light on board was doused and the great hull, gliding through the glass smooth water, merged her steep sides and towering yards and canvas into the universal shadow.

By 10 the ship was hove to close ashore, and the lights of the little settlement glimmered through the palms. The warm night, laden with exotic fragrance and strangely exciting in the intensity of its stillness and beauty, hid beneath its far reaching pall the various actors of an extraordinary drama. With pistols buckled to their hips, Brady, Winterslea, Hotham and Stanbury-Jones, four officers of the ship, together with Hatch, a flinty faced old seaman who could be trusted, all slipped down the ladder into the captain's gig and pulled with muffled oars for the break in the reef. Picking their way through the pass with the surf on either hand roaring in their ears, they slowly penetrated the lagoon and headed for the king's house. The shelving beach brought them to a stop, and, all jumping out to lighten the boat, they drew her over the shingle and made her painter fast to a pandanus tree. Then, acting in accordance with a preconcerted plan, Winterslea was sent forward to track down their prey, while the rest huddled together to await his return.

Ten minutes, twenty minutes, passed in palpitating suspense. A girl drew by wreathed in flowers. She looked out to sea, then up at the stars and shrank again into the shadow. From the neighboring houses there came the

sound of mellow voices and of laughter. A pig rooted and rustled among a heap of coconut shells. Half an hour passed, and from far across the water, as faint and silvery as some elfin signal, the ship sent her message of the time—six bells.

Panting and crouching, Winterslea groped his way among them.

"Come," he said.

They followed him in silence, unloosing their holsters and grimly ready. A pair of handcuffs clinked in Hatch's jumper. They inhaled the deep breath of tried and resolute men, inured to danger and accustomed to give and receive an unflinching loyalty.

"There!" said Winterslea.

The path opened out on a little clearing among the trees and showed them, set on high, the outlines of a native house. Like all Tahitian houses, it was on the model of a birdcage, and the oval wall of bamboo, set side by side, let through vertical streaks of light from the lamp or fire within. As the whole party drew nearer they heard deep below them on the other side the pleasant sound of falling water and realized that the cliff they were mounting overlooked a little river at its foot. Here in exquisite seclusion Jack Garrard had chosen the spot for his moral suicide.

Creeping up to the house and looking through the cracks of the bamboos, his comrades saw him sitting within dressed like a native in tapa cloth, with bare chest and flowers in his tawny hair. He was sitting in a hammock, and with her head against his knee, a beautiful girl was looking up into his face, one hand locked in his. In that land of pretty women she was the one that outshone them all, Tehea, the sister of the king, for whose sweet favor every man on board had sought in vain. And here she was, with her long hair loosened and her eyes swimming with love, looking up at the lad who had given name and honor to win her heart. The pair were hardly more than children, and Brady, a sentimentalist of forty, with red hair, sighed as he peeped through the eaves and thought of his own dear girl at home.

Garrard laid down the pipe he had been smoking and in happy unconsciousness of any audience but the woman at his feet began to sing. His voice had always been his greatest charm and the means of gaining him the friendship of men much older than himself. It had won Hadow. It had won Francis.

Jack lay back in the hammock and with wonderful tenderness and feeling sang "Flow Gently, Sweet Afton," repeating the last verse several times over. It was plain that something in it—some phrase or line—had deeply moved him, for he suddenly bent over and laid his face in his hands, shaking with a strange emotion. Tehea arose and, throwing her arms round his neck and forcing away his hands, pressed her lips to his wet eyes. Even as she did so Brady gave the signal for the whole party to move round to the door.

He entered first, the others close behind him. Jack leaped to his feet, white and speechless, his wide open eyes those of an animal at bay. Brady, Winterslea, Stanbury-Jones, Hotham, Hatch, the familiar faces haunted him like the sight of ghosts. Friends no longer, they were now avengers with the right to track him down and kill him.

"Jack!" cried Brady in a stifled voice.

The lad took a step back. The girl moaned and tried to run between Hatch and Stanbury-Jones. The old seaman caught and shook her like a dog, tearing away the whistle she put to her lips and dashing it to the floor. Jack put up his hand and snatched a pistol hidden in the thatch of the roof. Brady on the instant leveled his own and thundered out:

"Drop it, or I'll shoot!"

"Shoot or be hanged!" returned Jack, and with that he turned his pistol on himself, and, placing the muzzle against his forehead, pulled the trigger. It missed fire.

Before he could try again Brady had caught him around the neck, while



Jack lay back in the hammock and sang. Hatch, resigning the girl to Stanbury-

Jones, ran in and snapped the handcuffs on his wrists.

"Jack," cried Brady, "we aren't going to hurt you. We've rescued you from the hill tribes. Man, you're saved!"

"You never was no deserter," said Hatch.

"Mind you back us up, old fellow," said Winterslea.

"Give us your sin, boy," said Hotham.

It was some time before Jack could pull himself together. When at last he did so and began to appreciate the generosity of his captain and shipmates and their astounding concern to save him from the penalty of his crime, he underwent one of those reactions when despair gives way to the maddest gaiety. He swore at Hatch and made him take off the irons. He got out a bottle of white rum and forced them all to drink his health. He kept them in a roar with the story of his adventures and laughed and cried in turn as he described his life ashore.

"What does she want?" demanded Brady, as Tehea insistently repeated some words in native language.

"She says," said Jack, calmly picking up the whistle from the floor and touching it to his lips, "she says I've only to blow this and you will all be dead in five minutes!"

A hush fell upon the company.

Jack, with an oath, flung the whistle from him.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I am grateful. I am d—d grateful. If I live I shall try to repay each one of you. I shall try to be a better man. I shall try to be worthy of your kindness." He went around and shook hands solemnly with every one of them.

"D—d grateful!" he repeated.

"Let's be off," said Brady.

"Now, lad, your word of honor," said Winterslea.

Jack looked about him helplessly.

"I suppose I've no right to ask such a thing," he said. "I know how good you've been to me already and all that, but—but, gentlemen, she's my wife. I love her. I shall never see her again. May I not entreat a single minute for myself?"

"No," said Brady.

Jack went over to Tehea and took her hand. He put his arms about her and unashamed before them all pressed her comely head against his breast. He tried to explain the inexorable fate he was so powerless to resist. In incoherent whispers he told her he would break his chains and return to her free in the years to come to devote his life to the woman he loved. He called her the dearest names and begged her not to forget him, but she, with a perception greater than his own, swept away these despairing protestations with disdain. The daughter of one king, the sister of another, could she not meet force by force? These fierce intruders, with their rough voices and drawn pistols, who were they to threaten a princess of the royal blood and carry away her lover before her eyes? If they were strong she was stronger, and what ship cannon, she asked, however murderous or far ranging, could penetrate those mountain recesses whither she would carry him before the morning? Ah, she said, it was for him to choose between her and them; between Britain and the island; between love and the service of the white queen beyond the seas.

"I have chosen," he said.

Her eyes flashed as she freed herself from his arms.

"I am hateful in my own sight for having loved you," she said.

"Will you not even wish me well, Tehea?" he asked.

"No!" she cried. "I hope you will die!"

He turned away.

"Slut!" she cried after him.

He came back to her, downcast and silent.

"Remember," she said in an agony of sweet relenting, "that wherever thou goest, however many the years that may divide us, however wide the waters or the land, I shall be here waiting for thee, here in this house of our happiness, and if I die before thou comest here thou wilt find my grave."

"Tehea," he said, "as God sees me, some day I shall return!"

She took his hands and looked up into his face with such poignant longing and tenderness that Jack's comrades, already uncomfortable enough, were quite overcome by the scene. Tough old Hatch snuffled audibly, and Brady could hardly speak.

"Come, come, lad," he cried huskily, "you mustn't keep us longer!"

Jack unclasped the girl's hands and suffered himself to be led away by his comrades. A few minutes later they clambered up the ladder, the boat was hoisted in and the boatswain's whistle was rousing the watch on deck.

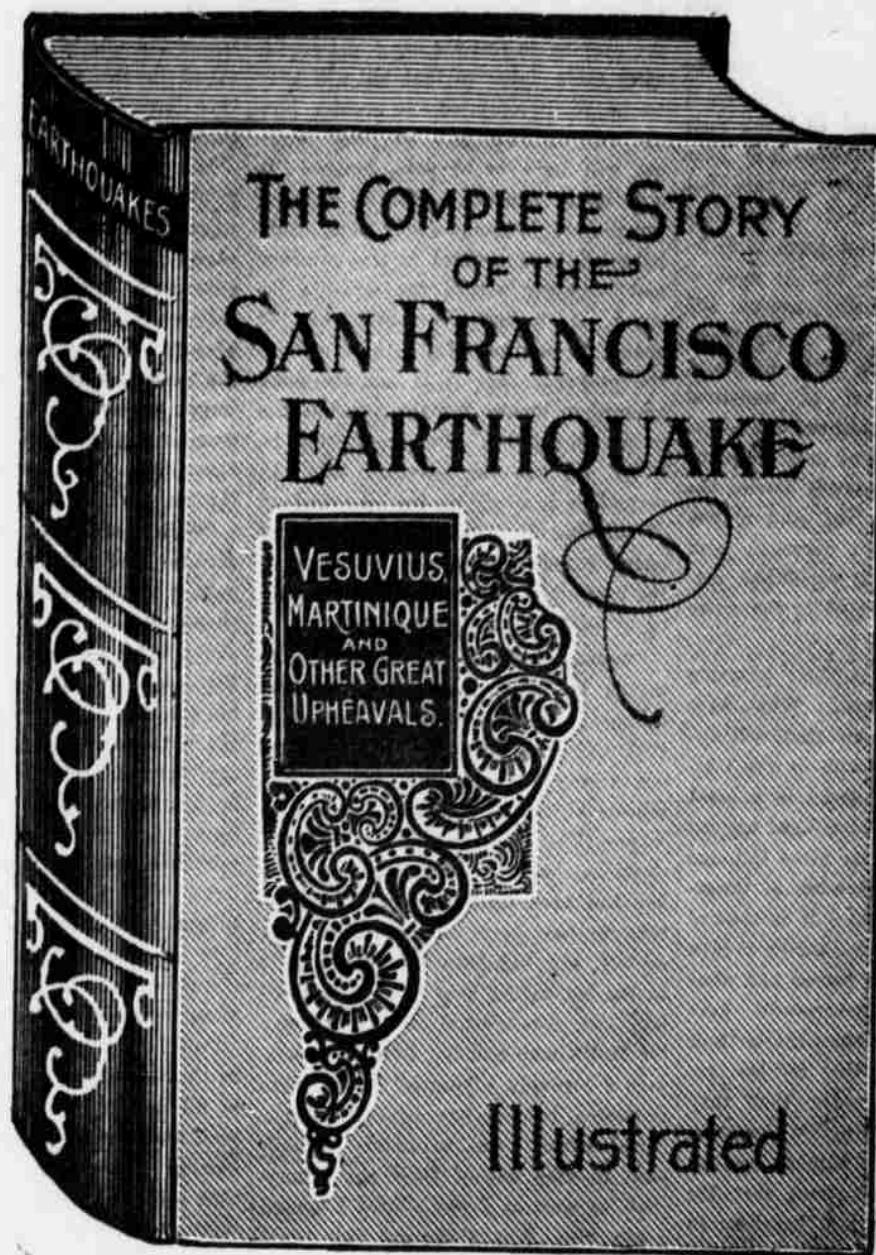
"Mainsail haul!"

By morning the island had sunk behind them, and, standing on the dizzy main royal yard, with one arm round the mast, Jack could make out nothing but a little cloud on the horizon.

At sixty John Garrard was a post captain, lieutenant commander of the bath.

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