The Stowaway

By

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Synopsis of Previous Chapters.

CHAPTER I—Overhearing a conspiracy between her uncle and the captain of his ship to sink the vessel and collect insurance, Iris Yorke secretes herself aboard the Andromeda just before it sails for southern seas. Her uncle, who is her guardian and has commanded her to wed old Dicky Bulmer, thinks she has run away to avoid the distasteful marriage. II—Philip Hozier, young and hadnsome second officer of the Andromeda, discovers Miss Yorke aboard. III—Iris tells Hozier of the plot to sink the vessel, and he keeps watch on Captain Coke. Mysterious defect in the steering gear discovered, causing the ship to veer from her course. Coke treats the matter lightly. IV—While putting into a harbor at an unknown island the Andromeda suddenly is shelled by a mysterious foe on shore. V—Shots wreck ship. Hozier is wounded and his life saved by Iris.

CHAPTER VI.

THE REFUGEES.

A COIL of stout rope fell on top of the windlass and rebounded to the deck. More than that, one end of it stretched into the infinity of dripping rock and flying spray overhead. And it had been thrown by friendly hands. It dangled from some unseen ledge.

Coke and Hozier recovered the use of their faculties simultaneously. The eyes of the two men met, but Coke was the first to find his voice.

"Salvage, by Jove!" he cried. "Up you go, Hozier! I'll sling the girl behind you. She can't manage it alone, an' it needs some one with brains to fix things up there for the rest of us." And he added hoarsely in Philip's ear: "Sharp's the word. We 'aven't many minutes!"

Iris permitted Coke and a sailor to strip off a life belt and tie her and Hozier back to back. It was wonderful, though hidden from her ken in that supreme moment, to see how they devised a double sling in order to distribute the strain. When each knot was securely fastened Coke vociferated a mighty "Heave away!"

But his powerful voice was drowned by the incessant roar of the breakers. Not even the united clamor of every man present, fifteen all told, including the drunken chief officer, could make itself heard above the din. Then Hozier tugged sharply at the rope three times, and it grew taut. Amid a jubilant cry from the others he and Iris were lifted clear of the deck. At once they were carried fully twenty feet seaward. As they swung back, not quite so far and now well above the level of the windlass from which their perilous journey had started, a ready witted sailor seized a few coils of a thin rope that lay tucked up in the angle of the bulwarks and flung them across Hozier's arms.

"Take a whip with you, sir!" he yelled, and Philip showed that he understood by gripping the rope between his teeth. It was obvious that the rescuers were working from a point well overhanging the recess into which the Andromeda had driven her bows, and there might still be the utmost difficulty in throwing a rope accurately from the rock to the wreck. As a matter of fact, no less than six previous attempts had been made, and the success of the seventh was due solely to a favorable gust of wind hurtling into the cleft at the very instant it was needed. The sailor's quick thought solved this problem for the future. By tying the small rope to the heavier one those who remained below could haul it back when some sort of signal code was established.

Once there was a check. They waited anxiously, but there was no sign given by the frail rope that they were to haul in again. Then the upward movement continued.

"Chunk o' rock in the way," announced Coke, glaring round at the survivors as if to challenge contradiction. No one answered. These men were beginning to measure their lives against the life of the wedge of iron and timber kept in position by the crumbling frame of the ship. It was a fast diminishing scale. The figures painted on the Andromeda's bows represented minutes rather than feet.

Watts was lying crouched on deck, with his arms thrown round the windlass. Looking ever for a fresh incursion of rats, he seemed to be cheered by the fact that his dreaded assailants preferred the interior of the forecastle to the wave swept deck. He was the only man there who had no fear of death. Suddenly he began to croon a long forgotten sailor's chanty:

"Now, me lads, sing a stave of the dead man's mass,
We'll never sail 'ome again, oh;
We're twelve old salts an' the skipper's lass,
Marooned in the Spanish main, oh!
Sing nay—
Sing no—
A nikker is Davy Jones!
Just one more plug an' a swig at the jug,
An' up with the skull an' bones!"

After a longer and faster haul than had been noticed previously the rope stopped a second time. Every one except Watts was watching the whip intently.

"There she goes!" yelled the sailor in charge of the line. He began to haul in the slack like a madman.

A dark form loomed downward through the mist. It was Hozier, alone, coming back to them. A frenzied cheer broke from the lips of those overwrought men. They knew what that meant. Somewhere high above the black rocks and the flying scud was hope throned in the blessed sunshine. They drew him in cautiously until Coke was able to grasp his hand. They were quick to see that he brought a second rope and a spare whip.

"Two at a time on both ropes," was his inspiriting message. "They're friendly Portuguese up there, but no one must be seen if a boat is sent from the island to find out what has become of the ship. So step lively! Now, captain, tell 'em off in pairs."

Coke's method was characteristic. He literally fell on the two nearest men and began to truss them. Hozier followed his example and tied two others back to back. They vanished, and the ropes returned, much more speedily this time. Four and four again were drawn up to safety. There were left the captain, Hozier and the unhappy Watts, who was now crying because the skipper had "set about" him just for "singin' a reel ole windjammer song."

"You must take up this swine," said Coke to Hozier, dragging Watts to his feet with scant ceremony. "If I lay me 'ands on 'im I'll be tempted to throttle 'im."

Before quitting the deck Hozier helped to adjust the remaining rope around the captain's portly person. They were lifted clear of the trembling forecastle almost simultaneously and in the very nick of time. Already the skeleton of the ship's hull was beginning to slip off into deep water. The deck was several feet lower than at the moment of the vessel's final impact against the rocks. Even before the three reached the ledge from which their rescuers were working the bridge and funnel were swept away, the foremast fell, the forehold and forecastle were riotously flooded by the sea, and Watts, were he capable of using his eyes, might have seen his deadly enemies, the rats, swarming in hundreds to the tiny platform that still rose above the destroying waves. Soon even that frail ark was shattered. When the keel and garboard strake plates snapped, all that was left of the Andromeda toppled over, and the cavern she had invaded rang with a fierce note of triumph as the next wave thundered in without hindrance.

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It was indeed a new and strange world on which Iris looked when able to breathe and see once more. During that terrible ascent she had retained but slight consciousness of her surroundings. She knew that Hozier and herself were drawn close to a bulging rock, that her companion clutched at it with hands and knees and thus fended her delicate limbs from off its broken surface; she felt herself half carried, half lifted, up into free air and dazzling light; she heard voices in a musical foreign tongue uttering words that had the ring of sympathy.

Friendly hands placed her in a warm and sunlit cleft, and she lay there, unable to think or move. By degrees the numbness of body and mind gave way to clearer impressions. But she took much for granted. For instance, it did not seem an unreasonable thing that the familiar faces of men from the Andromeda should gather near her on an uneven shelf of rock strewn with broken bowlders and the litter of sea birds. She recognized them vaguely, and their presence brought a new confidence. They increased in number. Sailor-like, they began to take part instantly in the work of rescue, but she wondered dully why Hozier did not come to her, nor did she understand that he had gone back to that raging inferno beneath until she saw his blood stained face appear over the lip of the precipice.

Then she screamed wildly, "Thank God—oh, thank God!" and staggered to her feet in the frantic desire to help in unfastening the ropes that bound him to the insensible Watts. Tears gushed

"THANK GOD—OH, THANK GOD!"

forth at her own helplessness. The pain in her eyes blinded her. She shrank away again. Not until Philip himself spoke did she dare to look at him, to find that he was bending over her and endeavoring to allay her agitation by repeated assurances of their common well being.

"Come, Miss Yorke," said Hozier, "our Portuguese friends say we must not remain here an instant longer than is necessary."

"Yes," said a strange voice, "the sea is moderating. At any moment a boat may appear. Follow me, all of you. The road is a rough one, but it is not far."

The speaker was an elderly man, long haired and bearded, of whose personality the girl caught no other details than the patriarchal beard, a pair of remarkably bright eyes, a long, pointed nose and a red scar that ran diagonally across a domed forehead. He turned away without further explanation and began to climb a natural pathway that wound itself up the side of an almost perpendicular wall of rock.

Hozier caught Iris by the arm and would have assisted her, but she shook herself free. She felt and conducted herself like a fractious child.

"I can manage quite well," she said, with an odd petulance.

Suddenly she clung to him.

"Don't let them send me back to the ship," she implored.

"No, no. You are safe now."

"Of course I am safe, but I dread that ship. Why did I ever come on board? Captain Coke said he would sink her. I told you"—

"Steady! Keep a little nearer the rocks on your left. The passage is narrow here."

Hozier raised his voice somewhat and purposely hurried her. They were skirting the seaward face of the rocky islet on which they had found salvation. The sun was blazing at them sideways from a wide expanse of blue sky. Thinking he was still dizzy from the effects of the blow, which the girl had ascribed to the bursting of a shell, Philip glanced at his watch. It was twenty-five minutes past 8. Yet he distinctly remembered eight bells being struck while Coke was telling him from the bridge to give the anchor thirty-five fathoms of cable. Was it possible that they had gone through so much during those few minutes?

Just then the track turned sharply away from the sea. A dry water course cut deeply into the cliff, where torrential rains had found an upright layer of soft scoria imbedded in the mass of basalt. Their guide was standing on the sky line of the cleft, some forty feet above them.

"Tell the others to make haste," he said. "This is the end of your journey."

"Who is he?" Iris asked, being rather breathless now after a steep climb.

"I don't know," said Hozier.

"How absurd!" she gasped. "I—I think I'm dreaming. Why have we come here?"

It was hot as a furnace in this narrow ravine. Each upward step demanded an effort. She would have slipped and hurt herself many times were it not for Hozier's firm grasp, nor did she realize the sheer exhaustion that forced him to seek support from the neighboring wall with his disengaged hand. The man in front, however, was alive to their dangerous

"PARDON ME, MONSIEUR."

plight. He said something in his own language, for his English had the precise staccato accent of the well educated foreigner, and another man appeared. The sight of the newcomer startled Iris more than any other event that had happened since the Andromeda reached the end of her last voyage. He wore the uniform of those dreadful beings whom she had seen on the island.

She shrieked. Hozier fancied she had sprained an ankle, but before she could utter any sort of explanation the apparition in uniform was by her side and murmuring words that were evidently meant to be reassuring. Seeing that he was not understood, he broke into halting French.

He was a handsome youngster, evidently an officer, and his eyes dwelt on the girl's face with no lack of animation as he led her into a cave which seemed to have been excavated from the inner side of a small crater.

"You can rest here in absolute safety, madame," he said. "Permit me to arrange a seat. Then I shall bring you some wine."

Iris flung off the hand which held her arm so persuasively.

"Please do not attend to me. There are wounded men who need attention far more than I," she said, speaking in English, since it never entered her mind that the Portuguese officer had been addressing her in French.

He was puzzled more by her action than her words, but Hozier, who had followed close behind, explained in sentences built on the Ollendorffian plan that mademoiselle was disturbed, mademoiselle required rest, mademoiselle hardly understood that which had arrived, et voila tout.

"Mademoiselle without doubt is the daughter of monsieur the captain?"

"No," said Hozier rather curtly, turning to ascertain how Iris had disposed of herself in the interior of the cavern. It was his first experience of a South American dandy's pose toward women, or, to be exact, toward women who are young and pretty, and it seemed to him not the least marvelous event of an hour crammed with marvels that any man should endeavor to begin an active flirtation under such circumstances.

He saw that Iris was seated on a camp stool. Her face was buried in her hands. A wealth of brown hair was tumbled over her neck and shoulders; the constant showers of spray had loosened her tresses, and the unavoidable rigors of the passage from ship to ledge had shaken out every hairpin. The tam-o'-shanter cap she was wearing early in the day had disappeared at some unknown stage of the adventure. Her attitude bespoke a mood of overwhelming dejection. Like the remainder of her companions she was drenched to the skin.

Their trials were far from ended when their feet rested on the solid rock. There was every indication that their rescuers were refugees like themselves. The scanty resources visible in the cave, the intense anxiety of the elderly Portuguese to avoid observation from the chief island of the group, the very nature of the apparently inaccessible crag in which he and his associates were hiding—each and all of these things spoke volumes.

Hozier did not attempt to disturb the girl until the dapper officer produced a goatskin and poured a small quantity of wine into a tin cup. With a curious eagerness he anticipated the other's obvious intent.

"Pardon me, monsieur," he said, seizing the vessel, and his direct Anglo-Saxon manner quite robbed his French of its politeness. Then his vocabulary broke down, and he added more suavely in English: "I will persuade her to drink a little. She is rather hysterical, you know."

The Portuguese nodded as though he understood. Iris looked up when Hozier brought her the cup.

"Is there no water?" she asked plaintively.

"We have no water, mademoiselle," the officer said. Then he glanced at the group of bedraggled sailors. "And very little wine," he added.

"Be quick, please," put in the elderly Portuguese with a tinge of impatience. "We have no second cup, and there are wounded men"—

"Give it to them," said Iris, lifting her face again for an instant. "I do not need it. I have told you that once already. I suppose you think I should not be here."

"I am sure our friend did not mean that," said Hozier, looking squarely into those singularly bright eyes. He caught and held them.

"I did not mean that the lady should be left to die, if that is the interpretation put on my remark," came the quiet answer. "But it was an act of the utmost folly to bring a delicate girl on such an errand. I cannot imagine what your captain was thinking of when he agreed to it."

"Wot's that, mister?" demanded Coke. Now that his fit of rage had passed the bulky skipper of the Andromeda was red faced and imperturbable as usual. The manifold perils he had passed through showed no more lasting effect on him than a shower of sleet on the thick hide of the animal he so closely resembled.

"Are you the captain?" said the other.

"Yes, sir. An' I'd like to 'ear w'y my ship or 'er present trip wasn't fit for enny young teddy, let alone"—

"That is a matter for you to determine. I suppose you know best how to conduct your own business. My only concern is with the outcome of your rashness. Why did you deliberately sacrifice your ship in that manner?"

"Wot are you a-drivin' at, mister?" Coke growled.

"Do you deny, then, that you acted like a madman? Do you say that you did not know quite well the risk you ran in bringing your vessel to the island in broad daylight?"

Then Coke found his breath.

"Risk!" he roared. "Risk in steamin' to an anchorage an' sendin' a boat ashore for water? There seems to be a lot of mad folk loose just now on Fernando Noronha, but I'm not one of 'em, an' that's as much as I can say for enny of you—damme if it ain't."

"Who are you, then? Who sent you here?"

"I'm Captain James Coke of the British ship Andromeda—that's 'oo I am—an' I was sent 'ere, or leastways to the river Plate, by David Verity & Co. of Liverpool."

It must not be forgotten that Coke shared with his employer a certain unclassical freedom in the pronunciation of the ship's name. The long "e" apparently puzzled the other man.

"Andromeda!" he muttered. "Spell it!"

"My godfather, this it an asylum for sure," grunted Coke, in a spasm of furious mirth. "A-n-d-r-o-m-e-d-a. Now you've got it."

"You are unlucky, Captain Coke, most unlucky," the other said. "I regret my natural mistake, which, it seems, was shared by the authorities of Fernando do Noronha. You have blundered into a nest of hornets, and as a result you have been badly stung. Let me explain matters. I am Dom Corria Antonio de Sylva, ex-president of the republic of Brazil. There is at this moment a determined movement on foot on the mainland to replace me in power, and with that object in view efforts are being made to secure my escape from the convict settlement in which my enemies have imprisoned me. I and two faithful followers are here in hiding. My friend Capitano Salvador de San Benavides," and he bowed with much dignity toward the uniformed officer, "came here two days ago in a felucca to warn me that a steamer would lie to about a mile south of the island tonight. The steamer's name is Andros-y-Mela. It is rather like the name of your unhappy vessel—so much alike that the Andromeda has been sunk by mistake. That is all."

Coke, listening to this explanation with the virtuous wrath of a knave who discovers that he has been wrongfully suspected, bristled now with indignation.

"Oh, that's all, is it?" he cried sarcastically. "No, sir; it ain't all, nor 'arf, nor quarter. Let me tell you that no crimson pirate on Gawd's earth can blow a British ship off the 'igh seas an' then do the dancin' master act, with 'is 'and on 'is 'eart, an' say it was just a flamin' mistake. All, says you? Don't you believe it. There's a lot more to come yet, take my tip—a devil of a lot or I'm the biggest lunatic within a ten mile circle of w'ere I'm stannin', which is givin' long odds to any other crank in the whole creation."

"NO CRIMSON PIRATE CAN BLOW A BRITISH SHIP OFF THE 'IGH SEAS."

And Coke was right, though he little guessed then why he was so thoroughly justified in assuming that he and the other survivors of the Andromeda had not yet gone through half or quarter or more than a mere curtain raising prelude to the strange human drama in which they were destined to be the chief actors.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]