

# Flossy's Christmas

## Surprise.

From Demorest's Magazine.

### CHAPTER II

For two days after the violence of the storm had abated, the sky remained overcast, so that it was impossible to take an observation. The nights were intensely dark.

Late on the second night after the gale, when the bark lay becalmed, and motionless, seemingly, except for the slow heaving of the long, regular waves, the man on watch heard, and promptly replied a low growling sound afar off in the darkness. Captain Marwin listened to it anxiously, for he knew what it was. Hour by hour he heard it deepen and increase in volume until it became a roar. The augmentation of the sound demonstrated that, notwithstanding the calm, the bark was steadily and with alarming rapidity moving toward that terrifying voice of the breakers; she was in the grasp of an ocean current.

When dawn came, not more than three or four miles distance seemed the white line where the waves were ceaselessly lashing themselves into foam, in the rage of their unending Titanic conflict with the rocks. Beyond the silvery rings could be seen a mass of tropical foliage rising like a great green mound out of the sea. Captain Merwin, in the hope of finding an anchorage to check his vessel's progress toward destruction, heaved the lead twenty, thirty, fifty fathoms ran out, and no bottom was found. The water was deep, up to the very face of the coral-leaf toward which they were being drifted.

At one moment, when almost within the breakers, they hoped that the current would bear them just clear of the reef; and had they been strong handed enough to throw out a boat and put a drag on the bark's head they might have had that good fortune. But three of the nine men before the mast had gone overboard with the foremast and the mate at the same time had received such injuries that he died a few hours later. The faint hope was short-lived. With a horrid crash, the Mollie struck an advanced spur of the coral wall, and was there held firmly by its thousand sharp projecting points, penetrating her hull. When the third great roll came, it lifted her up high and dashed her down again with such force that the rocks came up through the bottom. Then successive waves, with noise like thunder, beat in and shattered her stern and her port quarter. The sound was deafening, the salt spray, that leaped high over the vessel, blinding. Four of the sailors and the cook, mad with fear, seized the only remaining boat, and, in defiance of the captain's orders, leaped into it as it swung at the davits, let it go awkwardly with a run, and disappeared instantly in the breakers.

Captain Merwin and his wife, having donned life preservers, went as far aft as possible, leaped overboard into a receding wave, dived under the incoming roller, and so, both being strong, courageous, cool, and excellent swimmers, succeeded in weathering the spur of the reef on which the bark was going to pieces. Having done so, they found themselves in smoother water, and at the very mouth of a narrow inlet

through the reef. A little ahead of them was a narrow belt of placid water, inside the reef encircling the island, and beyond it a narrow beach of snowy sand. On the beach were a number of almost nude brown savages, men and women, with some small children. Hardly had they time to note this much, when a double canoe, like a catamaran manned by four of the natives, darted out from the beach and rescued the captain and his wife. They also saved one of the sailors, a sturdy black fellow; but his comrade, when the canoe was within a couple of yards of him, suddenly threw up his arms, with a blood-curdling scream of agony and terror, and went swiftly down out of sight. A shark had seized him.

Mrs. Merwin, her husband, and the sailor were received by the natives with kindness, and conducted to their village, a collection of hut-like leaf-covered shelters, beneath a grove of cocoa-nut palm trees, a very little way back from the beach. Dry clothing was not offered them, for all the islanders possessed was in use and none of it could be spared—with propriety. But food was immediately tendered, and greatly accepted, for the shipwrecked trio were almost starved.

"They see at a glance," remarked Captain Merwin placidly, with his mouth full of some appetizing mess that seemed to be a mixture of poi and fish, "that we are not fit to be eaten at present, so they commence to fatten us at once."

"Do you really think that we have fallen among cannibals?" asked his wife, very pale, but speaking in a steady voice.

"I should be very much surprised if we have not," replied the captain coolly. "All the natives of these South Sea islands have the reputation of eating each other when they get a chance, and looking upon white persons as a sort of Christmas turkey."

The colored sailor's teeth chattered, his eyeballs rolled wildly, and he almost fainted with terror. "You needn't be afraid of anything of that sort happenin' ten yea here, cap'n," spoke one of the islanders, a tall fellow, as nearly naked as the rest of them, and little, if any, lighter in tint than they.

"Gosh all fish-hooks!" exclaimed the captain, irrelevantly, but with amazed earnestness.

"I dunno what may happen ter the nigger," added the islander, with a mischievous grin, "but Cap'n Merwin and Mrs. Merwin—as I presume the lady ter be—are welcome ter the land as long as we can have the pleasure of their company."

"Land O' the live! You know us?" shouted the captain, starting to his feet.

"I guess so. My name's Elnathan Perkins, and I sailed a y'age with you ten Calcutta, better'n twenty years ago."

"Elnathan Perkins! Why, I remember you, but I don't recognize you."

"Shouldn't hardly guess you would. The fashionable costume of this country is sort' conductive to the sunburn, until ye get used ten it, and perhaps makes a feller look kind o' strange. But I'll seem more natural ten yea when you get ten look more like me."

"How long have you been here?"

"Fourteen years."

"And in all that time have you had no chance to get away?"

"No; and after a while I didn't care ten. There's no work ten do, life is rather pleasant when you get used ten it, even it is sort of quiet, and I've got a wife and five children and am a sort of boss of the hull outfit in sight."

"But couldn't you have got away if you had wanted to?"

"No, cap'n. We are out of the track of all ships except such as are driven here by storms and are wrecked, as the one I came on was and as yours has been. There are hundreds of miles between this and any other island, I guess, and this, since I've got ten be boss of it, is the only island in this ocean, I believe, that is not infested by cannibals who eat all strangers they can get hold of. Those who come here, come ten stay as long as the good Lord lets them live."

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Months linked themselves together into years, and the fate of the bark Mollie was generally looked upon as another of the sad mysteries of the sea. For two or three years, whalers returning from the Pacific were looked to, with gradually waning expectancy, for news of some discovery concerning her, but none was found. Certain "mediums" professed to have opened communication with Captain Merwin's ghost "in the summer land," and a good many persons thought it would be wrong to question any longer that he and all with him had been lost. So little ground for question was deemed to exist, that the underwriters paid the insurance with a murmur. Only Florence Merwin refused to believe that her parents were dead.

In church yards all along on eastern coasts are frequently to be found monuments bearing such inscriptions as, "Here lies Peter Smith, lost at sea and never found;" or "Sacred to the memory of Abel Pinkham, lost at sea. Peace to his ashes." Well-meaning friends of Florence were somewhat scandalized that she did not put up some such tribute to the memory of her parents. But she obstinately refused to do so; although she mourned for them, she did not mourn as one without hope.

"I do not believe," she was wont to say, "that father and mother are lost. I cannot believe it—I will not believe it! Some day they will come back. No; I can give you no reason why I think so, only that I do. Something in my heart tells me so."

Four years after her orphanage began, Mr. Sam Allen, an active good-looking and worthy young merchant, doing business in New London, persuaded Florence to become his wife; but he only gained her consent when he solemnly promised that if her parents came back he would give them a home with him. He would have promised anything on that extremely improvable contingency, to get Flossy. But, the promise once made, he thought no more of it than the parent does of the soothing pledge to a crying child. "When Christmas comes on the 4th of July, I will give you a winned frog that talks." Flossy kept it in mind, however, furnished a room in her new home for the old folks, and sometimes, when dispirited or sick, actually found herself looking out of the window for them, so real was her hope. The family doctor very seriously warned her husband that "she must not be allowed to dwell so much upon the subject, lest it become a mania; and, should they return, the news must be gently broken to her, especially if she is in delicate health, or the effect on her nervous system may be very serious." Sam loved his pretty young wife very dearly, and promised to take good heed of the warning.

(To be continued.)

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