

The Strumpet Sea

By BEN AMES WILLIAMS

SYNOPSIS

George McAusland was 38 years old when he sailed from America to undertake his post as a missionary in the Fiji Islands. A crime he had committed in a fit of excitement had shattered all his confidence in himself. He felt forced to avoid pretty Mary Doncaster, who boarded the ship at Honolulu. She was en route to visit her parents, who were missionaries on Gilead Island. Mary was attracted by George's attempts to avoid her. One day George accidentally fell overboard. Mary unhesitatingly dove into the sea to rescue George, who falls in love with her. When the boat approached her home on Gilead Island, they learned that Mary's parents had both died. George volunteered to take charge of the mission and asked Mary to be his wife. She accepted his clumsy proposal, and they left the ship to live in her former home on the island. The scanty dress of the natives shocked George at first, but he soon became reconciled to their customs. Mary discovered that Corkran, a sailor friend of George's, had come there to help George and Mary if they needed him. Their peaceful life was interrupted one day when a ship stopped in the harbor in search of pearls. They see the pearl divers attacked and their schooner sunk by a pirate ship. The pirates head their boat toward the bay near their village. George sends Mary inland for safety and walks down to the beach, alone and defenseless, to meet the unwelcome visitors. Natives carry him back to Mary hours later, shot through the shoulder. Natives killed the pirates that night and set their boat afloat. The boat was still burning when the long-awaited whaler, the Venture, arrived. Mary was told that his captain had died, and that his sons, Richard and Peter Corr, were now in charge as captain and first mate.

CHAPTER VIII—Continued

Mary told him what had happened. When she spoke of Fritz Aulgur's first coming to hunt pearls, Richard asked quickly:

"Pearls? Did he find any?"

"Yes."

"Here? On this island?"

He frowned at his own thoughts as she went on. She told him she and George had half forgotten Fritz, because there were so many people sick on the island, and dying, and he asked:

"Where'd they catch it?"

"George had a cold when we landed here. He's not very well, even now. I'm afraid they got it from him." She went on to tell him of the other schooner, and how the men aboard her killed Aulgur, and shot George; and how the islanders surprised that schooner in the night and clubbed the men and burned her afterward.

She saw him more and more alert as she proceeded. "That's why they're hiding now," he decided. "They're afraid of us. They'll jump us too if we give them a chance. They're scared, and when natives are scared you can't figure 'em." He asked: "Mary, have you told Peter about the pearls?"

"No. I didn't tell him much of anything."

"Well, don't, then," he directed. "Don't tell him or anyone about the pearls. The men will be willing to turn divers if they know."

"All right."

"Is your husband badly hurt?"

"I think he'll be all right. But he's sick, too, Richard."

"Richard, will you take us home with you?"

His eyes lighted. "Sure! Now you're sensible. You don't belong here, Mary. How about your husband? Will he go?"

"He wants to, yes." He swung to look vigilantly toward the Venture at anchor half a mile off, and she said: "George doesn't know what happened. I mean about the massacre."

Then Tommy came down the path to tell Mary that George was awake and calling her; and a moment later Peter appeared. He saw Richard, and hesitated, and Richard said briefly:

"Father died about daylight, Peter. We'll bury him here this morning, and pull out this afternoon."

Peter protested: "What's the hurry?"

"The natives here killed three white men a couple of days ago. Traders," Richard looked at Mary warningly. "And burned their schooner. That was the smoke we saw. That's why they're hiding now. It wouldn't be safe to lie in the bay overnight."

Peter stared at his brother, and Mary saw his lips white. "Killed them?" he whispered hoarsely, and looked quickly around. "Say, are they laying for us?" He swung toward Mary. "Blast it, why didn't you tell me?"

"I'm not afraid of them," Mary explained. "I never thought of telling you." She said: "I must go to George. Don't tell him about the killing, Peter."

He nodded. At the house, she went in first. She found George in his right mind, his fever gone; but he demanded at once:

"Who was that boy here, Mary?"

"That was Tommy Hanline, my cousin. Don't you remember I told you the Venture is here?"

"I don't remember much of anything. What happened to the men from the schooner, the men who shot me?"

She told him less than the truth. "They took some girls aboard, George, but they're gone now."

"I tried to stop them, but I wasn't man enough. Where are the people from the Venture? Bring them in."

So she called them into the little room where he lay. They seemed to fill it; and George on the bed was very small. Mary said: "This is Richard Corr, George. And Peter. And my cousin Tommy."

"Glad you've come," George told them. "We've had trouble here."

"We saw no sign of them when

we came in," Richard assented. Mary looked at him gratefully. George asked:

"Where's your uncle, Mary?"

"Uncle Tom was killed by a whale months ago, George," she said. "And Cap'n Corr died last night." She looked at Richard. "Richard is Captain of the Venture now."

"I'm sorry!" He spoke apologetically. "I'm not in shape to play host, I'm afraid; but you're welcome here. How long can you stay with us?"

"Peter and I want to bury my father ashore here, Mr. McAusland," he said. "I thought I'd—see to that first. This morning."

CHAPTER IX

Late that morning Captain Corr's body, sewed snugly in clean canvas, was brought ashore. Mary went to hear Richard read the funeral service, and she thought he was like a small boy floundering through a recitation badly memorized.

When the time came to speak to George of departure, Mary told him what they planned; but she found in him an unexpected opposition. He was weak enough to be stubborn; and he watched them all with dry burning eyes and said flatly that he would not go. Peter in his persuasions was gentle with the hurt man; but Richard, uneasy for his ship, was brisk and stern. Sometimes



Mary went to hear Richard read the funeral service.

his tone made anger rise in George's cheek.

"You'll never be really well here," Mary pleaded. "I want to get you back to clean, sunny, cold weather. That's what you need."

He looked past her at Richard, yet he spoke to her. "What changed your mind, Mary?" he asked. "Has Captain Corr here persuaded you?"

Mary said: "No, of course not! I think I'm afraid to stay!"

"You can always hide," he protested. "And after what happened this time, the people will hide too."

The argument proceeded for so long that Richard became more and more impatient. He broke in at last on their long futility of argument and pleading.

"Mr. McAusland," he said, "this is no place for Mary."

"It's my place," George retorted. "I'm needed here; and Mary's place is with me, isn't it?"

Richard cried explosively: "Man, they don't need you! They need to get rid of you!"

Mary caught her breath; but before she could speak George asked sharply: "What do you mean?"

"Why, I mean you've killed a fair batch of them already," Richard told him.

She cried: "Hush, Richard!"

George lifted his thin, veined hand. "Be still, Mary," he commanded. Rage choked him; he began to cough heavily, and could not speak, and a red stain touched his lips. He wiped it away with his fingers, and muttered apologetically to Mary: "I guess the bullet must have touched my lungs."

Richard spoke in wrath. "Don't be blind, man. You've got consumption. You'll die of it if you stay here, and so will half the people on the island."

"Richard, don't! You're cruel. Be still, George, it isn't true."

"It is true, isn't it?" George asked, looking up at her. "What Captain Corr says? I can see it must be true."

She said slowly: "I'm afraid it is, my dear."

He nodded in a broken submission. "Very well," he said. "Then I've failed here. Worse than failed. We'll have to go."

After that surrender, as though crushed by his own defeat, by the collapse of his life and hopes, he did not speak. He was passive in their hands.

Once the decision to depart was made, Mary had begun to pack their belongings. When the last of the load was borne away down the path, Peter said urgently:

"All right, Mary, come along."

She bade him go. "I—want to say good-bye alone," she said. Jarambo stood watching. Peter moved grudgingly down the trail.

She turned to Jarambo, and suddenly she felt like a little girl before this old man who had been her father's friend and hers. She said to Jarambo: "Keep this house well, Jarambo."

He assented. "Yes. But better you go."

They moved down the path together. Jarambo spoke to her, and she turned. He thrust into her hands a little twist of tappy cloth, and he said:

"You keep. Belong to you." She slipped the packet into her waist, and turned and faced Peter.

"Come along, Mary," he said. "It's late already."

She followed him toward the boat. When she was seated, she looked back and saw Jarambo standing alone where the path emerged from the trees. She touched the packet inside her dress, wondering what it contained, pressing it with her fingers. She felt in it some small, hard, round objects. Several of them. Her heart began to pound. She knew even then, without seeing them, that they were pearls.

The sun was already below the mountains when Peter's boat with Mary in the stern sheets came alongside the Venture. George on his stretcher lay on the main hatch amidships, and Mary stopped with him there. Men were at the windlass, and aloft making sail; but before the anchor came aweigh, Richard picked George up in his arms with a feminine gentleness, and carried him like a baby aft and down the companionway.

Richard laid George for the present on the long bench in the common room. He felt the Venture answer her sails and turned to go on deck. The sun was gone, night had fallen; but there was light enough to see the bold headlands at the mouth of the bay. He took the ship in hand, and Mat Forbes spoke at his elbow.

"A white man came aboard just now, Cap'n Corr," he reported. "He swam off to us in nothing but his pants, with a handkerchief around his head and a parrot hanging in it. Name of Corkran, he says, and calls himself a sailor."

Richard asked sharply: "Was he off that schooner the islanders burned?"

"No, he deserted from the Sunset, the ship that brought Mr. and Mrs. McAusland. He looks scared."

"Scared of what?"

"He didn't say. He doesn't look like one that's easy scared, either."

Later Richard met the sailor under the boat house.

"Your name's Corkran?"

"Aye, sir."

"Where did you come from?"

"Off the ship Sunset."

"Deserted?"

"Yes, your honor, sir."

"I've no use for deserters."

Corkran nodded respectfully. "Nor I, sir! But I did think myself and the young lady might be needing a good man with his fists some day, on the island, sir. Himself is a good plucked one, but he knows nothing at all, and such gets themselves into trouble they can't get out of."

"You weren't much use to him when he did need you."

"It's sorry I am, sir. Would your honor be telling me what happened?"

"You don't know?"

"I know 'twas bad," Corkran looked around. "They had me asleep, your honor, sir," he said in shame.

"Drunk?"

"I would not say so. I no more than noticed a queer taste to the coconut juice, not bad at all; so I drank it, and fell for a bit of a nap. The next I knew, an old man of them came to see was I still asleep. I was awake enough by that time to pretend to be asleep; but when a troop of them went up the trail past my house, I could look with one eye; and after that I sweated cold blood till I got away from that island, sir."

"What did you see?"

"Save me from remembering, your honor. Would your honor be needing a good harpooner, maybe?"

"You've served on whalers?"

"Aye, sir. Nineteen months. I can earn my way, you'll find."

Richard nodded. "All right, Corkran. The less talk about that back there, the better. Go forward now."

Richard went below. George still lay on the bench in the common room, Mary beside him; and Richard said: "We've a friend of yours aboard. Corkran, off the Sunset." George exclaimed: "Corkran?" Mary looked up at Richard quickly.

"Yes. He swam off to us with his parrot on his shoulder."

"Swam off? You mean he was at Gilead?"

Richard was surprised. "Didn't you know it? He must have kept out of your way."

George looked at Mary, and saw confession in her eyes, and smiled understandingly. "You knew it?"

"Yes. I was afraid it would bother you to know he was there."

"It would have," he admitted. Peter came down the companion, and Richard said to Mary:

"You'll want to give him supper here, I expect."

She nodded, and she stayed with George while Richard and Peter went into the main cabin. Mat Forbes came below to join them, and Tommy brought them their meals.

(TO BE CONTINUED)



MONKEYING WITH THE BIG SHOW

From Sarasota comes the word that the circus of 1941 will have more ruffles than ever. It has been going Hollywood for the past few seasons, but next year the biggest show on earth will look like something out of the "Arabian Nights" via Metro-Goldwyn.

Norman Bel Geddes has been retained by the Ringlings to streamline, decorate and dress the big show from the peanut bag to the elephants; and circus addicts who like their circus plain and a bit oederiferous are worried. It may be hard to tell the 1941 show from a night club interior.

The circus of tradition had faded costumes, a hard-boiled Queen of Sheba and a Maharajah of Indore who had two cauliflower ears and a broken nose.

Cinderella and her ladies generally had the appearance of being refugees from a midway.

The Fairy Prince had fallen arches, a three-days' growth of beard and a middle tooth missing. And the Caliph of Bagdad seemed freshly bounced from a corner saloon.

But the old-time circus fan was satisfied. He didn't expect too much.

There was something rough, catch-as-catch-can and impromptu about the big show that was appealing. If you wanted art and beauty you went to a musical show or a circus. And a circus had to smell like a circus, too.

But the big top woke up one spring morning and found that it had been to the beauty parlor, caliphs, princes, maharajahs, princesses, elephants, ponies and all.

When the bands blared for the opening pageant that season there wasn't a plug-ugly in the parade.

That would have been all right with the old-time circus addict if they had stopped there. But the circus management went in head over heels for glamour.

They rouged the elephant's toenails, powdered the gorilla's nose and made even the hostlers wash behind the ears. They hired beautiful showgirls, introduced the De Mille, the surrealist, and the De Sylva influence in one movement, and even went in for air conditioning the circus tent.

If you want your circus straight, with all the smells that had become traditional, you had to stay down near the camels and sea lions.

And it looks like a non-top trend. Norman Bel Geddes is now reported working on the tents. That looks like carrying the glamour stuff too far. A circus tent has always looked like a circus tent. What it will look like in 1941 is anybody's guess.

THE BREAK

I haven't any sables to slip elegantly on, Nor silver fox or monkey-fringe to lure a Don Juan; I haven't any star sapphires or robe with diamond bustle, And I haven't any bomb-proof cell to which I have to hustle!

G. K. B.

HOW LIFE GOES

Part to working, part to sleeping, part to playing, but most of life goes to waiting for some woman!

NEW VERSION

Early to bed, early to rise, Leaving more to your heirs Than you would otherwise.

"Italy Breathes Easier After Pact."—headline.

That isn't breathing; it's heavy panting.

Simile by T.G.D.—As overdressed as a cut-rate drugstore window.

EPITAPHS FOR TRAFFIC CHAOS

("Neon lights on store fronts are lights."—News item.) Here lies Lester Luther Watt; He thought a traffic light was not.

Here reposes Bixby (Leon); He thought the stop Light was a Neon.

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