
LOUIS BECKE
TOM WALLIS: A TALE OF THE SOUTH SEAS


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CHAPTER I

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FATHER AND SONS

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Northward from an Australian city, and hidden from seaward view by high wooded bluffs and green belts of dense wind-swept scrub, there lies one of the oldest and quaintest little seaport towns on the whole eastern sea-board, from the heat-smitten rocks of Cape York, in the far north of torrid Queensland, to where, three thousand miles to the south, the sweeping billows from the icy Antarctic leap high in air, and thunder against the grim and rugged walls of stark Cape Howe.

The house in which the Wallis family lived stood at the foot of one of these bluffs, within a stone's throw of the beach, and overlooking the bar; and at night time, when the swift outward rush of the river's current met the curling rollers from the open sea, the wild clamour and throbbing hum seemed to shake the walls of the old-fashioned building to its foundations. But to the two Wallis boys--who were born in that house--the noise of the beating surf, the hoarse shrieking notes of the myriad sea-birds, and the sough of the trade wind through the timbered slopes, were voices that they knew and understood, and were in a manner part and parcel of their own adventurous natures.

Let me try and attempt to draw, however rudely, an outline of a picture of their home, and of the sight that

every morning the two lads saw from their bedroom window, before they clattered downstairs into the low-ceiled old-time dining-room, to each eat a breakfast that would have done credit to a hungry bullock-driver.

First, then, the wide, blue Pacific--would that I could see it now!--sparkling and shimmering in the yellow sunshine, unbroken in its expanse except for the great dome of Kooringa Rock, a mile from the shore, from which, when the wind blew east, came the unceasing croak and whistle of ten thousand gulls and divers, who made it their rendezvous and sleeping-place.

To the north, on the other side of the roaring, restless bar (the house was on the southern horn of the entrance to the harbour), there ran a long sweeping half-mooned beach, ten miles from point to point of headland, and backed at high-water mark by a thick fringe of low, scrubby timber, the haunt of the black wallaby, and the refuge from pursuit of mobs of wild cattle. Not a dozen people in the little township had ever been through this scrub on foot; but Tom and Jack Wallis knew and loved every foot of it, from the sandspit on the northern bank of the river to the purple loom of the furthest cape. Further back still from this narrow belt of littoral, the main coastal range rose, grey and blue in the distance, monotonous in its outlines, and its silence broken only by the axes of a few wandering parties of timber-getters, who worked on the banks of the many streams rising in the mountain gullies, whose waters joined those of the great tidal river on its way to the ocean.

Southward from the bar, the coast presented another aspect; high cliffs of black, iron-stone rock stood up steep-to

from the sea, not in a continuous straight line, but in broken irregular masses, forming hundreds of small deep bays with lofty sides, and beaches of large rounded pebbles or snow-white sand. This part of the shore was so wild and desolate, that except themselves, a human being would seldom be seen about it from one year's end to the other, and the boys only went there during the crayfish season, or during an easterly gale, when from the grassy summit of one of the highest cliffs they loved to watch the maddened boil of surf far below, and catch the exhausted gulls and boobies, that sought refuge ashore from the violence of the wind amid the close-set, stunted herbage growing just beyond the reach of the flying spray. Iron-bound and grim-looking, it did not extend more than six or seven miles; and then came another long stretch of sandy beach for thrice that distance, banked up by lofty sand-dunes covered with a network of creepers, and a saline herb known as 'pig-face.'

Behind the sand-hills were a series of brackish lagoons, whose waters were covered with flocks of black swans, pelicans, and half a dozen varieties of wild duck and other waterfowl, which were seldom disturbed by any of the few settlers round about, who were too lazy to wade through water after a duck, although some of them would ride all night to steal a calf or a bullock. These lagoons had, here and there, narrow passages to the sea through the sand mounds, and where this was the case the waters were literally alive with fish--bream and whiting, and kingfish and trevally, and--but there, the memory of those happy, happy years of boyhood amid such rough and wild surroundings is strong with Tom Wallis still. For the lads, as their father

sometimes said, were born in a civilized family by mistake--Nature having intended them to have black skins and woolly hair, and to hunt paddymelons and wallabies with boomerang and waddy, like the survivors of the tribe of blacks who still led a lingering existence along the shores and around the tidal lakes and inlets of that part of the country.

Of the town itself near which they lived little need be said, except that it was very quaint, and, for a new country like Australia, old-fashioned. Once, in the early days of the colony, it promised to become a thriving and prosperous place. Many retired military and civilian officers had been given very large grants of land in the vicinity of the port, upon which they had settled, and at one time many hundreds of convicts had been employed by them. Besides these, there was a large number of prisoners who toiled on the roads, or in the saw-pits, or up on the rivers felling timber, under the supervision of Government overseers. These wretched men were generally marched to their work every morning, returning to their barrack prison at night time. There had been at first a company of soldiers stationed at the port, but when it was discovered that the place was ill-chosen for a settlement--in consequence of the shifting nature of the bar--they were withdrawn to Sydney with all the prisoners, except those who were assigned to the settlers as servants or workmen. Then most of the principal settlers themselves followed, and left their houses untenanted, and their cleared lands to be overgrown, and become swallowed up by the ever-encroaching scrub, which in those humid coastal regions is more an Indian jungle than

bush, as Australians understand the word 'bush.' With the soldiers went, of course, the leading civil officials, and the little seaport became semi-deserted, grass grew in the long, wide streets, and the great red-bricked barracks and Government storehouses were left to silence and decay.

Nearly twenty years after the breaking up of the settlement as a penal establishment, Lester Wallis and his young wife had settled in the place. He had formerly been in the service of the East India Company, where he had accumulated a small fortune. During a visit to Sydney, he had met and married the daughter of one of the Crown officials, an ex-naval officer, and, loth to return to the trying climate of India, decided to remain in Australia, and enter into pastoral pursuits. For a few thousand pounds he bought a small cattle-station at Port Kooringa, and, in a measure, became the mainstay of the place, for, in addition to cattle-raising, he revived the dying timber industry, and otherwise roused the remaining inhabitants of the little port out of their lethargic indifference. But fifteen years after he came to the place, and when his two boys were fourteen and thirteen years of age respectively, his wife died, after a few hours' illness. The blow was a heavy one, and for the time crushed him. He withdrew himself almost entirely from such society as the place afforded, dismissed most of his servants, and lived for more than a year in seclusion, in the lonely house facing the sea. His affection for his children, however, came to his aid, and did much to assuage his grief.

'Jack, my lad,' he said to the elder boy, one day, as they were riding along the northern beach, 'we must stick to each other always. You and Tom are all I have in the world to

love. Had your mother lived, I should have liked to have returned to England and ended my days there. But she is gone, and now I have no desire to leave Australia. We shall stay here, Jack; and you and Tom shall help me till you are both old enough to choose your future.'

Jack, a sturdy, square-built youngster, with honest grey eyes, nodded his head.

'I shall never want to leave you and Kooringa, father. I promised mother that before she died. But Tom says he hopes you will let him go to sea when he is old enough.'

Mr. Wallis smiled, and then sighed somewhat sadly. 'Time enough to think of that, Jack. But I would rather he thought of something else. 'Tis a poor life and a hard one. But why do you not want to be a sailor?'

Jack shook his head. 'I should like to be an explorer--that is, I mean if you would let me. I should like to cross Australia; perhaps I might find Dr. Leichhardt'--and his eyes glistened; 'or else I should like to ride round it from Port Kooringa right up to Cape York, and along the Gulf of Carpentaria and the coast of Arnhem's Land and West Australia, and then along the Great Bight back to Kooringa. It would make me famous, father. Mother said it would be more than ten thousand miles.'

Mr. Wallis laughed. 'More than that, Jack. But who knows what may happen? Perhaps I may buy some cattle country in Queensland some day; then you shall have a chance of doing some exploring. But not for some years yet, my boy,' he added, placing his hand on his son's shoulder; 'I do not want to go away from Kooringa yet; and I want to come

back here, so that when my time comes I may be laid beside *her*.'

'Yes, dad,' said the lad simply; 'I too want to be buried near poor mother when I die. Isn't it awful to think of dying at some place a long way from Kooringa, away from her? That's what I told Tom the other day. I said that if he goes to sea he might be drowned, or bitten in halves by a shark, like the two convicts who tried to cross the bar on a log when they ran away. Father, don't let Tom be a sailor. We might never see him again. Wouldn't it be awful if he never came back to us? And mother loved him so, didn't she? Don't you remember when she was dying how she made Tom lie down beside her on her bed, and cried, "Oh, my Benjamin, my Benjamin, my beloved"?'

'Yes, my lad,' answered the father, turning his face towards the sea, which shone and sparkled in the bright morning sunlight. Then the two rode on in silence, the man thinking of his dead wife, and the boy dreaming of that long, long ride of ten thousand miles, and of the strange sights he might yet see.

From the broad front verandah of the quiet house, young Tom had watched his father and brother ride off towards the town, on their way to the river crossing which was some miles distant from the bar. Once over the river, they would have to return seaward along its northern bank, till they emerged upon the ocean beach. They would not return till nightfall, or perhaps till the following day, as Mr. Wallis wished to look for some missing cattle in the scrubs around the base of rugged Cape Kooringa, and 'Wellington,' one of the aboriginal stockmen, had already preceded them with a

pack-horse carrying their blankets and provisions, leaving Tom practically in charge, although old Foster, a somewhat rough and crusty ex-man-of-war's man, who had been Mrs. Wallis's attendant since her childhood, was nominally so. He with two or three women servants and the gardener were all that were employed in, and lived in the house itself, the rest of the hands having their quarters at the stockyards, which were nearly half a mile away.

Tom watched his brother and father till they disappeared in the misty haze which at that early hour still hung about the beach and the low foreshore, although the sun had now, as Foster said, a good hoist, and the calm sea lay clear and blue beneath. Then something like a sigh escaped him, as his unwilling eye lighted upon his lesson-books, which were lying upon the table of a little enclosure at one end of the verandah, which did duty as a schoolroom for his brother and himself.

'Well, it can't be helped,' he muttered; 'I promised dad to try and pull up a bit--and there's the tide going out fast. How can a fellow dig into school books when he knows it's going to be a dead low tide, and the crayfish will be sticking their feelers up everywhere out of the kelp? Dad said three hours this morning. Now, what does it matter whether it is this morning, or this afternoon, or this evening? And of course *he* didn't think it would be such a lovely morning--and he likes crayfish. I wonder if he will be angry when I tell him?' Then, stepping inside, he called out--

'Foster, where are you?' There was a rattle of knives in the pantry, and then the old man shuffled along the passage, and came into the dining-room.

'What now, Master Tom?' he grumbled; 'not at your lessons yet? 'Tis nine o'clock----'

'Yes, I know, Foster. But, Foster, just look at the tip of Flat Rock showing up already. It's going to be a dead low tide, and----'

'Don't you dare now! Ah, I know what you're going to say. No, I won't have it. Leastways I won't argy over it. And don't you disobey orders--not if all the crayfish in Australy was a runnin' up out o' the water, and climbin' trees.' Then, screwing his features up into an affectation of great wrath, he shuffled away again.

Tom's face fell, and again a heavy sigh escaped him, as he looked at the shimmering sea, and saw that beyond the bar it was as smooth as a mountain lake. Then he quietly opened the Venetian shutters of the dining-room, and let the bright sunlight stream in.

'It's no use,' he said to himself, 'I can't work this morning. I'll try and think a bit whether I shall go or not.'

Over the mantel in the dining-room was a marine picture. It was but rudely painted in water-colours--perhaps by some seaman's rough hand,--and the lapse of five and twenty years had dimmed it sadly; but to Tom's mind it was the finest painting in the world, and redolent of wild adventure and romance. It showed as a background the shore of a tropical island, the hills clothed with jungle, and the yellow beach lined with palm trees, while in the foreground the blue rollers of the ocean churned into froth against a long curve of coral reef, on which lay a man-of-war, with the surf leaping high over her decks, and with main and mizzen-masts gone. On the left of the picture was a beautiful white-

painted brig, with old-fashioned rolling topsails and with her mainyard aback; and between her and the wreck were a number of boats crowded with men in uniform, escaping from the ship.

Often when the house was silent had Tom, even when a boy of ten, stolen into the room, and, sitting cross-legged on the rug, gazed longingly at the painting which, to his boyish imagination, seemed to live, ay, and speak to him in a wild symphony of crashing surf and swaying palm trees, mingling with the cries of the sailors and the shrill piping of the boatswain's whistles. Then, too, his eyes would linger over the inscription that, in two lines, ran along the whole length of the foot of the picture, and he would read it over and over again to himself gloatingly, and let his mind revel in visions of what he would yet see when he grew old enough to sail on foreign seas, as his father and his uncle Fred Hemsley had done. This is what the inscription said:--

'The Wreck of the Dutch warship Samarang on the coast of Timor Laut; and the Rescue of her Crew by the English brig Huntress, of Sydney, commanded by Mr. William Ford, and owned by Frederick Hemsley, Esquire, of Amboyna; on the morning of May 4, 1836.'

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Half an hour later old Foster clattered suddenly along the verandah, peered into the schoolroom, and then into the

dining-room, where Tom sat in a chair--still gazing at the picture.

'Rouse ye, rouse ye, Master Tom. Your eyes are better than mine. Here, look'--and he placed Mr. Wallis's telescope in the boy's hand--'look over there beyond Kooringa Rock. 'Tis a drifting boat, I believe. Kate tells me that it was in sight an hour ago, before your father and Master Jack went away, and yet the foolish creature never told me.'

Tom took the glass--an old-fashioned telescope, half a fathom long, and steadied it against a verandah post.

'Have you got her?' asked old Foster.

'Yes, yes,' answered the boy, quickly, his hand shaking with excitement; 'I can see her, Foster. There are people in her ... yes, yes, and they are pulling. I can see the oars dipping quite plainly. What boat can it be?'

'Shipwrecked people, o' course. What would any other boat be doin' out there, a comin' in from the eastward? Can you see which way she is heading?'

'Straight in for the bar, Foster.'

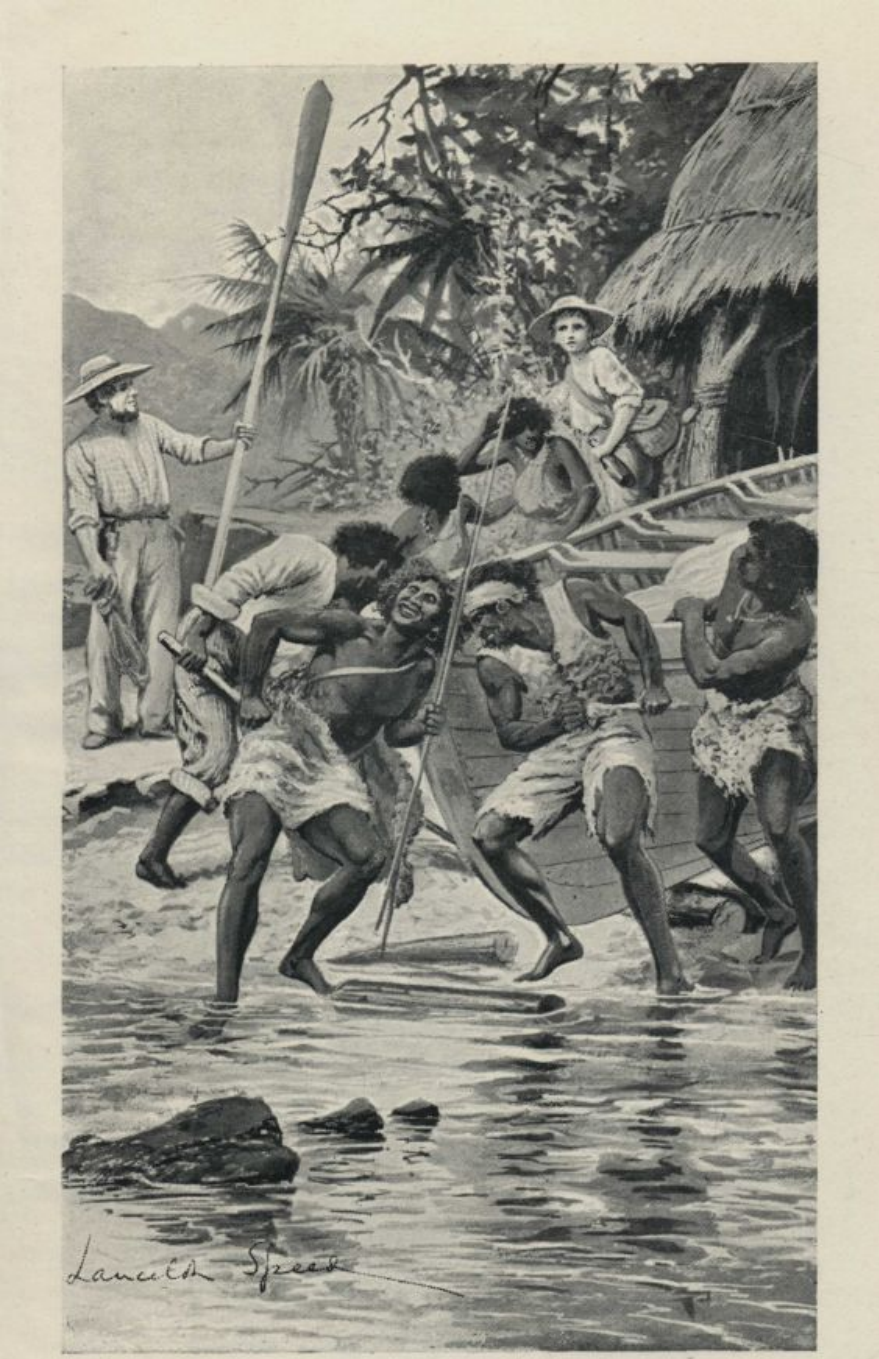
'And nothing but a steamer could stem the current now, with the tide runnin' out at six knots; an' more than that, they'll capsize as soon as they get abreast o' Flat Rock, and be aten up by the sharks. Master Tom, we must man our boat somehow, and go out to them. Then we can pilot them in to the bit o' beach under Pilot's Hill, if the current is too strong for us to get back here. But how we're going to launch the boat, let alone man her, is the trouble; there's not a man about the place but myself, and it will take the best part of an hour to send Kate or any other o' the women to the town and back.'

'Never mind that, Foster,' cried the boy; 'look down there on the rocks--there are Combo, and Fly, and some other black fellows spearing fish! They will help us to launch the boat, and come with us too.'

'Then run, lad; run as hard as ye can, and bring them up to the boatshed, an' I'll follow as soon as I get what I want.'

Seizing his cap, Tom darted away down the hill, across the beach, and then splashed through the shallow pools of water on the reef towards the party of aboriginals; whilst old Foster, calling out to Kate and the other women to get food ready against his return, in case it might be wanted for starving people, hurriedly seized some empty bottles and filled them with water; then, thrusting them into Jack's fishing-basket, which hung on the wall of the back verandah, he followed Tom down to the boatshed, where in a few minutes he was joined by the lad himself, and four stalwart, naked black fellows and their gins, all equally as excited as the old sailor.

The boat was a long, heavy whaleboat, but she was soon run out of the dark shed under the hill, and then into the water.



THE BOAT WAS SOON RUN OUT OF THE DARK SHED.

THE BOAT WAS SOON RUN OUT OF THE DARK SHED.

'Jump in, everybody,' said old Foster, seizing the steer oar, and swinging the boat's head round to the open sea.

CHAPTER II

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CAPTAIN RAMON CASALLE AND HIS MEN

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Under the five oars--Tom tugging manfully at the bow, though still panting with his previous exertions--the boat soon cleared the entrance to the little rocky cove, which, during the old convict days, had been made into a fairly safe boat harbour--the only one, except an unfrequented beach under Pilot's Hill, for many miles along the coast. Five minutes after the oars had touched the water she was fairly racing seaward, for she was in the full run of the ebbing tide as it swept through the sandbanks and reefs which lined the narrow bar. Then, as the water deepened, and the current lost its strength, Foster shielded his eyes with his hands from the blazing sun, and looking ahead, tried to discern the approaching boat.

'I can't see her anywhere!' he exclaimed presently; 'easy there, pulling. Perhaps she's in a line with Kooringa Rock, and we won't see her for another half-hour yet. Jump up, Combo, and take a look ahead.'

Combo, a huge, black-bearded fellow, with a broad much-scarred chest, showed his white teeth, drew his oar across, and sprung upon the after thwart. For two or three seconds he scanned the sea ahead, then he pointed a little to the northward of Kooringa Rock.

'I see um,' he said with a laugh; 'he long way yet--other side Kooringa--two fella mile yet, I think it;' then he added that the people in the boat had ceased pulling, and that she seemed to be drifting broadside to the southward with the current.

Old Foster nodded. 'That'll do, Combo, my boy. You've eyes like a needle. I can't see for the sun blaze right ahead. Give it to her, lads;' then he kept away a point or two to the southward, so as to pass close under Kooringa Rock, against the grim, weed-covered sides of which only the faintest swell rose and fell, to sway the hanging masses of green and yellow kelp to and fro. At any other time Tom's eyes would have revelled in the sight, and at the swarms of fish of all colours and shapes which swam to and fro in the clear water around the rock, or darted in and out amongst the moving kelp; but now his thoughts were centred solely on the boat's present mission--they were going to rescue what would most likely prove to be shipwrecked people--perhaps foreigners who could not speak English! Oh, how beautiful it was! And every nerve and fibre in his body thrilled with pleasure, as, with the perspiration streaming down his face, he watched his oar, and listened for the next word of command from the old sailor.

For a brief minute or two, as the boat passed along the base of the towering dome above, the fierce sun was lost, and Tom gave a sigh of relief, for although he had thrown off all but his shirt and trousers, his exertions were beginning to tell upon him, and he looked with something like envy at the smooth, naked backs of Combo and his sooty companions, who took no heed of the sun, but whose dark eyes gazed

longingly at the white masses of breeding gulls and boobies which covered the grassy ledges near the summit of the rock. Then out again into the dazzling glare once more, and Foster gave a cry--'Avast pulling! There she is, close to, but pulling away from us!'

Tom jumped up and looked, and saw the strange boat. She was not more than half a mile away, and he could see the people in her quite plainly; she was again heading towards the entrance to the bar.

'Give way, lads,' said Foster; 'they're only pulling three oars to our five, and we'll soon be within hailing of 'em. They can't make any headway against the ebb, when they get in a bit further, and are bound to see us afore many minutes.'

The crew--black and white--needed no encouragement, and without a word bent to their oars again, and pulled steadily on for less than a quarter of an hour; then Foster stood up and hailed with all the strength of his lungs; but still the three oars of the strange boat were dipped steadily though slowly, and she still went on.

'They're not looking this way,' muttered the old man to Combo and his listening companions; then Combo himself, drawing in a deep breath, stood up and sent out a long, loud *Coo-ee-ee!*

As the strange weird cry travelled over the waters, Foster and his companions watched intently, and then gave a loud hurrah! as they saw the rowers cease, and figures stand up in the other boat; then presently there came back a faint answering cry, and they saw an oar was up-ended, as a sign that they were seen. It stood thus for a few seconds, then

was lowered, and the strange boat slewed round, and began pulling towards them.

'Steady, now steady,' said Foster, warningly, to his crew, who began pulling with redoubled energy. 'Go easy; we'll be alongside in no time now. Master Tom, in with your oar, and come aft here. Take out a couple of those bottles of water, and keep 'em handy, but put the others out o' sight until I tell you. There's a power o' men in that boat, I can see, and I know what happens to a man perishin' o' thirst, when he gets his lips to water, and has no one to stand by him and take a turn in his swallow.'

Tom stumbled aft pantingly, and did as he was bid, and then, looking up, he saw the other boat was not a hundred yards away, and appeared crowded with men. Then followed a wild clamour of voices and cries, as the two boats touched gunwales, and a strange, rugged figure, who stood in the stern, cried out to Foster--

'Thank God, you are a white man! Have you any water?--ours was finished last night.'

'Enough to give you all a small drink,' replied Foster, quickly, as he handed the bottles over to him one by one, 'but we shall be ashore in another hour. Now, sir, tell some of your men to get into my boat as soon as they've had a drink.'

Although the castaways were the wildest-looking beings ever seen out of a picture-book, they still preserved discipline, and one of them at once began sharing out the water to the others, whilst the man who was steering, with his hands shaking with excitement, poured out a little into a tin mug, handed the rest back to Foster with an imploring

look, and then sank on his knees in the bottom of the boat beside a small, crouched-up figure clothed in a dirty calico shirt. As Tom bent over to look, he saw that it was a child--a little girl about five or six years of age. She put her hand out to the mug, and with her eyes still closed drank it eagerly.

'No more, sir, just now!' cried Foster warningly to the man, who, with a great sob of joy, and the tears streaming from his haggard and sun-blackened face, had extended his hand for the bottle, 'no more just now for the little one. Pass her into my boat, and get in yourself; but first take some of this,' and he poured out a full drink.

The officer took it, drank half, and then returned it. 'Is that all that is left? Are you sure that we are safe? For God's sake keep what is left for my child!'

'Ay, ay, sir. Have no fear. In another hour we shall be ashore. But hand me the little one, sir--pass me a tow-line here, some o' you chaps; an' you, Combo, an' Fly, an' the other chap, put on all your beef, and pull with all your might.... Tom, you sit down there with the captain, an' hold the babby.... Never fear, sir, he'll hold her safe, God bless her, dear little mite! ... Cheer up, sir; food an' rest is all she wants, an' all you an' these other poor chaps want.... Pull, Combo, my hearty; pull, Fly; send her along as she never went before.'

Tom, unheeding the excitement of those around him, as a tow-line was passed from the other boat and made fast, and Combo and his two black companions, aided by one of the castaway sailors, bent to their oars and tautened it out, was gazing into the face of his charge, who lay quietly breathing in his arms, whilst her father, weak and exhausted as he

was, was telling old Foster his story of disaster and death. It was the first time in Tom's life that he had ever held 'a baby'--as he mentally termed the little girl--in his arms, and under any other circumstances his youthful soul would have recoiled from such a position with horror. But presently, as she turned her face to his, and said in a thin, weak voice, 'Give me some water, please,' he began to shake at the knees, and feel frightened and intensely sympathetic at the same time.

'Only a little, Master Tom; only a mouthful at a time;' and old Foster, his face aglow with excitement, handed him the bottle of water and mug, and Tom carefully poured out about a wine-glassful, and put it to the lips of what, to his mind, seemed more like a dying monkey, with a wig of long black hair, than a real human child.

As the boats drew near the little boat harbour under Pilot's Hill, even the exhausted seamen in the one which was being towed gave a faint cheer, shipped their oars, and began to pull. The sea was still glassy smooth, for it was in November, when a calm would sometimes last for three days and more, only to be succeeded by a black north-easterly gale.

Standing on the shore awaiting the boats were nearly every one of Mr. Wallis's people, who were presently joined by some few of the townspeople, who had heard of something being afoot at the Beach House, as the Wallis's place was called.

'Jump out, Master Tom,' cried Foster, as the leading boat touched the soft, yielding sand, 'and give the baby to Kate. She'll know what to do.'