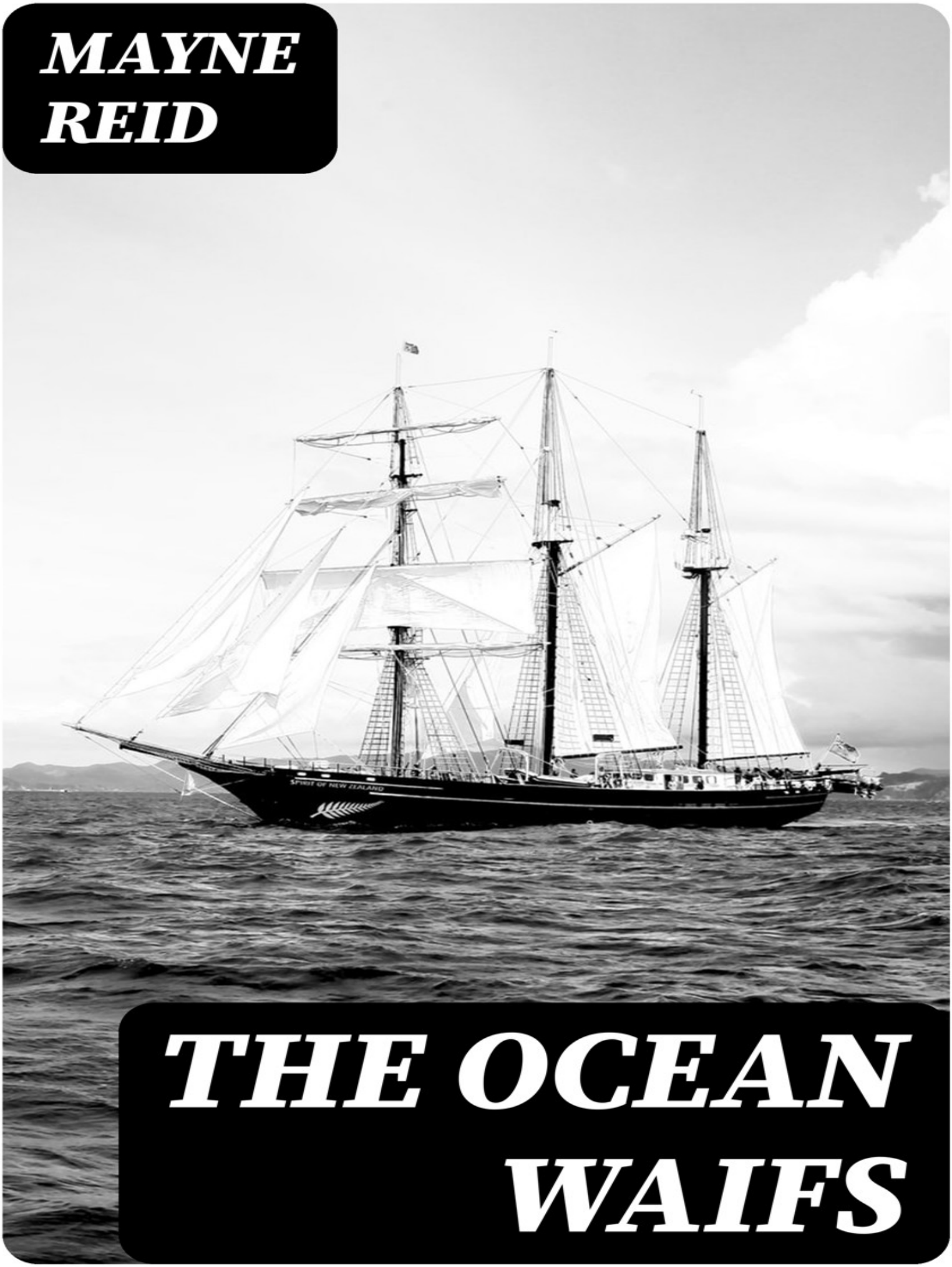
MAYNE REID



THE OCEAN WAIFS

Mayne Reid

The Ocean Waifs

A Story of Adventure on Land and Sea

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Chapter One.

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The Albatross.

The “vulture of the sea,” borne upon broad wing, and wandering over the wide Atlantic, suddenly suspends his flight to look down upon an object that has attracted his attention.

It is a raft, with a disc not much larger than a dining-table, constructed out of two small spars of a ship,—the dolphin-striker and spritsail yard,—with two broad planks and some narrower ones lashed crosswise, and over all two or three pieces of sail-cloth carelessly spread.

Slight as is the structure, it is occupied by two individuals,—a man and a boy. The latter is lying along the folds of the sail-cloth, apparently asleep. The man stands erect, with his hand to his forehead, shading the sun from

his eyes, and scanning the surface of the sea with inquiring glances.

At his feet, lying among the creases of the canvas, are a handspike, a pair of boat oars, and an axe. Nothing more is perceptible of the raft, even to the keen eye of the albatross.

The bird continues its flight towards the west. Ten miles farther on it once more poises itself on soaring wing, and directs its glance downward.

Another raft is seen motionless upon the calm surface of the sea, but differing from the former in almost everything but the name. It is nearly ten times as large; constructed out of the masts, yards, hatches, portions of the bulwarks, and other timbers of a ship; and rendered buoyant by a number of empty water-casks lashed along its edges. A square of canvas spread between two extemporised masts, a couple of casks, an empty biscuit-box, some oars, handspikes, and other maritime implements, lie upon the raft; and around these are more than thirty men, seated, standing, lying,—in short, in almost every attitude.

Some are motionless, as if asleep; but there is that in their prostrate postures, and in the wild expression of their features, that betokens rather the sleep of intoxication. Others, by their gestures and loud, riotous talk, exhibit still surer signs of drunkenness; and the tin cup, reeking with rum, is constantly passing from hand to hand. A few, apparently sober, but haggard and hungry-like, sit or stand erect upon the raft, casting occasional glances over the wide expanse, with but slight show of hope, fast changing to despair.

Well may the sea-vulture linger over this group, and contemplate their movements with expectant eye. The instincts of the bird tell him, that ere long he may look forward to a bountiful banquet!

Ten miles farther to the west, though unseen to those upon the raft, the far-piercing gaze of the albatross detects another unusual object upon the surface of the sea. At this distance it appears only a speck not larger than the bird itself, though in reality it is a small boat,—a ship's gig,—in which six men are seated. There has been no attempt to hoist a sail; there is none in the gig. There are oars, but no one is using them. They have been dropped in despair; and the boat lies becalmed just as the two rafts. Like them, it appears to be adrift upon the ocean.

Could the albatross exert a reasoning faculty it would know that these various objects indicated a wreck. Some vessel has either foundered and gone to the bottom, or has caught fire and perished in the flames.

Ten miles to the eastward of the lesser raft might be discovered truer traces of the lost ship. There might be seen the *débris* of charred timbers, telling that she has succumbed, not to the storm, but to fire; and the fragments, scattered over the circumference of a mile, disclose further that the fire ended abruptly in some terrible explosion.

Upon the stern of the gig still afloat may be read the name *Pandora*. The same word may be seen painted on the water-casks buoying up the big raft; and on the two planks forming the transverse pieces of the lesser one appears *Pandora* in still larger letters: for these were the boards that exhibited the name of the ship on each side of her bowsprit,

and which had been torn off to construct the little raft by those who now occupy it.

Beyond doubt the lost ship was the *Pandora*.

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Ship on Fire.

The story of the *Pandora* has been told in all its terrible details. A slave-ship, fitted out in England, and sailing from an English port,—alas! not the only one by scores,—manned by a crew of ruffians, scarce two of them owning to the same nationality. Such was the bark *Pandora*.

Her latest and last voyage was to the slave coast, in the Gulf of Guinea. There, having shipped five hundred wretched beings with black skins,—“bales” as they are facetiously termed by the trader in human flesh,—she had started to carry her cargo to that infamous market,—ever open in those days to such a commodity,—the barracoons of Brazil.

In mid-ocean she had caught fire,—a fire that could not be extinguished. In the hurry and confusion of launching the boats the pinnace proved to be useless; and the longboat, stove in by the falling of a cask, sank to the bottom of the sea. Only the gig was found available; and this, seized upon by the captain, the mate, and four others, was rowed off clandestinely in the darkness.

The rest of the crew, over thirty in number, succeeded in constructing a raft; and but a few seconds after they had

pushed off from the sides of the ship, a barrel of gunpowder ignited by the flames, completed the catastrophe.

But what became of the *cargo*? Ah! that is indeed a tale of horror.

Up to the last moment those unfortunate beings had been kept under hatches, under a grating that had been fastened down with battens. They would have been left in that situation to be stifled in their confinement by the suffocating smoke, or burnt alive amid the blazing timbers, but for one merciful heart among those who were leaving the ship. An axe uplifted by the arm of a brave youth—a mere boy—struck off the confining cleats, and gave the sable sufferers access to the open air.

Alas! it was scarce a respite to these wretched creatures,—only a choice between two modes of death. They escaped from the red flames but to sink into the dismal depths of the ocean,—hundreds meeting with a fate still more horrible: for there were not less than that number, and all became the prey of those hideous sea-monsters, the sharks.

Of all that band of involuntary emigrants, in ten minutes after the blowing up of the bark, there was not one above the surface of the sea! Those of them that could not swim had sunk to the bottom, while a worse fate had befallen those that could,—to fill the maws of the ravenous monsters that crowded the sea around them! At the period when our tale commences, several days had succeeded this tragical event; and the groups we have described, aligned upon a parallel of latitude, and separated one from another by a distance of some ten or a dozen miles, will be easily recognised.

The little boat lying farthest west was the gig of the *Pandora*, containing her brutal captain, his equally brutal mate, the carpenter, and three others of the crew, that had been admitted as partners in the surreptitious abstraction. Under cover of the darkness they had made their departure; but long before rowing out of gun-shot they had heard the wild denunciations and threats hurled after them by their betrayed associates.

The ruffian crew occupied the greater raft; but who were the two individuals who had intrusted themselves to that frail embarkation,—seemingly so slight that a single breath of wind would scatter it into fragments, and send its occupants to the bottom of the sea? Such in reality would have been their fate, had a storm sprung up at that moment; but fortunately for them the sea was smooth and calm,—as it had been ever since the destruction of the ship.

But why were they thus separated from the others of the crew: for both man and boy had belonged to the forecastle of the *Pandora*?

The circumstance requires explanation, and it shall be briefly given. The man was Ben Brace,—the bravest and best sailor on board the slave-bark, and one who would not have shipped in such a craft but for wrongs he had suffered while in the service of his country, and that had inducted him into a sort of reckless disposition, of which, however, he had long since repented.

The boy had also been the victim of a similar disposition. Longing to see foreign lands, he had *run away to sea*; and by an unlucky accident, through sheer ignorance of her character, had chosen the *Pandora* in which to make his

initiatory voyage. From the cruel treatment he had been subjected to on board the bark, he had reason to see his folly. Irksome had been his existence from the moment he set foot on the deck of the *Pandora*; and indeed it would have been scarce endurable but for the friendship of the brave sailor Brace, who, after a time, had taken him under his especial protection. Neither of them had any feelings in common with the crew with whom they had become associated; and it was their intention to escape from such vile companionship as soon as an opportunity should offer.

The destruction of the bark would not have given that opportunity. On the contrary, it rendered it all the more necessary to remain with the others, and share the chances of safety offered by the great raft. Slight as these might be, they were still better than those that might await them, exposed on such a frail fabric as that they now occupied. It is true, that upon this they had left the burning vessel separate from the others; but immediately after they had rowed up alongside the larger structure, and made fast to it.

In this companionship they had continued for several days and nights, borne backward and forward by the varying breezes; resting by day on the calm surface of the ocean; and sharing the fate of the rest of the castaway crew.

What had led to their relinquishing the companionship? Why was Ben Brace and his *protégé* separated from the others and once more alone upon their little raft?

The cause of that separation must be declared, though one almost shudders to think of it. It was to save the boy *from being eaten* that Ben Brace had carried him away from his former associates; and it was only by a cunning

stratagem, and at the risk of his own life, that the brave sailor had succeeded in preventing this horrid banquet from being made!

The castaway crew had exhausted the slender stock of provisions received from the wreck. They were reduced to that state of hunger which no longer revolts at the filthiest of food; and without even resorting to the customary method adopted in such terrible crises, they unanimously resolved upon the death of the boy,—Ben Brace alone raising a voice of dissent!

But this voice was not heeded. It was decided that the lad should die: and all that his protector was able to obtain from the fiendish crew, was the promise of a respite for him till the following morning.

Brace had his object in procuring this delay. During the night, the united rafts made way under a fresh breeze; and while all was wrapped in darkness, he cut the ropes which fastened the lesser one to the greater, allowing the former to fall astern. As it was occupied only by him and his *protégé*, they were thus separated from their dangerous associates; and when far enough off to run no risk of being heard, they used their oars to increase the distance.

All night long did they continue to row against the wind; and as morning broke upon them, they came to a rest upon the calm sea, unseen by their late comrades, and with ten miles separating the two rafts from each other.

It was the fatigue of that long spell of pulling—with many a watchful and weary hour preceding it—that had caused the boy to sink down upon the folded canvas, and almost on the instant fall asleep; and it was the apprehension of being

followed that was causing Ben Brace to stand shading his eyes from the sun, and scan with uneasy glance the glittering surface of the sea.

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The Lord’s Prayer.

After carefully scrutinising the smooth water towards every point of the compass,—but more especially towards the west,—the sailor ceased from his reconnoissance, and turned his eyes upon his youthful companion, still soundly slumbering.

“Poor lad!” muttered he to himself; “he be quite knocked up. No wonder, after such a week as we’ve had o’t. And to think he war so near bein’ killed and ate by them crew o’ ruffians. I’m blowed if that wasn’t enough to scare the strength out o’ him! Well, I dare say he’s escaped from that fate; but as soon as he has got a little more rest, we must take a fresh spell at the oars. It ’ud never do to drift back to *them*. If we do, it an’t only him they’ll want to eat, but me too, after what’s happened. Blowed if they wouldn’t.”

The sailor paused a moment, as if reflecting upon the probabilities of their being pursued.

“Sartin!” he continued, “they could never fetch that catamaran against the wind; but now that it’s turned dead calm, they might clap on wi’ their oars, in the hope of overtakin’ us. There’s so many of them to pull, and they’ve got oars in plenty, they might overhaul us yet.”

“O Ben! dear Ben! save me,—save me from the wicked men!”

This came from the lips of the lad, evidently muttered in his sleep.

“Dash my buttons, if he an’t dreaming!” said the sailor, turning his eyes upon the boy, and watching the movements of his lips. “He be talkin’ in his sleep. He thinks they’re comin’ at him just as they did last night on the raft! Maybe I ought to rouse him up. If he be a dreamin’ that way he’ll be better awake. It’s a pity, too, for he an’t had enough sleep.”

“Oh! they will kill me and eat me. Oh, oh!”

“No, they won’t do neyther,—blow’d if they do. Will’m, little Will’m! rouse yourself, my lad.”

And as he said this he bent down and gave the sleeper a shake.

“O Ben! is it you? Where are they,—those monsters?”

“Miles away, my boy. You be only a dreamin’ about ’em. That’s why I’ve shook you up.”

“I’m glad you have waked me. Oh! it was a frightful dream! I thought they had done it, Ben.”

“Done what, Will’m?”

“What they were going to do.”

“Dash it, no, lad! they an’t ate you yet; nor won’t, till they’ve first put an end o’ me,—that I promise ye.”

“Dear Ben,” cried the boy, “you are so good,—you’ve risked your life to save mine. Oh! how can I ever show you how much I am sensible of your goodness?”

“Don’t talk o’ that, little Will’m. Ah! lad, I fear it an’t much use to eyther o’ us. But if we must die, anything

before a death like that. I'd rather far that the sharks should get us than to be eat up by one's own sort.—Ugh! it be horrid to think o't. But come, lad, don't let us despair. For all so black as things look, let us put our trust in Providence. We don't know but that His eye may be on us at this minute. I wish I knew how to pray, but I never was taught that ere. Can you pray, little Will'm?"

"I can repeat the Lord's Prayer. Would that do, Ben?"

"Sartain it would. It be the best kind o' prayer, I've heerd say. Get on your knees, lad, and do it. I'll kneel myself, and join with ye in the spirit o' the thing, tho' I'm shamed to say I disremember most o' the words."

The boy, thus solicited, at once raised himself into a kneeling position, and commenced repeating the sublime prayer of the Christian. The rough sailor knelt alongside of him, and with hands crossed over his breast in a supplicating attitude, listened attentively, now and then joining in the words of the prayer, whenever some phrase recurred to his remembrance.

When it was over, and the "Amen" had been solemnly pronounced by the voices of both, the sailor seemed to have become inspired with a fresh hope; and, once more grasping an oar, he desired his companion to do the same.

"We must get a little farther to east'ard," said he, "so as to make sure o' bein' out o' their way. If we only pull a couple of hours afore the sun gets hot, I think we'll be in no danger o' meetin' *them* any more. So let's set to, little Will'm! Another spell, and then you can rest as long's you have a mind to."

The sailor seated himself close to the edge of the raft, and dropped his oar-blade in the water, using it after the fashion of a canoe-paddle. “Little Will’m,” taking his place on the opposite side, imitated the action; and the craft commenced moving onward over the calm surface of the sea.

The boy, though only sixteen, was skilled in the use of an oar, and could handle it in whatever fashion. He had learnt the art long before he had thought of going to sea; and it now stood him in good stead. Moreover, he was strong for his age, and therefore his stroke was sufficient to match that of the sailor, given more gently for the purpose.

Propelled by the two oars, the raft made way with considerable rapidity,—not as a boat would have done, but still at the rate of two or three knots to the hour.

They had not been rowing long, however, when a gentle breeze sprung up from the west, which aided their progress in the direction in which they wished to go. One would have thought that this was just what they should have desired. On the contrary, the sailor appeared uneasy on perceiving that the breeze blew from the west. Had it been from any other point he would have cared little about it.

“I don’t like it a bit,” said he, speaking across the raft to his companion. “It helps us to get east’ard, that’s true; *but* it’ll help them as well—and with that broad spread o’ canvas they’ve rigged up, they might come down on us faster than we can row.”

“Could we not rig a sail too?” inquired the boy. “Don’t you think we might, Ben?”

“Just the thing I war thinkin’ o’, lad; I dare say we can. Let me see; we’ve got that old tarpaulin and the lying jib-sail under us. The tarpaulin itself will be big enough. How about ropes? Ah! there’s the sheets of the jib still stickin’ to the sail; and then there’s the handspike and our two oars. The oars ’ll do without the handspike. Let’s set ’em up then, and rig the tarpaulin between ’em.”

As the sailor spoke, he had risen to his feet; and after partially drawing the canvas off from the planks and spars, he soon accomplished the task of setting the two oars upright upon the raft. This done, the tarpaulin was spread between them, and when lashed so as to lie taut from one to the other, presented a surface of several square yards to the breeze,—quite as much sail as the craft was capable of carrying.

It only remained for them to look to the steering of the raft, so as to keep it head on before the wind; and this could be managed by means of the handspike, used as a rudder or steering-oar.

Laying hold of this, and placing himself abaft of the spread tarpaulin, Ben had the satisfaction of seeing that the sail acted admirably; and as soon as its influence was fairly felt, the raft surged on through the water at a rate of not less than five knots to the hour.

It was not likely that the large raft that carried the dreaded crew of would-be cannibals was going any faster; and therefore, whatever distance they might be off, there would be no great danger of their getting any nearer.

This confidence being firmly established, the sailor no longer gave a thought to the peril from which he and his

youthful comrade had escaped. For all that, the prospect that lay before them was too terrible to permit their exchanging a word,—either of comfort or congratulation,—and for a long time they sat in a sort of desponding silence, which was broken only by the rippling surge of the waters as they swept in pearly froth along the sides of the raft.

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Hunger.—Despair.

The breeze proved only what sailors call a catspaw, rising no higher than just to cause a ripple on the water, and lasting only about an hour. When it was over, the sea again fell into a dead calm; its surface assuming the smoothness of a mirror.

In the midst of this the raft lay motionless, and the extemporised sail was of no use for propelling it. It served a purpose, however, in screening off the rays of the sun, which, though not many degrees above the horizon, was beginning to make itself felt in all its tropical fervour.

Ben no longer required his companion to take a hand at the oar. Not but that their danger of being overtaken was as great as ever; for although they had made easterly some five or six knots, it was but natural to conclude that the great raft had been doing the same; and therefore the distance between the two would be about as before.

But whether it was that his energy had become prostrated by fatigue and the hopelessness of their

situation, or whether upon further reflection he felt less fear of their being pursued, certain it is he no longer showed uneasiness about making way over the water; and after once more rising to his feet and making a fresh examination of the horizon, he stretched himself along the raft in the shade of the tarpaulin.

The boy, at his request, had already placed himself in a similar position, and was again buried in slumber.

“I’m glad to see he can sleep,” said Brace to himself, as he lay down alongside. “He must be sufferin’ from hunger as bad as I am myself, and as long as he’s asleep he won’t feel it. May be, if one could keep asleep they’d hold out longer, though I don’t know ’bout that bein’ so. I’ve often ate a hearty supper, and woke up in the mornin’ as hungry as if I’m gone to my bunk without a bite. Well, it an’t no use o’ me tryin’ to sleep as I feel now, blow’d if it is! My belly calls out loud enough to keep old Morphis himself from nappin’, and there an’t a morsel o’ anything. More than forty hours have passed since I ate that last quarter biscuit. I can think o’ nothing but our shoes, and they be so soaked wi’ the sea-water, I suppose they’ll do more harm than good. They’ll be sure to make the thirst a deal worse than it is, though the Lord knows it be bad enough a’ready. Merciful Father!—nothin’ to eat!—nothin’ to drink! O God, hear the prayer little Will’m ha’ just spoken and I ha’ repeated, though I’ve been too wicked to expect bein’ heard, ‘*Give us this day our daily bread*’! Ah! another day or two without it, an’ we shall both be asleep forever!”

The soliloquy of the despairing sailor ended in a groan, that awoke his young comrade from a slumber that was at

best only transient and troubled.

“What is it, Ben?” he asked, raising himself on his elbow, and looking inquiringly in the face of his protector.

“Nothing partikler, my lad,” answered the sailor, who did not wish to terrify his companion with the dark thoughts which were troubling himself.

“I heard you groaning,—did I not? I was afraid you had seen them coming after us.”

“No fear o’ that,—not a bit. They’re a long way off, and in this calm sea they won’t be inclined to stir,—not as long as the rum-cask holds out, I warrant; and when that’s empty, they’ll not feel much like movin’ anywhere. ’Tan’t for them we need have any fear now.”

“O Ben! I’m so hungry; I could eat anything.”

“I know it, my poor lad; so could I.”

“True! indeed you must be even hungrier than I, for you gave me more than my share of the two biscuits. It was wrong of me to take it, for I’m sure you must be suffering dreadfully.”

“That’s true enough, Will’m; but a bit o’ biscuit wouldn’t a made no difference. It must come to the same thing in the end.”

“To what, Ben?” inquired the lad, observing the shadow that had overspread the countenance of his companion, which was gloomier than he had ever seen it.

The sailor remained silent. He could not think of a way to evade giving the correct answer to the question; and keeping his eyes averted, he made no reply.

“I know what you mean,” continued the interrogator. “Yes, yes,—you mean that we must die!”

“No, no, Will’m,—not that; there’s hope yet,—who knows what may turn up? It may be that the prayer will be answered. I’d like, lad, if you’d go over it again. I think I could help you better this time; for I once knew it myself,—long, long ago, when I was about as big as you, and hearin’ you repeatin’ it, it has come most o’ it back into my memory. Go over it again, little Will’m.”

The youth once more knelt upon the raft, and in the shadow of the spread tarpaulin repeated the Lord’s Prayer,—the sailor, in his rougher voice, pronouncing the words after him.

When they had finished, the latter once more rose to his feet, and for some minutes stood scanning the circle of sea around the raft.

The faint hope which that trusting reliance in his Maker had inspired within the breast of the rude mariner exhibited itself for a moment upon his countenance, but only for a moment. No object greeted his vision, save the blue, boundless sea, and the equally boundless sky.

A despairing look replaced that transient gleam of hope, and, staggering back behind the tarpaulin, he once more flung his body prostrate upon the raft.

Again they lay, side by side, in perfect silence,—neither of them asleep, but both in a sort of stupor, produced by their unspoken despair.

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Faith.—Hope.

How long they lay in this half-unconscious condition, neither took note. It could not have been many minutes, for the mind under such circumstances does not long surrender itself to a state of tranquillity.

They were at length suddenly roused from it,—not, however, by any thought from within,—but by an object striking on their external senses, or, rather, upon the sense of sight. Both were lying upon their backs, with eyes open and upturned to the sky, upon which there was not a speck of cloud to vary the monotony of its endless azure.

Its monotony, however, was at that moment varied by a number of objects that passed swiftly across their field of vision, shining and scintillating as if a flight of silver arrows had been shot over the raft. The hues of blue and white were conspicuous in the bright sunbeams, and those gay-coloured creatures, that appeared to belong to the air, but which in reality were denizens of the great deep, were at once recognised by the sailor.

“A shoal o’ flyin’-fish,” he simply remarked, and without removing from his recumbent position.

Then at once, as if some hope had sprung up within him at seeing them continue to fly over the raft, and so near as almost to touch the tarpaulin, he added, starting to his feet as he spoke—

“What if I might knock one o’ ’em down! Where’s the handspike?”

The last interrogatory was mechanical, and put merely to fill up the time; for as he gave utterance to it he reached towards the implement that lay within reach of his hands, and eagerly grasping raised it aloft.

With such a weapon it was probable that he might have succeeded in striking down one of the winged swimmers that, pursued by the bonitos and albacores, were still leaping over the raft. But there was a surer weapon behind him,—in the piece of canvas spread between the upright oars; and just as the sailor had got ready to wield his huge club, a shining object flashed close to his eyes, whilst his ears were greeted by a glad sound, signifying that one of the vaulting fish had struck against the tarpaulin.

Of course it had dropped down upon the raft: for there it was, flopping and bounding about among the folds of the flying-jib, far more taken by surprise than Ben Brace, who had witnessed its mishap, or even little William, upon whose face it had fallen, with all the weight of its watery carcass. If a bird in the hand be worth two in the bush, by the same rule a fish in the hand should be worth two in the water, and more than that number flying in the air.

Some such calculation as this might have passed through the brain of Ben Brace; for, instead of continuing to hold his handspike high flourished over his head, in the hope of striking another fish, he suffered the implement to drop down upon the raft; and stooping down, he reached forward to secure the one that had voluntarily, or, rather, should we say, involuntarily, offered itself as a victim.

As it kept leaping about over the raft, there was just the danger that it might reach the edge of that limited area, and once more escape to its natural element.

This, however naturally desired by the fish, was the object which the occupants of the raft most desired to prevent; and to that end both had got upon their knees, and

were scrambling over the sail-cloth with as much eager earnestness as a couple of terriers engaged in a scuffle with a harvest rat.

Once or twice little William had succeeded in getting the fish in his fingers; but the slippery creature, armed also with its spinous fin-wings, had managed each time to glide out of his grasp; and it was still uncertain whether a capture might be made, or whether after all they were only to be tantalised by the touch and sight of a morsel of food that was never to pass over their palates.

The thought of such a disappointment stimulated Ben Brace to put forth all his energies, coupled with his greatest activity. He had even resolved upon following the fish into the sea if it should prove necessary,—knowing that for the first few moments after regaining its natural element it would be more easy of capture. But just then an opportunity was offered that promised the securing of the prey without the necessity of wetting a stitch of his clothes.

The fish had been all the while bounding about upon the spread sail-cloth, near the edge of which it had now arrived. But it was fated to go no farther, at least of its own accord; for Ben seeing his advantage, seized hold of the loose selvage of the sail, and raising it a little from the raft, doubled it over the struggling captive. A stiff squeeze brought its struggles to a termination; and when the canvas was lifted aloft, it was seen lying underneath, slightly flattened out beyond its natural dimensions, and it is scarcely necessary to say, as dead as a herring.

Whether right or no, the simple-minded seaman recognised in this seasonable supply of provision the hand

of an overruling Providence; and without further question, attributed it to the potency of that prayer twice repeated.

“Yes, Will’m, you see it, my lad, ’tis the answer to that wonderful prayer. Let’s go over it once more, by way o’ givin’ thanks. He who has sent meat can also gie us drink, even here, in the middle o’ the briny ocean. Come, boy! as the parson used to say in church,—let us pray!”

And with this serio-comic admonition—meant, however, in all due solemnity—the sailor dropped upon his knees, and, as before, echoed the prayer once more pronounced by his youthful companion.

Chapter Six.

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Flying-Fish.

The flying-fish takes rank as one of the most conspicuous “wonders of the sea,” and in a tale essentially devoted to the great deep, it is a subject deserving of more than a passing notice.

From the earliest periods of ocean travel, men have looked with astonishment upon a phenomenon not only singular at first sight, but which still remains unexplained, namely, a fish and a creature believed to be formed only for dwelling under water, springing suddenly above the surface, to the height of a two-storey house, and passing through the air to the distance of a furlong, before falling back into its own proper element!

It is no wonder that the sight should cause surprise to the most indifferent observer, nor that it should have been long a theme of speculation with the curious, and an interesting subject of investigation to the naturalist.

As flying-fish but rarely make their appearance except in warm latitudes, few people who have not voyaged to the tropics have had an opportunity of seeing them in their flight. Very naturally, therefore, it will be asked what kind of fish, that is, to what *species* and what *genus* the flying-fish belong. Were there only one kind of these curious creatures the answer would be easier. But not only are there different species, but also different “genera” of fish endowed with the faculty of flying, and which from the earliest times and in different parts of the world have equally received this characteristic appellation. A word or two about each sort must suffice.

First, then, there are two species belonging to the genus *Trigla*, or the Gurnards, to which Monsieur La Cepède has given the name of *Dactylopterus*.

One species is found in the Mediterranean, and individuals, from a foot to fifteen inches in length, are often taken by the fishermen, and brought to the markets of Malta, Sicily, and even to the city of Rome. The other species of flying gurnard occur in the Indian Ocean and the seas around China and Japan.

The true *flying-fish*, however, that is to say, those that are met with in the great ocean, and most spoken of in books, and in the “yarns” of the sailor, are altogether of a different kind from the gurnards. They are not only different in genus, but in the family and even the order of fishes.

They are of the genus *Exocetus*, and in form and other respects have a considerable resemblance to the common pike. There are several species of them inhabiting different parts of the tropical seas; and sometimes individuals, in the summer, have been seen as far north as the coast of Cornwall in Europe, and on the banks of Newfoundland in America. Their natural habitat, however, is in the warm latitudes of the ocean; and only there are they met with in large “schools,” and seen with any frequency taking their aerial flight.

For a long time there was supposed to be only one, or at most two, species of the *Exocetus*; but it is now certain there are several—perhaps as many as half a dozen—distinct from each other. They are all much alike in their habits,—differing only in size, colour, and such like circumstances.

Naturalists disagree as to the character of their flight. Some assert that it is only a leap, and this is the prevailing opinion. Their reason for regarding it thus is, that while the fish is in the air there cannot be observed any movement of the wings (pectoral fins); and, moreover, after reaching the height to which it attains on its first spring, it cannot afterwards rise higher, but gradually sinks lower till it drops suddenly back into the water.

This reasoning is neither clear nor conclusive. A similar power of suspending themselves in the air, without motion of the wings is well-known to belong to many birds,—as the vulture, the albatross, the petrels, and others. Besides, it is difficult to conceive of a leap twenty feet high and two hundred yards long; for the flight of the *Exocetus* has been

observed to be carried to this extent, and even farther. It is probable that the movement partakes both of the nature of leaping and flying: that it is first begun by a spring up out of the water,—a power possessed by most other kinds of fish,—and that the impulse thus obtained is continued by the spread fins acting on the air after the fashion of parachutes. It is known that the fish can greatly lighten the specific gravity of its body by the inflation of its “swim-bladder,” which, when perfectly extended, occupies nearly the entire cavity of its abdomen. In addition to this, there is a membrane in the mouth which can be inflated through the gills. These two reservoirs are capable of containing a considerable volume of air; and as the fish has the power of filling or emptying them at will, they no doubt play an important part in the mechanism of its aerial movement.

One thing is certain, that the flying-fish can turn while in the air,—that is, diverge slightly from the direction first taken; and this would seem to argue a capacity something more than that of a mere spring or leap. Besides, the wings make a perceptible noise,—a sort of rustling,—often distinctly heard; and they have been seen to open and close while the creature is in the air.

A shoal of flying-fish might easily be mistaken for a flock of white birds, though their rapid movements, and the glistening sheen of their scales—especially when the sun is shining—usually disclose their true character. They are at all times a favourite spectacle, and with all observers,—the old “salt” who has seen them a thousand times, and the young sailor on his maiden voyage, who beholds them for the first time in his life. Many an hour of *ennui* occurring to the ship-