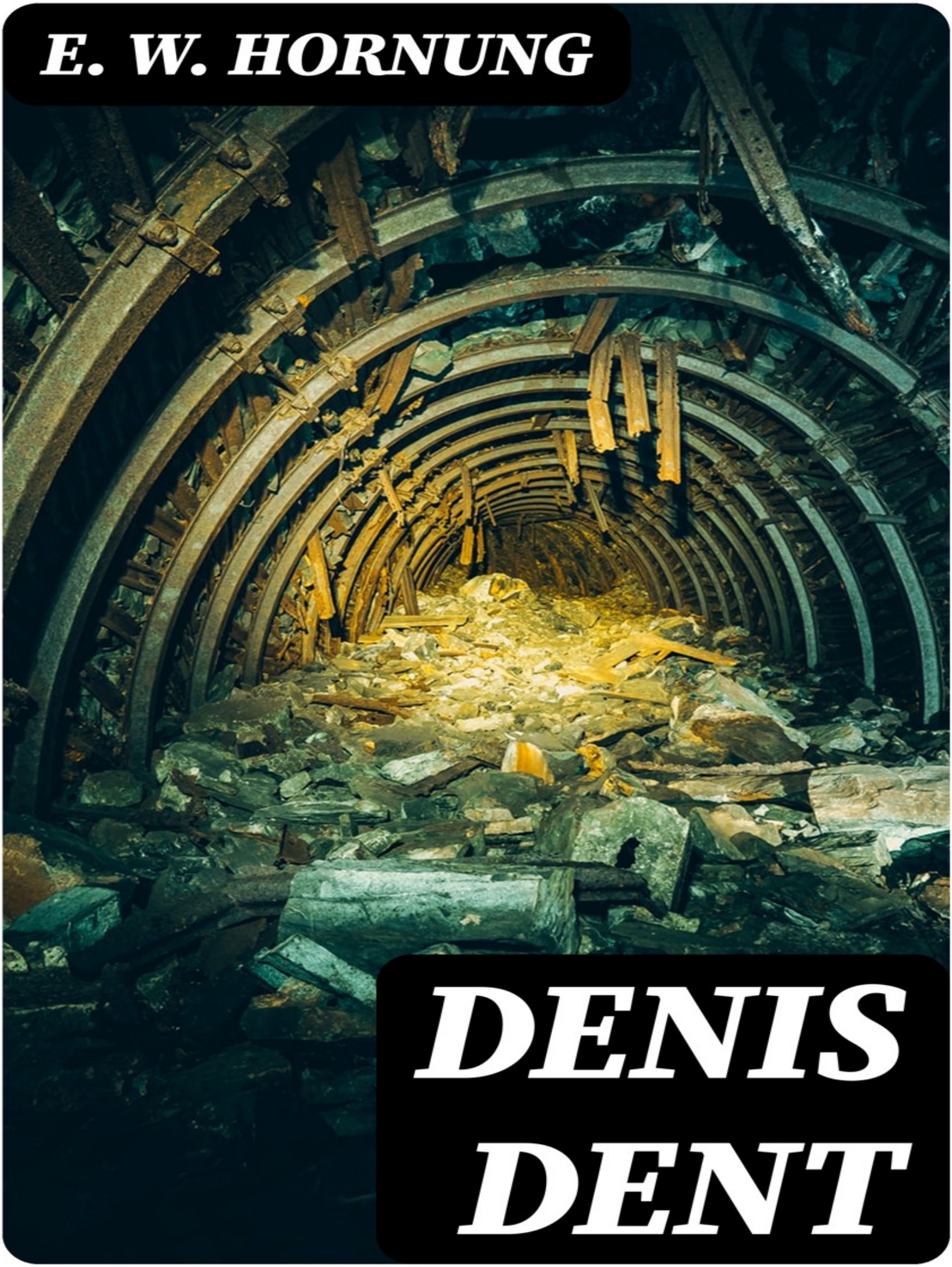
E. W. HORNUNG



DENIS DENT

E. W. Hornung

Denis Dent

A Novel

EAN 8596547381235

DigiCat, 2022
Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

Table of Contents

CHAPTER I
THE SECOND OFFICER

Table of Contents

"Land ahead!"

The *North Foreland* had been made advisedly snug for the night. In the middle watch she was under her three lower topsails and fore topmast staysail only. Not that it blew very hard, but the night was dark and hazy, with a heavy swell. And it was the last night of the voyage.

At eight bells there had been a cast of the deep-sea lead, with the significant result that the skipper had been the first to turn in; gradually the excited passengers had followed his example, instead of staying on deck to see the Otway light. The second mate had said there would be no Otway that night, and what the second said was good enough for most. The saloon skylight had become a clean-edged glimmer in the middle of the poop, the binnacle a fallen moon; not a port-hole twinkled on the rushing ink; and the surviving topsails, without visible stitch or stick aloft or alow, hovered over the ship like gigantic bats.

Four persons remained upon the poop: the middy of the watch, tantalized by muffled guffaws from the midshipmen's berth in the after-house; the man at the wheel, in eclipse above the belt, with the binnacle light upon one weather-beaten hand; and on the weather side, the second mate in reluctant conversation with a big cigar that glowed at intervals into a bearded and spectacled face, the smooth brown one of the young officer sharing the momentary illumination.

"It's all very well," said the senior man, in low persistent tones, "but if we don't have it out now, when are we to? You know what it will be like to-morrow: we shall land first thing, and you'll be the busiest man on board. As for the rules of the ship, if an owner can't use his discretion he might as well travel by some other line."

The young fellow was smiling pleasantly as the other puffed again.

"Very good, Mr. Merridew! I don't object if the captain doesn't; and of course I must tell you anything you want to know."

"Anything! My good young man, if I am to consider this matter for a moment (which I don't promise) I must at least know everything that you can tell me about yourself first; for what," continued Mr. Merridew, taking the cigar from his teeth, "what do you suppose I know about you at this moment? Absolutely nothing except that you seem to be a first-class sailor, as they tell me you are, and a very nice fellow, as I have found you for myself—aboardship; but of your shore-going record, of your position in life at home, and of your people and their position, to speak quite plainly, I know nothing at all."

Mr. Merridew delivered himself with a certain dispassionate unction, as one who could do the judicial to a turn, and enjoy it. Yet his tone was kindly, and the periods free from wilful offense.

"You may make your mind easy about my people. I have none," said the sailor, bitterly. A fatherly hand found his shoulder on the word.

"My dear fellow! I am so sorry."

"You mean relieved."

"I mean what I say," said Mr. Merridew, removing his hand.

It was the young man's turn to apologize, which he did with much frankness and more feeling.

"The truth is, sir, my parents have been dead for years; and yet they are nearly everything to me still—they were all the world until this voyage! My mother was Irish; her name would not be new to you, but it will keep. It may not be necessary for you to know it, or anything more about me, and in any case it can't alter me. But I am half-Irish through my mother—though you wouldn't think it."

"I would think it," remarked Mr. Merridew, blowing at his cigar as at a forge, until the red light found him looking wise through his spectacles, but the officer with one eye on his sails and no perceptible emotion in the other.

"My first name," he went on, "is as Irish as you like; it's Denis; and you may say that I've been living up to it for once!"

"Denis!" repeated Mr. Merridew, with interest. "Well, I know that name, anyhow; one of our partners—Captain Devenish's father—he's Denis Devenish, you know."

"Indeed," said Denis Dent, and there was a strange light in his spare eye. "Well, so much for my mother; my father was a Yorkshire dalesman, as his father and his father's father were before him. I am the first of them to leave the land."

"May I ask why?"

"It isn't our land any more. My father gave up everything to take my mother abroad, when her life was despaired of in

England, and when her people—her own people—I can't trust myself to speak of them!"

And the young fellow turned abruptly aside, while Mr. Merridew puffed and peered at a massive though clean-cut face, whose only Irish feature was a pair of bright brown eyes, bold and resolute, yet quick to laughter, if quicker still to fire.

The south-easter sang through the unseen rigging; the ship rushed a fathom through the unseen sea. The second had a look at the compass, and came climbing back to windward with his hands in his pea-jacket pockets.

"And yet," said Mr. Merridew, flourishing his cigar, "and yet—you want to marry my daughter!"

"If she will have me, sir," said the sailor, with an uncertainty on that point in becoming contrast to his certainty of himself.

"But whether *I* will or not."

"I never said that, Mr. Merridew. I should be very sorry to take up such a position, I can assure you, sir."

"You would be sorry, but you would do it," retorted Mr. Merridew with acumen. "You would do as your father evidently did before you."

"I hoped we had finished with my parents, sir."

"But they left you nothing, if I understand aright," rejoined Merridew, changing his ground and his tone with some dexterity. "And you would marry my daughter on the pay of a junior officer in the merchant service."

"I never said that either. I have my captain's certificate, sir, as it is."

The new tone was the tone to take. Mr. Merridew went so far as to give his daughter her name.

"And Nan," said he, "might have ten thousand pounds for her marriage portion. I don't say she would, but for all you know she might have more. Her husband ought to bring at least as much into settlement, even as a self-respecting man, don't you think? And yet you would make her a merchant skipper's wife!"

The young man winced, as though for a flash he saw himself wholly in the wrong. Then his face hardened—all but the Irish eyes—and it was the face of a man who would justify himself with his life's blood. Impulse, initiative, temerity, were in the eyes, indomitable endurance in their solid setting.

"You take it for granted that I will never be anything more!" he exclaimed. "But, sir, once a sailor isn't always one. I've got on well at sea. I'd get on well on land—anywhere—at anything! You may smile. I feel it in me. Mr. Merridew, it may seem what you please, but I'm pretty young even for what I am now. Surely, surely, you would give me time—if she would?"

It was the Irishman speaking, the Irish blood spurting out in words, and Mr. Merridew distrusted the bulk of that race; but his cigar glowed again upon a mouth and jaw that came of harder stock, and for the moment his mind was illuminated too.

Here was this Denis Dent, not one young man, it struck him, but two young men in one, each with a very name of his own. Dents from the Dales, Denis from old Ireland! Mr. Merridew smiled through his spectacles, pleased with his

conceit, not altogether disposed to regard it as such, but incontinently interested in a personality to which he had been so clever as to supply the key. The heart of the discoverer warmed toward his own. There was an attractiveness in Denis, a solid worth in Dent. Denis might win the girl. Dent would deserve her. And Denis Dent might have carried her own father with him, had he been the only young man in the case, or even on the poop of the *North Foreland* as she drove through the haze on the last night of her voyage.

But as the pair stood eye to eye, the pregnant pause between them was interrupted by a loud and startling laugh, and a tall figure loomed through the first gray tinge of approaching dawn. It was that of a young man in a tasseled dressing-gown, with an ornate meerschaum pipe pendent between the bushy black whiskers of the day.

"Well, if that doesn't take first prize for cheek!" cried he, and lurched toward them in his slippers as one who had never found his sea-legs.

"We are having a private conversation, Ralph," said Mr. Merridew in mild rebuke.

"A private conversation that you could hear on the forecastle-head!" jeered Ralph Devenish, who was full of liquor without being drunk. "I suppose he's so proud of it he wants the whole ship to know!"

And the meerschaum pointed jerkily at Denis, who stood the heaving deck as a circus rider stands a horse, his hands still deep in his pea-jacket pockets.

"Captain Devenish," said he, "it's against the rules to speak to the officer of the watch, but you shall speak civilly

if you speak at all. Otherwise I advise you to take yourself off the poop before you're put off."

"By God!" snarled Devenish, "but you shall pay for that! Before one owner to another owner's son, on the last night of the voyage! It's your last in the Line, Mr. Officer of the Watch! And you dare to lay a hand on me! Come on. You dare. I know your blustering breed, you damned Jack-in-buttons!"

"And I know yours—you Devenishes! I know you too well to soil my hands on any one of you!"

The concentrated bitterness of this retort had an opposite effect on either hearer; one it stupefied, the other it flooded with a sudden light; but Devenish was the first to find his tongue, and for the moment there was none more foul before the mast. The deplorable torrent was only stemmed by the startling apparition of a square little man in a still more awful, because a more articulate and more righteous, rage.

"I'll teach you to break the rules of my ship! I'll teach you to curse my officers, drunk or sober! Out of my sight, sir, or I'll have you in irons before you're a minute older!"

"Come, come, Captain Coles," said Mr. Merridew, with dignity; "there has been more provocation than you imagine; and this, you must remember, is Captain Devenish."

"I don't care a dump if it's Devenish Merridew and Company lumped into one!" roared the little skipper. "You can have your way ashore, but I mean to have mine at sea; and as for your iron coffin of a ship, I'll be thankful to come off her alive, let alone sailing in her again. No two

compasses alike, thirty-six hours since we got the sun, the darkest night of the voyage, and Australia anywhere! Yet this is the night you choose, you owners, to bully and browbeat my officers of the watch!"

But it was no longer the darkest night of the voyage, or even night at all. The group stood visible and divisible in a cold gray haze. The lower topsails were no longer detached from the ship; there was a misty mast to each; and the ship was running dry-decked through the high smooth seas.

It was at this moment that the haze lifted like breath from a mirror; and a subtle new sound was just beginning to insinuate itself upon the ear when the look-out man drowned it with his roar from the forecastle head.

CHAPTER II
SAUVE QUI PEUT

Table of Contents

Land was indeed ahead, and in the most appalling shape known to seafaring man: at the last moment, the haze had lifted on a line of jagged cliffs, already parallel with the foreyard, albeit by the muffled thud of the breakers, not quite so near as it looked.

The *North Foreland* was blessed with a commander who was at his best in an emergency. Little Coles had turned in when he should have stayed on deck, and was no more prepared for shipwreck than if such disasters were unknown; but he rose to the occasion like a lark. His sharp voice cracked like a whip from the break of the poop, and all hands, piped from the forecastle, the petty officers' quarters, and the midshipmen's berth, came running as though the words drew blood.

The spanker was set, with the mizzen and maintopmast staysail, and the helm put down to bring her round; but there was no racing of the cliffs to port. She stumbled a little in her stride; the fresh sails flapped; but there was no getting her on the other tack, though the upper mizzen topsail was pressed into the job.

The skipper waited a minute with compressed lips and fiery eye; then a crackle of musketry from his weatherbeaten throat, and both anchors were let go.

The port anchor had fifty fathoms of cable, the starboard anchor sixty fathoms of chain; in anticipation of their holding, the sails were clewed up, and a man sent into the

chains with the lead, for she was drifting inshore every moment. But the lead danced on smooth rock, where the anchors trailed as readily as over ice; the captain had them both up again, but that took longer than letting them go, and meanwhile half the hands were aloft shaking out sail once more.

Coles was showing his resource at every point, and by this time had his ship actually head to wind; in another minute she might have stood away upon the port tack. But at this juncture time was wasted in an attempt to sheet home the topsails, which failing, the buntlines of the mainsail were let go, the port main tack got on board, and the sheet hauled aft. The men were still upon the rope when the *North Foreland* struck and spilt them like the winners in a tug-of-war.

It was the horrible striking of an iron ship: a terrific crash under the mizzen-chains, and there she quivered like a rat in a terrier's teeth. And the devilish seas that had run with her, hunted with her, how they fell on her now, and swept and trampled her from the moment she was down!

The scene on deck, if it wanted the infinite horror of pitch darkness, was only a degree less dreadful in a pearly dawn that left no doubt about the situation. Every hatchway spouted crude humanity, shouting, shoving, screaming, scolding, covering a chattering nakedness as it gained the deck, and there struck silent at a glance. For nothing was hid, nothing extenuated, for a single moment, to a single eye. There was no learning the worst by humane degrees. It was patent at once to the wildest and the calmest gaze. The sanguine soul was no more help to the stunned community

than the born pessimist; there was no chance for the imagination either way.

They could see, every one of them, the towering cliffs—blind sides of houses without an inch of pavement—the rollers running up to them unbroken, for the better sport of leaping sky-high at the impact. They could see her settling, see her bumping, see the top-hamper falling about the deck. There was enough to feel and to hear. The eyes might have been spared a little. Some shut them more than once, as when an upper spar came down like an arrow, transfixing a sailor with incredible neatness, and actually sticking upright through man and deck; but few escaped the sight of blood, and none the dying scream. A worse sight was in store. A steward with the stock of life-belts from the lazaretto touched the captain's arm. And, checked in some hoarse tirade, the valiant Coles stood first aghast and then abject in the sight of passengers and crew—beaten man and broken reed.

The better part of valour was the only part he lacked. Not a boat in davits; the whole fleet docked, inboard, on skids! And exactly six life-belts to go round a ship's company of over a hundred souls!

The second mate was clearing away the port life-boat with five of the hands, one blaspheming, another in tears, more than one vowing with reason that they would all be drowned, and the young officer himself in a consuming agony of his own. At the break of the poop, almost all this time, stood a slender figure in a pink wrapper, between a bearded man in spectacles and a man with bushy whiskers in incongruous silk and tassels. Dent wondered why he did

not lend a hand; no, on second thoughts he knew, and cursed the fellow in his heart. He did not mean to leave her side. He meant to have the rescuing of her. Trust a Devenish to play his own game! Denis was too busy to look twice at the trio, but he seemed to see them all the time, and the vision galled him to insensate effort.

"Take your time, take your time," cried the chief officer, all red hook-nose and ginger moustache, an oilskin bonnet fastened under his chin. "The old man's done his part. He'll go down in her. The rest hangs on you and me."

The chief met the responsibility with his own tap of cold profanity, not unaccompanied by shrewd cuff and calculated kick, as he superintended the clearing of the other life-boat. As for the skipper, it seemed that he had recovered his mettle to meet fresh trouble further aft; they could hear him firing oaths and threatening lead; but when Denis looked he could not get his eyes past the two men at the break of the poop, for at that moment they were lashing one of the six life-belts about a forlorn little figure in pink.

The port life-boat was ready first, and the third mate busy marshaling the women and children in a helpless, eager, hesitating, exasperating throng; but Miss Merridew was still detained by her friends on the poop. The gripes had been cut, and Denis himself had sent the last chock flying with a savage kick. He and his crew of five were in the act of hooking the tackles to the thwarts. The chief mate was shouting a timely word of advice.

"When you get her launched, and filled, and stand away in her——"

But Denis did not hear what he was to do then, for at that instant a green sea lifted the port life-boat clean over the side with all six men.

Denis's next thought was that the water was warmer than he should have supposed, and his next but one that somebody was bent on braining him; he was hit about the head, not once but repeatedly; but as soon as he could see he knew the reason, for a dim glimmer was all there was to see. The boat was riding bottom upward. He had come up under her. It was the thwart that had been belabouring him. He caught hold of it, pulled as at a horizontal bar, came up like a cork, and easily wormed half his person between thwart and bilge.

In this position Denis regained breath, immersed to the waist, but with no lack of air, and a bilge-cork handy for fresh supplies, until the real danger occurred to him. The capsized life-boat rode the rollers like a cradle, but at any moment she might shatter herself against the cliffs. It was hardly the work of one for Denis to dive from underneath her at the thought. The cliffs, however, were still far enough away; of the wreck he could see nothing for the swell; but it was now broad daylight.

He went under the boat again, and in about five minutes she righted herself for no apparent reason. Denis was nearly stunned in the process, nor was the advantage otherwise unmixed. The boat had come up full, and Denis had now to bale for his life.

So she floated upon the cliffs, until the big seas began to break, when she instantly capsized again. This time he succeeded in scaling the keel, only to be dislodged as his

perverse ship righted herself once more. But the tenacity of the Dents was now uppermost in Denis, if indeed he had any other quality left, and he was back in the boat when she eventually struck upon the cliff. The shock hurled him overboard for the last time, yet was so much less terrific than he had anticipated, that he sought and found the reason as he swam clear. A minute ago the boat had been within a few fathoms of the full face of the cliffs; at the last instant a mouth had opened, and all she had done was to cannon off the perpendicular wall of a strait so narrow as to be practically invisible from without.

It was comprehensible enough. The tide was setting through this tiny channel. The derelict life-boat was not alone; packages bobbed between the towering walls; a table came riding by on its top, three legs still standing, as Denis trod water. And on the table he partly floated and partly swam into a bay which stood to the channel as a flagon to its neck.

It was semicircular in shape, surrounded by cliffs as lofty and precipitous as those without, but mercifully provided with a sandy beach at the upper end. The castaway breathed a hoarse thanksgiving at the saving sight. His smarting eyes had risen involuntarily, and as they rested on the heights, the sun lit up some heath and bracken that overhung the edge a few feet like a table-cloth: thence downward it was sheer for one or two hundred to the beach below. At the base a couple of caves opened romantically upon the yellow sand, but there was no sun for them yet, or for the dancing waves that bore Denis and his table finally to the land.

There in an instant he was staggering and stumbling under the abnormal weight of his dripping and exhausted body. A few yards he reeled, then fell prone upon the warm sand, digging in his fingers to the knuckles, thinking of no mortal but himself, thanking his God for preserving him as though he had made the voyage alone. Indeed the long voyage on the ship was temporarily blotted out of mind by the little one in the boat.

And he a lover! And his love as good as drowned before his eyes!—for not a vestige of the ship had he seen since the original mishap to the port life-boat. It was a terrible reflection to Denis for the rest of his days—but at the time he did not think of her—did not even picture a certain shade of pink and ask himself what it meant and must mean to him till his dying day. He just lay and held on to the warm sand, foot and finger, because the earth heaved under him as the sea had done for thirteen weeks, and his vitality was very low.

Consciousness might have left him altogether; he always wanted to think so, for then he could have forgiven himself; but he was never satisfied on the point. He only knew it was a faint far cry that roused him in the end. But faint as it was, and never so far away, that thin high cry brought the half-dead man to his feet like a gunshot at the ear.

A bar of sunlight slanted through the narrow heads, and in the sun the blue waves were tipped with gold, and across the gold and the blue a black spar floated with some sodden and discoloured rags.

But Denis was in no doubt as to their shade.

CHAPTER III
THE CASTAWAYS

Table of Contents

Denis had been a swimmer all his life; how he struck out now every swimmer will know, though none so well as the happy few who have themselves saved life. It is good to think that that noblest of human instincts had its secret place even now in this glowing heart; that Denis Dent would have given himself as unstintedly to the rescue of some unknown person; yet surely the sacred flame alone could have fired those spent members to the last pitch of redoubled endurance. The white left arm, brown as a glove from the wrist down, flew over as white a shoulder in flashing curves; the brown head dipped in the blue, to rise spluttering and dripping a good yard further; but the yards were close on two hundred from shore to spar, and when Denis came up with the latter, it was his love, indeed, but she was already senseless.

They had tied her in a life-belt, and lashed the life-belt to a spar; in time she would have been cast up on the warm sand, dead! She was not dead yet; she should not die. Denis took the hem of her dear drenched garment between his teeth, and swam in, if possible, more strenuously than he had swum out, but with the breast stroke, and in twice the time.

At last she lay where he had lain, only in the sun. Already the sand was gloriously hot to bare knees; and there was still a faint throbbing in the inanimate wrist, though the eyelids lay leaden in a livid face. Denis caught up his

scattered clothes, raced behind a ti-tree thicket, and put them on as hurriedly as he had plucked them off.

The thicket grew under the cliffs between the two caves, and Denis delayed some seconds to fill his arms with branches before running back to the girl.

Her pulse seemed stronger. He arranged some of the branches, but left the sun beating on her feet. It was the month of October, and early summer in Australia.

Sundry packages had already come ashore; there was the inevitable barrel of salt junk; there was a box of soap, that Denis spurned, and another box so similar that he left it to the last. Judge therefore of his joy on eventually discovering that here was nothing less than a case of Spanish brandy! He shrieked the good tidings to the girl. She did not stir. He had to run back to her, and lift that leaden wrist once more, before he could bear to open the box.

His sailor's knife was worth a thousand pounds to him in that hour; the great blade made short enough work of the lid, but the heavy haft knocked the neck off a bottle so prettily as to provide a measure with the medicine. Denis filled the inverted neck as he ran, and was soon spilling as much over the marble face as he managed to get between the bloodless lips. Then, for the first time, fear came to him: he retreated a little on his knees. The stuff had caught her breath, her eyelids twitched, and as she coughed the marble flushed to flesh. She did not quite open her eyes.

"I am so cold," she moaned; and the white feet were drawn up a very little, but so stiffly, as though the whole body had been dragged with them.

Denis's blood froze as he remembered some vague saying that the feet die first; even in the hot sun these looked dead enough; they also must be brought to life, and the arch enemy repulsed at every point, at any sacrifice. In Denis, or rather in the Denis who was least a Dent, the act would almost outstrip the thought; this was the Denis who was saving his darling's life without time to realize what she was to him. Quicker than thought he had tipped up the bottle itself, so that the brandy came out in gulps, first over one pale foot and then the other. And now the left, now the right, now with one hand apiece, and anon with both together for one foot, did he chafe and rub, and rub and chafe, until the little lead feet were such pink shells, but so warm, so warm that the tears stood in his eyes. For he had been long enough at it to think a little as he rubbed; but as yet it was otherwise with her; she could only lie there with closed eyes, as meek and unashamed as any other dying soul.

She was not going to die, however, unless Denis dropped dead first. When he could leave her feet he had a turn at her hands, a much shorter journey for the blood, and by the time they began to clasp his feebly there was no more brandy left. Denis went for another bottle, and half the next dose she swallowed properly; the rest she pushed toward him.

"To please me," she whispered: they were her first words, and it his first drop.

Now she was lying with her eyes tight shut, but not in sleep. Her lips moved, first in the faintest smile, then in more whispers.

"I remember—everything. I knew you would come to me. I knew it!"

He could only say her name.

"Nan! Nan! Nan!"

It was as though his heart had broken, it was so full. He had dared to call her his, the other night under the awning; he never dreamed of doing so now. His conception of honour forbade an endearment which she could not repudiate if she would; his own delicacy deplored the vital offices which had been thrust upon him. He had brought the life's blood back to leaden limbs, but he had brought it back at an expense which he already apprehended dimly. In her right senses she might have chosen death. He had taken on himself to give her life, and now she would live to love or loathe him.

Gentle birth and hard upbringing had produced in Denis an essential delicacy underneath a somewhat bluff exterior; but he was not self-conscious on either score. Qualm and pang came upon him as part of the situation, almost as his deserts. He was not aware of any fine feeling in the matter. He was full of feeling, but he did not know that it was fine.

Presently he saw she was asleep, and when he bent to listen she was breathing beautifully; he just touched one hand, with the strange new awe he had for her, and it was warmer than his own. But now he was in a new difficulty; he found time to appreciate his own exhaustion; a stiff pull of brandy alone kept him from fainting, and he foresaw in alarm how it would be. They would both lie sleeping where they were, the almost tropical sun would beat down on them all day, and they might never see another. The nearer cave was not twenty yards away. Denis went to it, and it was

lined with far finer sand than outside; he came back and gazed a moment on the girl. She was very young, and so delicately made! He knew that he could carry her, feeble though he now felt: if only it did not wake her. He gathered her tenderly in his arms: he carried her to the cave, he put her down on the cool fine sand, and all she did was to smile on him in her sleep.

If only she would when she awoke!

Meanwhile a pillow she must have before Denis would lay his own head anywhere, and he had seen some rushes in the thicket. He cut an armful, and thin bundle by thin bundle he got the lot under her head at last. Then there was the table. He caught sight of it along the beach, and thought what a fine screen it would make for Nan. It kept him up another ten minutes; but by that time, and thereafter, the sun might stream into the cave, but not a fiery finger would it lay on Nan. So then Denis measured his length at last, outside the screen, as a dog lies across the door.

On finally awaking (for many times he dropped off again deliciously), his first act was to listen on hands and knees; and since the sound he could just hear was as peaceful as it was regular, his next was to go outside and stick a rush upright in the sand. Its shadow was a short finger pointing seaward, so that he knew it was about noon. The tide had gone down. Denis walked to the edge of the surf, and there stood gazing up at the cliff for many minutes. No; there was no way up that he saw or could conceive. Yet the little beach was only as the lees in the flagon of a bay. There was assuredly no way round.

It is fifty years since the wreck of the *North Foreland* and the second mate's extraordinary climb, but the scene of each remains an object of interest to visitors at the station on the heights above, while the minor incident is unfailing matter for conjecture, contention, and much open incredulity. It has been handed down that the sailor himself failed to identify the place within an hour of his alleged performance. The tradition is so far true. Denis never pretended to know how he had achieved the superhuman: had he been in a condition fully to appreciate what he was doing, the chances are that he never would have made the attempt. He did not mean to make it as it was. But with the brandy in him (and little else) he had clambered a few feet to see whether the thing was as impossible as it appeared. Of course, it was not; but already it seemed safer to climb a little further than to drop at the risk of broken bones; and so in a minute he found himself committed to the ascent. The cliff had beetled by insidious degrees; all at once there was nothing to be seen between his naked feet and the beach far below; one foot was soon bleeding, and the drops falling clear into the sand. To drop clear himself would have meant certain injury now; as well break neck as leg, thought Denis, for all the use he would be to Nan with either. So on and up he went, now flattened for breath against a favourable slope, now swinging by the fingers from some ledge that threatened to saw them to the bone, anon testing tuft or twig with his life, yet all with so light a head that the protracted jeopardy was an exhilaration almost to the last. According to Denis, it was just at the top, when a bunch of

bracken came up so slowly as to enable him to grasp a stronger bunch in time, that his gorge rose with the roots.

Remains the undisputed fact that between one and two in the afternoon, a lad on the station, whose boundary was these cliffs, saw an eerie figure approaching through the yellow dust of a mob of sheep which he happened to be driving at the time. It was this lad whom the papers mentioned as Mr. James Doherty; but like Denis he was Irish only by descent, and not for an instant did he imagine that he had seen the devil. He appeared to be a very quick youth, who knew the bush, and a glance convinced him that the ragged wretch had been lost in it and driven to some dreadful extremity; for his face and hands were all bloody, and even his bare feet incrusted with blood and dust. Moreover, his speech was slightly indistinct, as is the case with men who are half-dead with thirst.

This lad Doherty was the first person in Australia to learn the fate of the *North Foreland*, and the first to discredit the wild finish of the wild man's talk.

"Why, there's stairs right down," he cried. "Over two hundred on 'em, cut in the sandstone."

"What a silly lie," sighed Denis.

"Did you sample the caves?"

"One of them."

"Which one?"

"The one with the big mouth."

"Don't you tell me you never went into the other! It's a nat'ral chimbley at the fur end, and the boss had it shoved right through, and steps cut in the sandstone for bathing."

The sailor's bloodstains were cracking in a ghastly grin.

"So that won't do, old man," added Mr. Doherty, severely.

"Will these?"

And Denis lifted one naked foot after the other; the left sole showed a purple bruise, the right a gash that still dripped as he held it up.

Mr. Doherty supposed that he must be the liar, but only allowed himself to look confounded for the moment; the next, he was emptying his water-bag, from which Denis had already enjoyed a deep pull, over the wounds. The sheep had scattered right and left, but the horse stood apparently fast asleep in the sun.

"Now up you jump," said Doherty. "He's as quiet as a cow."

Denis stared at him.

"Jump up? What for?"

"You're within a mile of the homestead. You struck the right track on top."

"Oh, but I'm not going on," said Denis hastily. "I must go back to—her."

"With them feet and without your tucker?"

And the lean brown lad stood with his bare arms akimbo, a stained statue in a flannel shirt and moleskins.

"At once," said Denis. "I've wasted time enough; and if there are stairs there's no difficulty. Go you back to the homestead, and tell them to send down everything they can think of for a young lady. Food and clothes; mind, she hasn't had a bite since dinner yesterday."

The young Australian doffed his wide-awake with a sweep.

"Why, mister!" he got out, but that was all. "I'm sorry I didn't call you 'mister' before," he added, after the stare of an idolater. "I'll never leave it out again!"

Denis was limping along only a few minutes later when the sound of a gallop made him look round for the rider who had just left him; and the same horse it was, but a different horseman, for whom the stirrups were grotesquely short. In a few seconds he had bobbed and bounded into a blue-eyed man with fair beard blowing and tanned face filled with humane distress.

"Get on this horse," he cried, flinging himself off. "If you don't, I'll carry you myself! There—let me give you a hand; my name's Kitto; this is my run. Everything's following in the buggy, but here's a biscuit to begin on; the beds will be made and aired by the time we get you both back. But only two of you—only two!"

Mr. Kitto had a heart of gold, and wore it on his sleeve; rarer still was a tact almost incongruous in that desolate spot. Not a question had Denis to answer as the horse ambled under him and the squatter strode alongside. But when they came to the mouth of a long stair tunneled through the soft sandstone, it was Mr. Kitto who looked curiously at the rude steep steps.

"Nobody has come up here," said he. "We had a dust-storm yesterday before the wind went round, and the sand on these top steps is as it drifted."

Denis could afford to smile.

"So you didn't believe it either."

"What's that? I could believe the side of a house of you, my brave fellow!" cried Mr. Kitto. "I only mean that your