

**THE CRUISE OF THE
"SCANDAL"**

AND OTHER STORIES

**BY
VICTOR BRIDGES**

To
COUSIN ROSE

PREFACE TO THE AMERICAN EDITION

To offer a volume of short stories to the countrymen of Edgar Allan Poe and O. Henry is an operation which requires nerve. According to my publisher it also requires "a foreword" which I find, after consultation with the dictionary, is the same thing as a preface. Now to write a preface to one's own book seems to me about as embarrassing a task as any author can be asked to undertake. It is like standing outside the front door calling the attention of indifferent passers-by to the more attractive features of one's own house. They managed things better in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when for a comparative trifle some great artist like John Dryden was cheerfully prepared to furnish a flattering introduction to the work of any author on the simple understanding that he was not expected to read the volume in question.

Not possessing the pen of Dryden, and being additionally handicapped by the fact that I have read the accompanying stories, I find myself very much at a loss how to fulfil my publishers' request. Desperate situations demand desperate remedies, and I will, therefore, tell the truth. I wrote these stories in order to satisfy an inward craving—not for artistic expression, but for food and drink. I took a great deal of trouble over them, and if they are not good they are at least as good as I could make them. I should not, however, have had the audacity to offer them to the American public in book form, except for the fact that they have sold well and are continuing to sell well in England. The most curious phenomena occasionally repeat themselves, and it is with a wistful hope that something of the sort may occur in the present case that I

venture to launch the *Scandal* on the time-honoured trail of Columbus.

VICTOR BRIDGES.

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The Cruise of the "*Scandal*"

"One must never forget," said George solemnly, "that rank has its duties as well as its privileges." I helped myself to another glass of champagne.

"What is it you want me to do?" I asked.

"I have no wish to dictate to you in any way," he answered. "I am merely offering you my advice. As your elder brother and the head of the family, I naturally take an interest in your career."

"Fire ahead," I replied gratefully. "I'm always ready to listen to wisdom, especially from a Cabinet Minister."

There was a short pause.

"Well, then," said George, taking a thoughtful pull at his cigar, "my advice is that you should accept this invitation from Lady Bulstrode, and make up your mind to settle down."

"To do what?" I asked in dismay.

"To settle down," repeated George, with some firmness. "If you are ever going to do anything with your life, it's quite time you started. You can't go wandering about the world in this aimless fashion for ever."

"But it isn't aimless, George," I protested. "I always have an excellent reason for going anywhere."

"And may I ask what your 'excellent reason' was for spending the whole of last year in the wilds of Kashmir?"

"I wanted to shoot a snow leopard," I said.

George shrugged his shoulders.

"Exactly what I mean. A year of your life thrown away on a frivolous piece of sport."

"Frivolous!" I echoed. "There's devilish little frivolity about shooting a snow leopard. You try it."

"Thank you," said George coldly. "I have something better to do with my time."

It was plain that he was getting a little huffy, and my conscience pricked me. With all his seriousness George is an excellent fellow.

"Look here, old son," I said. "Politics are all very well for you—you've got a turn for that sort of thing—but what on earth use should I be? I can't talk for nuts, and know rather less about the game than this cigar."

George frowned slightly.

"Politics," he observed, "are not a game, and with regard to your knowing nothing about them—I suppose you can learn. You have plenty of ability if you care to use it. Sir Henry Martin was telling me only yesterday that your paper about New Guinea in the *Fortnightly* was quoted by practically every witness at the Royal Commission.

"Good!" said I. "That must be why the editor wants me to write him something about Kashmir."

George nodded his head approvingly.

"I hope you will do so. Nowadays serious journalism is as good an introduction to a political career as you could possibly have. Besides, one would like to feel that all these years of wandering about have not been entirely wasted."

"Oh, they've not been wasted, George," I said. "I've enjoyed 'em enormously. The only thing is they've rather put me off what people call civilization. I can stand a couple of months of London, but I'm afraid I should get frightfully fed up if I stopped here much longer."

George leaned back in his chair and drummed lightly on the table with his fingers.

"That," he said, "is due to the fact that you have no steady influence in your life. When you have once settled down to regular work, you will find that this unfortunate restlessness will disappear." Then he paused: "It would be a good thing if you were to get married," he added.

"What, on my income?" I exclaimed; for I knew George had rather spacious notions about the family dignity.

George nodded.

"There is no greater help for a rising politician than the right sort of wife," he remarked oracularly.

"My dear George," I said, "I don't want to grumble about the size of my income—it has always been ample for my simple tastes—but when it comes to marriage and living in London and being in Parliament, what the devil's the good of nine hundred pounds a year? Why, it wouldn't keep some women in frocks!"

"There are some women," replied George, "who can very well afford to pay for their own frocks."

I looked at him with surprise and pain.

"You are not doing anything so immoral as to suggest that I should marry for money?" I asked.

George carefully removed the ash from his cigar.

"To contract an alliance with a wealthy woman," he observed, "is not necessarily the same as what you are pleased to call marrying for money."

"No, George," I said. "I hope I'm sufficiently English to appreciate the difference."

"Besides," he went on, disregarding my interruption, "marriage must always be a matter of give and take. If a woman brings you a reasonable dowry, you, on the other hand, are able to offer her one of the oldest names in the country, an unimpeachable social position, and—er—a certain measure of youth and good looks."

I picked up one of the Savoy tablespoons, and contemplated my reflection in its highly polished surface. I can only conclude that it did not do me justice.

"That's all very well," I said; "but where does one find these gilded and easily pleased females?"

Again George's brow contracted.

"There are plenty of charming girls in society, who at the same time are by no means paupers. You are sure to find one or two at Grendon, for instance."

I put down the spoon slowly.

"Oh, ho!" said I. "Now I begin to understand. We are expected to combine business and pleasure this trip—eh?"

"If you mean to suggest that I have been talking the matter over with Lady Bulstrode," said George coldly, "you are quite mistaken. At the same time, I know she would be only too pleased to see you make a sensible marriage. She has often asked after you when you've been away, and when she heard you were in London she insisted on my sending her your address at once."

"Lady Bulstrode," I said, "is a dear old soul. I've always been in love with her ever since I was a kid at Strathmore and she used to ask me over to Grendon to shoot rabbits. By the way, who's living at Strathmore now?"

George looked at me a little suspiciously. I think he believed me guilty of trying to change the conversation.

"There's no one there at present," he replied, "except old Donald Ross and his wife. I want to sell the place if I can; it's no good to us."

"Oh, don't sell it," I protested. "It's the only one of our numerous family mansions I could ever stand." Then I paused. "I left a boat there last time I was in England," I added. "I wonder what's happened to it?"

"I should imagine it was there still," replied George.

I laughed, and finished my champagne.

"I wasn't suggesting you'd pawned it, George," I said.

A sense of humour not being my brother's strong point, this little pleasantry fell on stony ground.

"Aren't we wandering rather from the point?" he asked.

"Not a bit," I said, with some cheerfulness. "I was just thinking that if I'm booked to go to Grendon in ten days' time it's highly necessary that I should have a short holiday first. A smart country house-party bang on top of two months of London would just about finish me."

"Well?" said George, raising his eyebrows.

"Well, that's why I inquired about the boat," I finished. "I could just put in a week's sailing nicely, and write my paper for the *Fortnightly* at the same time."

George looked at me with a kind of pitying interest.

"Am I to understand that you intend sailing about the coast of Scotland for a week by yourself?"

I nodded.

"A certain amount of solitude," I observed, "is necessary for the production of great literature."

George shrugged his shoulders.

"I suppose you are serious. Personally I should find it difficult to imagine anything less enjoyable, or anything less conducive to work."

"I shan't be sailing all the time," I explained. "I shall make a snug little base on Kerrin Island, and do my scribbling there."

"Kerrin Island!" repeated George incredulously. "Why, the place is deserted. No one has been there for years."

"Yes, they have, George," I said. "I spent a fortnight there last time I was home, and, what's more, I built myself a most superior hut. Unless some of the fisher-boys have been monkeying around, it ought to be as sound as ever. I took a lot of trouble over that hut."

At this point George, who had been consulting his watch, apparently decided that I had wasted quite enough of his time for the present.

"Well, please yourself," he said, beckoning the waiter with a peremptory wave of his hand. "So long as you go to Grendon I suppose that's all we can expect. I shall hope to hear soon, however, that you are adopting some really serious and permanent interest in life."

"If it should take the form of an heiress, George," I said, "I will wire you at once without fail."

* * * * *

Exactly two days after this sporting promise I found myself in the excellent company of the sea and the sky about three miles off the land, near Inverness. I was not alone. Sitting in the bows of the boat, and looking out with interest towards the approaching coast of Kerrin Island, was the most disreputable rough-haired terrier puppy that ever forced his society upon his betters. His name was Rufus, and he had been presented to me by Donald Ross. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say he had presented himself, and that Donald, with the simple philosophy of his race, had merely

acquiesced in the arrangement. For from the moment that I had arrived at Strathmore, Rufus had joyously but firmly adopted me as his new owner, and nothing short of prussic acid would, I think have terminated the engagement.

I must admit that I was glad of his society. Not that solitude had any terrors for me, but still a dog undoubtedly lends it a certain harmony that it otherwise lacks. One feels this more especially at meal-times.

Anyhow, there we were, Rufus and I, quite contented with each other's company, and thrusting our way merrily through the small white-capped waves that rose and sank in the brisk off-shore breeze. Although only a four-tonner, my little boat, the *Scandal*, was a rare sea-going craft, and the faithful Donald had looked after her with such honest care that the sails and rigging were as sound as on the day when I laid her up.

Dressed in an old pair of grey flannel trousers and a still older shirt, I must have cut almost as disreputable a figure as Rufus. George would have had a fit on the spot if he could have seen me, but I can't say that even this sombre reflection depressed me very much. Stowed away in the locker I had a large hamper from Harrods', a change of kit, a "Primus" stove, and a generous supply of baccy and books; and if a man can't be happy for a week on an outfit like that, all I can say is that I'm devilish sorry for him.

There are two places on the island where you can get a safe anchorage, one a small sheltered bay on the further side, and the other a kind of shallow estuary looking out towards Strathmore. I decided on the latter as being the nearer, and steered the *Scandal* towards the straggling growth of trees that half hid the entrance. I

struck the channel all right first shot, and, running up the cove, came round head to wind and let down my anchor.

Rufus watched the proceedings with considerable interest. He evidently realized we were going ashore; for the moment I hauled alongside the tiny collapsible Berthon boat which we had been towing behind us, he jumped in hurriedly with a little yelp of approval, and sat down in the stern-sheets. Then he looked up at me and grinned.

I hesitated for a minute as to whether I should cart any of my stores ashore at once; then I decided that it would be better to land first and make certain that my hut was still in existence. Quite possibly it had been spirited away in the interval by some enterprising fisherman, and in that case I intended to make the tiny cabin of the *Scandal* my headquarters. I am not lazy, but there is a limit to one's enthusiasm for single-handed house-building.

A very few strokes brought us to the shore, which at this point consisted of a marshy stretch of saltings about twenty yards broad. I tugged the boat up out of the water, and, preceded by Rufus, who kept on looking round to see that there was not some dark plot to maroon him, I picked my way from tuft to tuft towards the edge of the wild, heather-covered down of which Kerrin Island is chiefly composed.

The whole place is only about half a mile wide, but one cannot see the hut until one is almost up to it, as it stands on the further side of the island under the shelter of some rising ground. I had built it there purposely, so that it should be invisible from the mainland.

Rufus reached it before I did. Rounding the base of the little hill, and coming suddenly into full view of it, I found him lying on the grass, contemplating his discovery with every symptom of surprised approval.

"Yes, my son," I said, "you may well look awe-struck. That superb edifice—" Then I stopped.

"Well, I'm hanged!" I added incredulously.

There, just to the right of the hut door, I had suddenly caught sight of a wood fire, crackling and blazing away in the most cheerful and unabashed fashion. I stared at it for a moment in amazement. Yes, it was a wood fire all right. There could be no doubt about that. And furthermore, sitting complacently amongst the flames, I perceived a large black kettle, from the spout of which little jets of steam were shooting up into the air.

"Rufus," I observed, "there is some cursed intruder here!"

Rufus looked thoughtfully at the kettle, and put his tongue out.

"Yes," I said sternly, "I've seen that, but if you imagine I am going to sell my birthright for a mess of pottage you're mistaken. Tea or no tea, out he comes!"

I strode across the intervening grass to the door of the hut, and rapped loudly with my knuckles. The result was unexpected. I heard a slight exclamation, accompanied almost simultaneously by the crash of falling china. Then, very clearly and earnestly, a rather sweet voice remarked "Damn!"

I turned to fly, but it was too late. There was a sound of quick footsteps, the door opened abruptly, and I found myself confronted by the prettiest girl I have ever seen in my life.

She was dressed in a short blue skirt, with a soft cream-coloured shirt, open at the neck. From under a red tam-o'-shanter her dark brown hair hung down her back in two long plaits, reaching just below her waist. As for her face—well, I always think a beautiful face is the most difficult thing to describe in the world, but if you can picture a Madonna turned wood nymph, and delightfully sunburned at that, you'll be somewhere around the mark.

For a moment her grey eyes contemplated me with calm surprise; then her gaze travelled to Rufus, who promptly sat up and wagged his tail.

"That," I explained, "is his manner of apologizing."

She turned back to me, and her lips parted in a frank smile.

"I expect," she said, "that I ought to be apologizing instead. This is not my island, as—as you probably know."

"It certainly isn't mine," I returned, "and you were here first."

"Very well," she said. "I'll accept the apology. After all, you've made me break a plate."

"Your nerves must be splendid," I said. "I should have broken a whole dinner-service."

She laughed cheerfully.

"It was silly of me to be startled, but somehow or other one doesn't expect afternoon visitors here." Then she paused. "I don't know whether you are a friend of the owner of the island," she added. "Indeed, I'm afraid I don't even know who he is."

"His name," I said, "is George. We are slightly acquainted."

"And did he build this hut?"

"No," I said proudly; "I did that."

She looked a little embarrassed.

"I really must apologize then," she said. "I'm afraid I've been making free with your property in the most unpardonable manner. I thought it was a kind of desert island."

"So it was," I said, "before you came—a most hopeless desert." Then I hesitated. "If you won't think me inquisitive," I went on, "may I ask how you managed to get here?"

She smiled.

"The same way that you did, I expect. My boat's round the bend there behind the trees." She pointed away to the left towards the small bay which formed the island's other anchorage. "It's only a three-tonner though," she added regretfully.

I looked at her with some interest.

"Are you accustomed to roam about the high sea single-handed in a three-ton boat?" I inquired.

"Oh, yes," she said. "Why not? After all, they are the easiest to handle."

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