

Stories by English Authors: The Sea

by

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The Extraordinary Adventure Of A Chief Mate.....	3
Quarantine Island.....	14
The Rock Scorpions.....	24
The Master Of The "Chrysolite"	32
"Petrel" And "The Black Swan"	40
Melissa's Tour	46
Vanderdecken's Message Home; Or, The Tenacity Of Natural Affection	57

The Extraordinary Adventure Of A Chief Mate

BY W. CLARK RUSSELL

In the newspapers of 1876 appeared the following extracts from the log of a merchantman: "VOLCANIC ISLAND IN THE NORTH ATLANTIC. --The ship Hercules, of Liverpool, lately arrived in the Mersey, reports as follows: March 23, in 2 deg. 12' north latitude, 33 deg. 27' west longitude, a shock of earthquake was felt, and shortly afterward a mass of land was hove up at a distance of about two miles from the ship. Michael Balfour, the chief officer, fell overboard. A buoy was thrown to him, the ship brought to the wind, and a boat lowered within fifteen minutes of the occurrence. But though the men sought the chief mate for some time, nothing could be seen of him, and it is supposed that he sank shortly after falling into the sea. Masters of vessels are recommended to keep a sharp lookout in approaching the situation of the new island as given above. No doubt it will be sighted by other ships, and duly reported."

I am Michael Balfour; I it was who fell overboard; and it is needless for me to say here that I not drowned. The volcanic island was only reported by one other ship, and the reason why will be read at large in this account of my strange adventure and merciful deliverance.

It was the evening of the 23d of March, 1876. Our passage to the equator from Sydney had been good, but for three days we had been bothered with light head winds and calms, and since four o'clock this day the ocean had stretched in oil-smooth undulations to its margin, with never a sigh of air to crisp its marvellous serenity into shadow. The courses were hauled up, the staysails down, the mizzen brailed up; the canvas delicately beat the masts to the soft swing of the tall spars, and sent a small rippling thunder through the still air, like a roll of drums heard at a distance. The heat was great; I had never remembered a more biting sun. The pitch in the seams was soft as putty, the atmosphere was full of the smell of blistered paint, and it was like putting your hand on a red-hot stove to touch the binnacle hood or grasp for an an instant an iron belaying-pin.

A sort of loathing comes into a man with a calm like this. "The very deep did rot," says the poet; and you understood his fancy when you marked the blind heave of the swell to the sun standing in the midst of a sky of brass, with his wake under him sinking in a sinuous dazzle, as though it was his fiery glance piercing to the green depths a thousand fathoms deep. It was hot enough to slacken the nerves and give the imagination a longer scope than sanity would have it ride by.

That was why, perhaps, I found something awful and forbidding in the sunset, though at another time it might scarcely have detained my gaze a minute. But it is true, nevertheless, that others besides me gaped at the wonderful gushings of hot purple,--arrested whirlpools of crimson haze, they looked,--in the heart of which the orb sat rayless, flooding the sea with blood under him, so magnificently fell was the hue, and flushing the sky with twenty dyes of gold and orange, till, in the far east, the radiance faded into the delicacy of pale amber.

"Yon's a sunset," said Captain Matthews, a North of England man, to me, "to make a fellow think of the last day."

"I'm looking at it, sir," said I, "as though I had never seen a sunset before. That's the oddest part of it, to my mind. There's fire enough there to eat a gale up. How should a cat's-paw crawl then?" And I softly whistled, while he wetted his finger and held it up; but to no purpose; the draught was all between the rails, and they blew forward and aft with every swing of the sails.

When the dusk came along, the silence upon the sea was something to put all sorts of moods into a man. The sky was a hovering velvet stretch of stars, with a young moon lying curled among them, and winkings of delicate violet sheet-lightning down in the southwest, as though some gigantic-tinted lantern, passing, flung its light upon the dark blue obscure there. The captain went below, after a long, impatient look round, and I overhung the rail, peering into the water alongside, or sending my gaze into the frightful distance, where the low-lying stars hung. With every soft dip of the ship's side to the slant of the dark folds, there shot forth puffs of cloudy phosphor, intermixed with a sparkling of sharper fires now and again, blue, yellow, and green, like worms of flame striking out of their cocoons of misty radiance. The noise of the canvas on high resembled the stirring of pinions, and the cheep of a block, the grind of a parrel, helped the illusion, as though the sounds were the voices of huge birds restlessly beating their pinions aloft.

Presently the man at the wheel startled me with an observation. I went to him, and he pointed upward with a long, shadowy arm. I looked, and saw a corposant, as it is called at sea,--a St. Elmo's fire,--burning at the end of the crossjack-yard. The yard lay square, and the polished sea beneath gave back the reflection so clearly that the mystic fire lay like a huge glow-worm on the black mirror.

"There should be wind not far off," said the helmsman, in a subdued voice; for few sailors can see one of these lights without a stirring of their superstitious instincts, and this particular exhalation hung close to us.

"I hope so," said I, "though I don't know where it's to come from."

As I spoke, the light vanished. I ran my eye over the yards, expecting its reappearance; but it returned no more, and the sails rose pale and phantom-like to the stars. I was in an odd humour, and this was an apparition not to brighten one up. Of course one knows all about these maritime corpse-candles, and can explain their nature; but nevertheless the sudden kindling of them upon the darkness of the night, in the dead hush of the calm or amid the fury of the shrieking hurricane, produces feelings which there is nothing in science to resolve. I could have laughed to find myself sending a half-awed look aloft, as if I expected to see some visionary hand at work upon another one these graveyard illuminations--with a stealing out of some large, sad face to the melancholy glow; but I returned to the side very pensive for all that, and there stood watching the fiery outline of a shark subtly sneaking close to the surface (insomuch that the wake of its fin slipped away in little coils of green flame) toward the ship's bows.

Half an hour later the dark curl of a light air of wind shattered the starlight in the sea, and our canvas fell asleep. I called to the watch to trim sail, and in a few moments the decks were busy with the figures of men pulling and hauling and surging out at the ropes in sulky, slumberous growlings. The captain arrived.

"Little worth having in this, I fear," said he. "But make the most of it--make the most of it. Get the foretopmast stunsail run up. If she creeps but a league, it is a league to the good."

The sail was sleepily set. Humbugging about with stunsails to the cat's-paws little pleased the men, especially at night. For three days they had been boxhauling the yards about to no purpose, and it was sickening work running stunsail-booms out to airs that died in their struggles to reach us. However, here was a draught at last, and the old gurgling and moaning sounds of the breathless, sluggish swell washing heavily like liquid lead to the sides were replaced by the tinkling noises of waters parting at the bows with a pretty little seething of expiring foam, and the hiss of exploding froth-bells. At eleven o'clock the light breeze was still holding, and the ship was floating softly through the dusk, the paring of moon swaying like a silver sickle over the port mizzen topsail yard-arm, everything quiet along the decks, no light save the sheen from the lamps in the binnacle, and nothing stirring but the figure of a man on the forecastle pacing athwartships, and blotting out at every step a handful of the stars which lay like dust on the blackness, under the yawn of the forecourse. On a sudden a steamer's lights showed on the starboard bow--a green beam, and a yellow one above, with the water on fire beneath them, and sparks floating away upon her coil of smoke, that made you think of the spangles of a falling rocket. She went past swiftly, at no great distance from us. There was not a moan in the hot breeze to disturb the wonderful ocean stillness, and you almost thought you caught the beating of the iron heart in her, and the curious monotonous songs which engines sing as they work. She swept past like a phantom, running a line of illuminated windows along, which resembled a row of street-lamps out in the darkness; and as she came on to our quarter she struck seven bells (half-past eleven), the rich metallic notes of which I clearly heard; and with the trembling of the last stroke upon the ear her outline melted.

At that instant a peculiar thrill ran through the ship. It may be likened to the trembling in a floor when a heavy waggon passes in the street outside. It was over in a breath, but I could have sworn that it was not my fancy. I walked aft to the wheel, and said to the man, "Did you notice anything just now?"

"Seemed to me as if the vessel trembled like," he replied.

As he spoke the ship shook again, this time strongly. It was something more than a shudder; the sensation was for all the world as though she had scraped over a shoal of rock or shingle. There was a little clatter below, a noise of broken glass. The watch, who had been dozing on deck, sprang to their feet, and their ejaculations of surprise and fear rolled in a growl among them. The captain ran out of the companionway in his shirt and trousers.

"What was that, Mr. Balfour?" he bawled.

"Either the shock of an earthquake," said I, "or a whale sliding along our keel."

"Get a cast of the lead! get a cast of the lead!" he shouted.

This was done to the full scope of the hand-line, without bottom, of course. By this time the watch below had tumbled up, and all hands were now on deck, staring aloft or over the side, sniffing, spitting, muttering, and wondering what had happened.

"There's that bloomin' compreesant come again!" exclaimed a hoarse voice; and, sure enough, a light similar to the one that had hung at the crossjack yard-arm now floated upon the end of the upper maintopsail-yard.

"The devil's abroad to-night!" exclaimed the captain. "There's sulphur enough about," and he fell a-snuffling.

What followed might have made an infidel suppose so; for scarce were the words out of his mouth when there happened an astonishing blast of noise, as loud and violent as that of forty or fifty cannons fired off at once, and out of the black sea no farther than a mile broad on the starboard beam rose a pillar of fire, crimson as the light of the setting sun and as dazzling too; it lived while you might have counted twenty, but in that time it lighted up the sea for leagues and leagues, put out the stars, and made the sky resemble a canopy of yellow satin; we on the ship saw one another's faces as if by daylight; the shrouds and masts and our own figures cast jet-black shadows on the deck; the whole ship flashed out to that amazing radiance like a fabric sun-touched. The column of fire then fattened and disappeared, and the night rolled down upon our blinded eyes as black as thunder.

There was no noise--no hissing as of boiling water. If the furious report that preceded the leap of the fire had rendered its coming terrible, its extinction was made not less awful by the tomb-like stillness that attended it. I sprang on to the rail, believing I could perceive a dark mass--like a deeper dye upon the blackness that way--upon the water, and to steady myself caught hold of the mizzen loyal backstay, swinging out to my arm's length and peering with all my might. My excitement was great, and the consternation that possessed the ship's crew was upon me. As I leaned, the vessel heeled violently to a large swell caused by the volcanic disturbances. The roll was extraordinarily severe, heaving the vessel down to her covering-board; and the great hill of water running silent and in darkness through the sea, so that it could neither be viewed nor heard, made the sickening lurch a dreadful surprise and wonder.

It was in that moment that I fell overboard. I suppose my grip of the backstay relaxed when the ship lay down; but, let the thing have happened how it would, in a breath I was under water. It is said that the swiftness of thought is best shown by dreams. This may be so; yet I cannot believe that thought was ever swifter in a dream than it was in me ere I came to the surface; for in those few seconds I gathered exactly what had befallen me, wondered whether my fall had been seen, whether I should be saved, realised my hopeless condition if I had not been observed, and, above all, was thinking steadfastly and with horror of the shark I had not long ago watched stemming in fire past the ship. I was a very indifferent swimmer, and what little power I had in that way was like to be paralysed by thoughts of the shark. I rose and fetched a breath, shook the water out of my eyes, and looked for the ship. She had been sliding along at the rate of about four knots an hour; but had she been sailing at ten she could not seem to have gone farther from me during the brief while I was submerged. From the edge of the water, where my eyes were, she appeared a towering pale shadow about a mile off. I endeavoured to scream out; but whether the cold of the plunge had bereft me of my voice, or that I had swallowed water enough to stop my

pipes, I found I could utter nothing louder than a small groan. I made several strokes with my arms, and suddenly spied a life-buoy floating almost twenty yards ahead of me. I made for it in a transport of joy, for the sight of it was all the assurance I could ask that they knew on the ship that I had tumbled overboard; and, coming to the buoy, I seized and threw it over my head, and then got it under my arms and so floated.

The breeze, such as it was, was on the ship's quarter, and she would need to describe a considerable arc before she rounded to. I could hear very faintly the voices on board, the flinging down of coils of rope, the dim echoes of hurry and commotion. I again sought to exert my lungs, but could deliver no louder note than a moan. The agony of mind I was under lest a shark should seize me I cannot express, and my strained eyeballs would come from the tall shadow of the ship to the the sea about me in a wild searching of the liquid ebony of it for the sparkling configuration of the most abhorred of all fish. I could have sworn that hours elapsed before they lowered a boat from the ship, that seemed to grow fainter and fainter every time I looked at her, so swallowing is the character of ocean darkness, and so subtle apparently, so fleet in fact, the settling away of a fabric under canvas from an object stationary on the water. I could distinctly hear the rattle of the oars in the rowlocks, and the splash of the dipped blades, but could not discern the boat. It was speedily evident, however, that they were pulling wide of me; my ear could not mistake. Again I tried to shout, but to no purpose. Manifestly no one had thought of taking my bearings when I fell, and I, who lay south, was being sought for southwest.

Time passed; the boat never approached me within a quarter of a mile. They must instantly have heard me, could I have halloed; but my throat refused its office. I reckoned that they continued to row here and there for about half an hour, during which they were several times hailed by the captain, as I supposed; the sound of the oars then died. A little later I heard the very faint noises made by their hoisting the boat and hauling in upon the braces, and then there was nothing for me to do but to watch, with dying eyes, the shadow of the ship till it faded, and the stars shone where she had been.

The sky shed very little light, and there was no foam to cast an illumination of its own. However, by this time, as you will suppose, I was used to my situation; that is to say, the horror and novelty of my condition had abated, and settled into a miserable feeling of despair; so that I was like a dying man who had passed days in an open boat, and who languidly directs his eyes over the gunwale at the sea, with the hopelessness that is bred by familiarity with his dreadful posture. It was some time after the ship had melted into the airy dusk that I seemed to notice, for the first time since I had been in the life-buoy, the lump of blackness at which I had been straining my eyes when the vessel heeled and I fell. It had the elusiveness of a light at sea, that is best seen (at a distance) by gazing a little on one side of it. It lay, a black mass, and whether it was a vast huddle of weeds, or a great whale killed by the earthquake, or solid land upheve by the volcanic rupture, was not conjecturable. It hung, still and not very tall, for I could not see that it put out any stars, and was about a mile distant. Whatever it might prove, I

could not be worse off near or on or amid it than i was here; so, setting my face toward it, I began to strike out with my legs and arms.

The water was so fiery, it chipped in flashes to every blow of my hands. I swam in the utmost terror, never knowing but that the next moment I should be feeling the teeth of a shark upon my legs, for the sparkling of the sea to my kicks and motions was signal enough for such a beast if it was a league distant; but I may as well say here that there is no doubt the shock of earthquake and the flame effectually cleared the sea in its neighbourhood of every kind of fish that floated in it, though the hope of such a thing could yield me but very little comfort while I swam.

I continued to make good progress, and presently approaching the block of blackness, for so it looked, perceived that it was certainly land,--a solid rock, in short,--the head of some mountainous submarine formation lifted ten or twelve feet above the sea. I could now discern a faintness of vapour circling up from it and showing like steam against the stars. Its front stretched a length of a few hundred feet; how far it went behind I could not tell. A small sound of creaming waters came from it, produced by the light swell washing its shelter side. It lay all in a line of grayish darkness even when I was quite close, and I could see nothing but the shapeless body of it. Of a sudden my feet struck ground, and I waded thirty paces along a shelf that was under water till my paces lifted to the dry beach. But by this time I was fearfully exhausted; I could scarcely breathe. My legs and arms were numbed to the weight of lead. The atmosphere was warm, but not unbearably so--not hotter than it had been at noon in the ship. Steam crawled up from every pore, like the drainings of smoke from damp straw, but it did not add to the distress of my breathing. I made shift to stagger onward till I had gone about fifty feet from the wash of the sea. Nature then broke down; my knees gave way, I stumbled and fell--whether in a swoon or whether in a death-like slumber, I cannot say; all I can tell is that when I awoke, or recovered my senses, the sun stood fifteen degrees above the horizon, and I opened my eyes upon a hot and dazzling sky.

I sat up in the utmost amazement. My mind for some time was all abroad, and I could recollect nothing. Memory then entered me with a bound, and I staggered to my feet with a cry. The first thing I took notice of was that my clothes were nearly dry, which was not very reconcilable with the steam that was still issuing from the island, though it was as I say. My bones ached cruelly, but I was not sensible of any particular languor. The brilliance was so blinding that I had to employ my eyes very warily in order to see; and it was not until I had kept opening and shutting them and shading them with my hands for some minutes that they acquired their old power. The island on which I stood had unquestionably been hove up in the night by the earthquake. I cannot figure it better than by asking you to imagine a gigantic mass of pumice-stone, somewhat flat on top, and shelving on all sides very gently to the water, lying afloat but steady on the sea. It was of the hue of pumice, and as clean as an egg-shell, without a grain of calcined dust or any appearance of scoriae that I could anywhere observe. It was riddled with holes, some wide and deep--a very honeycomb; and that I did not break my neck or a limb in staggering walk from

the beach in the darkness, I must ever account the most miraculous part of my adventure.

But what (when I had my whole wits) riveted my attention, and held me staring open-mouthed, as though in good truth the apparition of the devil had risen before me, was the body of a ship leaning on its bilge, at not more than a gunshot from where I stood, looking toward the interior. When my eyes first went to the thing I could not believe them. I imagined it some trick of the volcanic explosion that had fashioned a portion of the land or rock (as it may be called) into the likeness of a ship, but, on gazing steadfastly, I saw that it was indeed a vessel, rendered extraordinarily beautiful and wonderful by being densely covered with shells of a hundred different kinds, by which her bulk was enlarged, though her shape was preserved. Bright fountains of water were gushing from fifty places in her, all these waterfalls shone like rainbows, and showed surprisingly soft and lovely against the velvet green of the moss and the gray and kaleidoscopic tints of the shells upon her. Lost in amazement, I made my way toward her, and stood viewing her at a short distance. She had three lower masts standing--one right in the bows, and the mizzen raking very much aft. All three masts were supported by shrouds, and that was all the rigging the sea had left. She looked to be made of shells and moss; her shrouds and masts were incrustated as thickly as her hull. She was a mere tub of a ship in shape, being scarce twice as long as she was broad, with great fat buttocks, a very tall stern narrowing atop, and low bows with a prodigious curve to the stem-head. I am not well versed in the shipping of olden times, but I would have willingly staked all I was worth in the world that the fabric before me belonged to a period not much later than the days of Columbus, and that she had been sunk at least three centuries below the sea; and it was also perfectly clear to me that she had risen in the daylight, out of her green and oozy sepulchre, with the upheaval of the bed on which she lay to the convulsion that had produced this island.

But my situation was not one to suffer me to stand long idly wondering and staring. The moment I brought my eyes away from the ship to the mighty desolation of the blue and gleaming ocean, a horror broke upon me, my heart turned into lead, and in the anguish of my spirits I involuntarily lifted my clinched hands to God. What was to become of me? I had no boat, no means of making anything to bear me, nothing but the life-buoy, that was no better than a trap for sharks to tear me to pieces in. I was thirsty, but there was no fresh water on this steaming speck of rock, and I tell you, the knowing that there was none, and that unless rain fell I must die of thirst, had like to have driven me mad. Where the ship was, and beyond it, the island rose somewhat in the form of a gentle undulation. I walked that way, and there obtained a view of the whole island, which was very nearly circular, like the head of a hill, somewhat after the shape of a saucepan lid. It resembled a great mass of sponge to the sight, and there was no break upon its surface save the incrustated ship, which did, indeed, form a very conspicuous object. Happening to look downward, I spied a large dead fish, of the size of a cod of sixteen or eighteen pounds, lying a-dry in a hole. I put my arm down and dragged it out, and, hoping by appeasing my hunger to help my thirst somewhat, I opened my knife and cut a little raw steak, and ate it. The

moisture in the flesh refreshed me, and, that the sun might not spoil the carcass, I carried it to the shadow made by the ship, and put it under one of the waterfalls that the play might keep it sweet. There was plenty more dead fish in the numerous holes, and I picked out two and put them in the shade; but I knew that the great heat must soon taint them and rot the rest, whence would come a stench that might make the island poisonous to me.

I sat down under the bends of the ship for the shadow it threw, and gazed at the sea. Perhaps I ought to have felt grateful for the miraculous creation of this spot of land, when, but for it, I must have miserably perished in the life-buoy, dying a most dreadful, slow, tormenting death, if some shark had not quickly despatched me; but the solitude was so frightful, my doom seemed so assured, I was threatened with such dire sufferings ere my end came, that, in the madness and despair of my heart, I could have cursed the intervention of this rock, which promised nothing but the prolongation of my misery. There was but one live spark amid the ashes of my hopes; namely, that the island lay in the highway of ships, and that it was impossible a vessel could sight so unusual an object without deviating from her course to examine it. That was all the hope I had; but God knows there was nothing in it to keep me alive when I set off against it the consideration that there was no water on the island, no food; that a ship would have to sail close to remark so flat and little a point as this rock; and that days, ay, and weeks might elapse before the rim of yonder boundless surface, stretching in airy leagues of deep blue to the azure sky at the horizon, should be broken by the star-like shining of a sail.

Happily, the wondrous incrustated bulk was at hand to draw my thoughts away from my hideous condition; for I verily believe, had my eye found nothing to rest upon but the honeycombed pumice, my brain would have given way. I stood up and took a long view of the petrified shell-covered structure, feeling a sort of awe in me while I looked, for it was a kind of illustration of the saying of the sea giving up its dead, and the thing stirred me almost as though it had been a corpse that had risen to the sun, after having been a secret of the deep for three hundred years.

It occurred to me that if I could board her she might furnish me with a shelter from the dew of the night. She had channels with long plates, all looking as if they were formed of shells; and stepping round to the side toward which she leaned, I found the fore channel-plates to be within reach of my hands. The shells were slippery and cutting; but I was a sailor, and there would have been nothing in a harder climb than this to daunt me. So, after a bit of a struggle, I succeeded in hauling myself into the chains, and thence easily dragged myself over the rail on to the deck.

The sight between the bulwarks was far more lovely and surprising than the spectacle presented by the ship's sides. For the decks seemed not only formed of shells of a hundred different hues; there was a great abundance of branching corals, white as milk, and marine plants of kinds for which I could not find names, of several brilliant colours; so that, what with the delicate velvet of the moss, the dark shades of seaweed of figurations as dainty as those of ferns, and the different sorts of shells, big and little, all lying as solid as if they had been set in

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