

Literature, &c.

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THE HERMIT OF ST. PAULS.
 A TALE OF THE SEA.

By Robert Fostens.

By virtue of a press warrant we propose to transport the courteous reader's imagination on board of an English sloop-of-war. But in so doing we declaim all further interference with his freedom. We will leave him in perfect liberty to roam about her decks, while we merely draw his attention to her 'whereabouts.' He will observe, then, that she skimming along before a steady breeze, well down in the southern latitudes of the great Indian Ocean; that the quarter-master has just made it six bells in the middle watch, and which, being translated into shore-going time, tallies with three o'clock in the morning, and as it happened on this occasion to be, about an hour before sunrise. Not a sound breaks the monotonous roll of the sea save an occasional 'Steady, boy—steady!' from the quarter-master, to which a juvenile, of about fifty, at the wheel, with the quid side of his cheek as big as a cobbler's lap-stone, echoes 'Steady, it is—steady—ah!' in tones deep enough for the bass notes of an organ. Aft on the poop the officer of the watch is lounging away the time in solitude; while down in the waist knots of men are lounging about, luxuriating in the cool of the early dawn, secure for a brief period from the scorching rays of a December's sun. On the fore-castle a confused group of the best hands in the ship are nestled round a tough old Triton: some lying on the deck others on gun carriages and spars; or stowed away, as sailors only can stow themselves away, in coils of rope. The breeze is steady; and as we are at the antipodes, of course we naturally expect to find not only the seasons, but everything else reversed. Accordingly the wind, which in England is proverbially fickle, becomes in those happy climes a symbol of constancy, to which a lover may compare his mistress, and convey a compliment by the comparison. This fact appears to be well understood on board the sloop, for neither officers nor men seem to be solicitous about the weather, but have surrendered themselves up to 'taking it easy' for the remainder of the watch. Two keen-eyed top men, however, are perched on the fore and main top-gallant yards, peeping into the gloom, as though some anticipated event was expected with the early streak of dawn; and, as it will appear, the cause of their vigilance occupied the thoughts of the watch on deck as well as the 'lookout' aloft.

'Come, come, Ben,' said a brisk young topman to the old Triton before alluded to, 'overhaul your news bag, old boy: tell us summat about this queer island we're a running for. Is it true you've touched there afore, eh?'

'True enough, mate,' replied Ben.

'Let's see,' chimed in the captain of the fore-castle: 'how do they call the out-landish place?'

'St. Paul's.'

'Ah, St. Paul's! It is a rum berth for a ship to run for, I'm told.'

'I believe ye,' replied old Ben. 'Once put toe and heel ashore, and you've logged the fact in your memory for the rest of the cruise, I'll warrant ye!'

'Deed!' said two or three listeners gradually drawing within earshot.

'There's two islands, aint there Ben?'

'Yes; 'bout twenty miles apart.'

'And no other land there?'

'Not for thousands o' miles replied the veteran.'

'Well; but, Ben,' continued the young topman, 'didn't you fall in with a rum sort o' customers when you landed there? Come, come—tell us all about it,' said he, impatiently, 'or else the look-out at the mast-head will report the island in sight afore you've had time to ball off your yarn.'

'It's no yarn I'm about to spin,' replied old Ben: 'leastways you may call it a yarn if ye like; but 'member, every strand in it is laid in truth—true as the log; and the log, ye know, never lies.'

'Well, well—we know that,' replied half a dozen voices, 'go on.'

Old Ben continued.

'You see it's now about four years ago that I signed articles in a Botany-bay-man, bound for Sidney. On our run out our barkey and her consort sighted these very islands we're now running down upon for the same purpose as brings us among 'em.'

'And what's that, Ben?'

'Why to erect our chronometers, to be sure,' he continued. 'Ye see they're

sometimes sighted by vessels, for that reason, and by ships bound to the Australian ports. Howsomever the captains o' our two craft never could agree about their blessed time keepers; so they determined to make the nearest land to set themselves right, get a cargo of fresh vegetables, and a live pig or two into the bargain. Well, in course, if ye keep a good look-out you may find the sea-serpent in time; and at last we made this bit of a island of St. Paul's, and drops our anchors on its easternmost side in a gritty sort o' black sand, as like wet gunpowder, as one marine's like another.'

'And did you go ashore, Ben—eh?'

'In course I did, mate. There was the first and second cutters, and the jolly-boats; and I was capt'n's cox'sun. My eyes! I 'members the fun we had a pullin' ashore, right through shoals o' seals and thrashers, for a 'ticing sort o' bay. There, I tells ye what it is my lads, the view of that bay, or lagoon, or whatever they calls it, is the most surprisin' in all creation. It reglarly takes a fellar's breath away, like the sight o' Bet Sponson in full togg on the sunny side o' the common hard at Portsmouth. I've cruised in all parts o' this mortal earth,' continued he, elevating his arm to give additional force to his remarks: 'seen the Bay o' Naples, Sandy Hook, the Golden Horn, and all sich like show-shops, but they're no more to be compared to the lagoon we're a talkin' about than a Jew's eye is to a double piece o' pork.'

'What you means for beauty, I s'pose?'

'Sartinly; and for cur'osity, too,' added the old man.

'How big's your wonderful bay, eh, Ben?'

'Well, I tells ye, it aint exactly a bay,' replied the veteran; 'for it's as round as the drum-head of a capstan, leavin' only a bit of an openin' bout pistol-shot wide next the sea. But fortunately we'd a doctor aboard—one o' the cutest fellars in the world! Lor' bless ye! he'd still baccy or rum in a minute, out of any poison in his medicine chest, and bring a chap to life whenever he lik'd; and he and the captain 'greed that this here bay or lagoon was the crater of a burnt-out volcano—and its likely they're right; for though it's at least three mile round and thirty fathom deep, yet the water near the shore o' the lagoon reglarly biles, and steams away like the galley coppers on pea-soup day.'

'Capital mermaid'd bath,' said one of the seamen.

'Precious soon make lobscouse of 'em,' said Ben.

'Don't I tell ye the sea's hot enough to blister a wooden leg within twenty yards o' he shore; and yet—it's as cool as a iceberg a couple o' boats-lengths farther off from the land.'

'No fish there, then, I s'pose?' asked the topman.

'Never se'd such a place for fish in all my life—ketch 'em without bait, too—why, they'll ran after a bit o' red rag as keen as a girl will run after a so'ger; we filled our jolly boat with all sorts and sizes o' the handsomest rock fish, with nothing but strips cut off the corners of a red ensign twisted round our hooks.'

'What, they'd got used to live in biling water, I s'pos?' said the topman jeering.

'Not exactly,' replied Ben.

'Though the sea was hot enough to cook a mermaid; why, Ben—hallo! small helm Bob, don't work to wind'ard o' truth, old boy.'

'Don't mean to,' replied the veteran coolly; 'nevertheless, we biled our fish in the hot sea-water, and that, too, without takin' them off the hook. Ah! I tells ye, St. Paul's is a queer sort of a place. It's strange fishin'-ground where a fellar can stand in the bow of a jolly boat and ketch fish in cold water, and then, by merely sluicing hisself round, drop 'em into bilin' water and cook 'em.'

'In course, Ben, you didn't forget to peep into the koker-nuts ashore?' demanded the topman with a sly look.

'Peep into tue koker-nuts?' said Ben, puzzled at such a question. 'What for?'

'Why, ye see, mate, I did'nt know what might happen in such a strange country, so I thought p'raps the same fires as cooked your fish, might a simmered the milk in the koker-nuts into slap-up butter, that's all.'

'Ha! ha! ha!' roared the group of seamen in chorus.

'Ha! ha! ha!' said old Ben, mocking, 'why, ye d—ned grinnin' hy-ne-nahe, every word's as true as the sloop's log—only wait till we make the land, and I'll prove it or forfeit a week's grog; 'sides, a man that would play fast and loose with Dame Nature, and make her keep a false reck'nin', isn't fit to be trusted with a sight of her beauties.'

'Well, well,' said the laughing seamen

but still evidently disbelieving the old man. 'Go on.'

Ben gave a severe gripe at his quid, and proceeded.

'After our feast in the crater, we scrambled up the sides of the volcano and gained the top of the land, where we found patches of verdure mingled with jagged lumps of rock, and groves of palms; and high over head there was acres of sea-birds, screamin' and wheelin' about, and these was the only signs of life about the place. But the sight that won all our hearts, was the view lookin' down the crater we'd just left. You might 'a fancied 'twas a large green bowl, with one of its sides chipped off, and through this opening the sea had run in and half filled it with water, that glistened in the sun, and looked as moist and bright as a widow's eye. Then it was so calm and transparent, that the rocks and cliffs, the groves of palms, and the sky that was the color of blue steel, and looked as hard, was reflected on its smooth surface with all the truth of a mirror. Well, I don't know,' continued the old seamen, with considerable feeling, 'but somehow, I could fancy the landscape had features, that looked solitary and sad, as if it mourned the desolation of the fires that had spread such havoc about.'

'Well, my lads,' continued Ben, after delivering himself of his bit of sentiment, 'we didn't get away from this pleasant spot without a sigh, but of course, when the order was given, 'twas obeyed; so we separated into two divisions to explore the island, pick sourvy-grass, fresh vegetables, and shoot pigs.'

'Shoot pigs!' cried the topman, 'come, none o' your gammon, Ben—why, where could they come from?'

'I turned adrift by Capt. Cook. I believe to feed any poor devils that might chance to be wrecked upon the island. Well, we found plenty, for they'd multiplied wonderfully, and gave us lots o' fun. Only fancy twenty or thirty sailors sent ashore anywhere after a long cruise, and you're sartin to have a nitty. But just s'pose 'em on an uninhabited island, half sprung with grog, free from the control of their officers, and out a pig shootin'.'

'What, you'd guns, then?' said the topman.

'We'd all sorts of weapons, rusty ship's muskets, old pistols, and cutlasses,' replied Ben. 'Well, away we goes swellin' and lolloping about, poppin' at a pig here and slashin' at another there as they darted out of their hidin'-places. I'presently somebody wounds a hog p'raps, and away he scampers, squealin' with the lungs o' forty bo'suns, and cuttin' for his life to a hole in the rocks, or else into a tope of palms, with a couple o' sailors holding on by the slack of his slippery tail—the pig pullin' for his life, and Jack pullin' for his dinner, and all three every now and then swearin', and gruntin', and pitchin', and rollin' over one another, like so'gers in a breeze. For, mind, it's no joke shootin' a hog, ticklarly when he's a wild 'un. You knock him over, as dead as a 'berring, or else you don't bag him. No, no, he's clean gone if he's only a leg left, I can tell ye. Into the rocks he bolts, and you might as well whistle a jig to a millstone as try to get him out.'

'Well, mates, this sort o' sport melted away the time as fast as the sun does butter upon the Guinea Coast, so that, by about noon, we found ourselves broilin' along under a load o' game, about the centre of the island, and then we got 'tangled in a stony pass, where Dame Nature had sartainly been trying her hand at a game o' nine pins, for the rocks are just like skittles. Howsomever, it was a wild sort of a place, and we played Tom Cox's traverse, and lost and found ourselves a dozen times before we entered the open country again, and then what d'ye think was the first thing we se'd?'

'A mermaid, p'raps out for a stroll,' said the topman.

'No,' said Ben.

'What was it, then, eh?'

'A man,' replied the veteran.

'Only a man!' ejaculated the topman, evidently disappointed.

'Only a man!' echoed Ben, 'why who'd 'a thought of findin' one in a solitary island like St. Paul's, eh? and what's more strange, that he should 'a tried to shun a meetin', or he'd a slipped his cable and run if he could; but, you see, that was onpossible, because we'd a clear view afore us right away to the sea, and he was between him and the only hidin'-place at hand, the rocky defile, through which, as it afterward turned out, we'd driven him. Well, you may be sure, that findin' a man on a bit of a oninhabited island, kicked up a precious bobberty, and we asked him as many questions in a minnit as would 'a took an hour to answer.'

'What countryman was he, then?' inquired the captain of the fore-castle.

'An Englishman; he'd been left there

to catch seals by a whaler, and he was to be called for on the ship's return to Europe, after she had fished for a year or two in the Pacific. He'd been there four years when we found him.'

'And all alone, eh?'

'Not at first,' replied Ben, 'he'd one companion.'

'And he died, I s'pose?' said the topman; 'how lonely for the survivor!'

'You're wide o' the truth; but p'raps,' continued Ben, musing, 'you wouldn't gess in a blue moon what became of him.'

'Tried to escape, p'raps, and was lost,' said one.

'Boild hisself to death in the crater,' said another.

'No,' said Ben slowly. 'Ah! you'd never gess, so here's tell ye—they couldn't agree.'

'What, and so liv'd on different parts o' the island?'

'Bless yer heart, no,' continued Ben, 'each man must have a whole island to hisself, so after a reglar fight one mornin', with knives, down on the shore of the lagoon, when they both lay stabbed and helpless, they determined to separate for the future, and to settle which should emigrate hisself to the neighbouring isles of Amsterdam; they tossed up and our friend won, and his mate, true as steel, took the boat left 'em by the whaler, and sailed for his new home, and he'd never heard on him from that hour.'

'Can't think what they could 'a fought about.'

'Well, you see,' replied the old seaman, 'the yarn he spun to us was, that soon after the ship had left 'em on the island, they quarreled about the division o' the seal-skin they'd took, and our hermit said he was in fear of his life, for he'd found his mate on two or three occasions creeping into his hut, with the intention he thought, of murdering him in his sleep.'

'But what should he murder him for?'

'Well, 'twas s'posed he intended to claim the whole of the skins as his own, when the ship called for 'em on her homeward vi'age. Dead men tell no tales, you know, and in course he could 'a made his story good to the captain. Be that as it may, however, the suspicion was unbearable, they felt that neither was safe; if they met they scoulded and passed in silence, for it appeared they were afraid of one another, and so they were obliged to sleep as cunning as foxes, in hollows, thickets, and caves, and out-of-the-way places, never letting their secret haunts be known, for if one had ketched the other asleep, he'd never 'walked again.'

'I should 'a thought they would have lived together for the sake of company,' said the topman.

'Ah! said Ben, so should I; but there is no 'counting for taste, ye know—sides, it is my opinion that neither on them was much good. You may be sartin, the captain of the whaler did not part with the best of his hands—perhaps they was a couple of mutinous fellars, and left there on purpose to get rid of them. But solitude suited him, for long as he'd been without society, he did not wish to meet us. He'd seen us heave in sight, make for the land, and drop our anchor, send boats ashore, land in the lagoon, climb up the sides of the crater, scour the island a pig-shootin', and retreated before us into the rocky defile, where we found him.'

'But how did he live?'

'Live! replied Ben, very well. Isn't the lagoon chock full of fish?'

'And then the biling water's always laid on at the main,' said the topman.

'Besides, there is wild hogs, koker-nuts, and vegetables. Ah!' continued Ben, luxuriously sucking his quid, 'a fellar might 'a been as happy there as a troop of monkeys in a grove of nuts, with a few companions of the right sort. But I tell ye, mates, it's my opinion a chap must 'a had some reason for shunning his species, if he could 'a shut hisself up in such a regular built Paradise as St. Paul's, without wishing to share it with another.'

'True, mate; but I suppose you humoured him and left him there,' said the topman.

'Why yes,' said Ben, 'he would not come away.'

'Perhaps he is there now,' said one of the seamen.

'Like enough,' replied the old tar, 'for though the islands are often sighted they are seldom landed on; and it is my belief the captain of the whaler never meant to call for him, after being away for four years. But we shan't be long in suspense, for here comes the morning sun, and the sloop's a flying through the water like a dolphin.'

'Land ho!' bawled the look-out on the foretopgallant yard.

'Land ho!' shouted the main at the main.