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SYNOPSIS.

Peter Clephane and Andrew Kilgour are cousins, students at Edinburg University, between whom is a better feud. The former is the son of a rich city lawyer and his cousin is the heir of an estate in the Highlands that has almost passed into the hands of creditors. After a bitter fight with his cousin, Kilgour is on his way home when he falls in with company at the "Hound and Stag" inn at Perth. Arrived home his companion on the journey turns out to be his uncle, Peter Clephane's father. To retrive his family's fortune Andrew is sent to India.

CHAPTER VIII (Continued.)

The Bird of Paradise lay dead as a log without guidance from helm or impulse from sail, but she kept afloat, and that was a reason for thankfulness. As binnacle and compass were both gone, it was impossible to judge the course save vaguely by the stars, and as the heavenly bodies had never been much among the objects of my contemplation my reckoning was wild enough. But my conclusion was that we were making, or, more correctly, drifting, W. N. W., and that, barring accidents or good fortune of being picked up, I should sooner or later touch somewhere in the neighbourhood of the Persian Gulf. This pleased me little, for I knew the entire region to be infested by bands of pirates, who, should they discover us, would make short work of both me and the brig. But, as I have said, I was powerless to alter the course, and so had to drift on, trusting to Providence for safety.

One evening there sprang up a breeze on our larboard quarter, which, for the first time since I had been left alone, pushed the Bird of Paradise to something of a pace.

"I'll take it as a good omen," I said to myself. "If she keeps at that, I shall soon arrive—somewhere."

I sat on deck that night longer than usual, partly to keep a sharp lookout, partly to enjoy the bracing breeze. It could not be called a clear night, but there was a strange light on the sea, half aerial, half phosphorescent, that would have made a sail visible at a considerable distance had one chanced to come that way, which it didn't.

About eleven o'clock I went below, and, having fed my family of rats—a thing which I did as regularly as I said my prayers—turned into bed. I lay long awake, however, with a premonition that something was going to happen. It could not be called a painful feeling, rather a vague sense of some impending change that might prove important. However, I fell asleep after a time without disturbance of any sort.

The sun was already level with my peep-hole windows when I awoke. After dressing leisurely I went out on deck to go through the usual morning exercise of sweeping the ocean to see whether any sail had wandered into view. At first I could discern nothing, and concluded I was still all alone, but presently, taking a second look, I descried the tiniest black speck—it might be a floating hat—between me and the horizon. My heart thumped in sudden excitement.

"Now, what the deuce is that?" I found myself saying, with quickened breath. "It doesn't look like a sail. No, it can't be a sail. If I were anywhere in the track of civilization I should say it was a buoy. But a buoy where ships never appear to come would be an impossible piece of absurdity."

I gazed with all my might, rubbing my eyes when they were dazzled and smarting, and going at it again like one whose hope of salvation is centred in his seeing properly. My curiosity increased without bringing me any clearer knowledge. "Perhaps it's some monster fish taking the sun," I said aloud, as if I had listening companions. But no fish I had ever heard of was fond of being broiled alive. It did not move nor show signs of life. "Flotsam, jetsam, ligan—" I went over the possibilities. "Pieces of wreckage, goods sunk by pirates, to be found again at convenience." Neither theory was satisfactory, and my anxiety was feverish. "It's 'The Old Man of the Sea,'" I thought, frivolously, "or a mermaid—no, it's too black for a mermaid. The creatures are fair."

But I was too painfully interested to give way to a whimsical spirit, so, in good earnest, I conjectured, propounding theories to myself and immediately rejecting them, rubbing my eyes when they saw double, taking a turn about the ship to ruminate, making a childish compact with myself not to look again for fifteen minutes and yielding in fifteen seconds to the spell of the black speck. I gazed till I saw double, treble, quadruple—till my head was swimming and a thousand objects were leaping and whirling fantastically on the light gray horizon. Then I thought it prudent to stop gazing for a little, and went below for breakfast.

It was a hasty, perfunctory meal that morning, for in less than five minutes I was on deck again, palpitating with a desire for knowledge. The black speck was still on the glittering plain—distinct, motionless, mysterious as ever. The gentlest breeze blew in my larboard quarter, and in my eagerness I ran to the helm, forgetting that it was a splintered wreck, as potent for its purpose as the tail of a moulting hen. Then, finding it was to be a game of watching, I hurriedly rigged a hammock out of the tangled cordage and sails and climbed into it, intent on discovery. Hours passed without bringing enlightment. The burning sun beat down on a shimmering, brazen sea, whose metallic sheen made me giddy and nearly blind. The breeze died away and the brig lay idle. In all the vast silence there was not a sound save the thumping of my own heart, nor a visible object save that aggravating black speck.

By and by I went below, with some vague idea of luncheon, immediately rushing back on deck more eager than ever. Hardly had I swung myself into my place than I leaped down again, calling out, as if the immense vacancy were peopled, that beyond doubt the thing moved and was growing bigger. Then after awhile I saw something like the flutter of a flag, and I understood the black speck was a boat with a man in it. And he saw the brig.

"Yehoo!" I cried, with a leap of joy. "Deliverance at last!" And I ran about the deck like one possessed, shouting, "Deliverance, deliverance!" and could have wept for gladness.

But all at once a cold chill struck me to the marrow and put an end to this exhibition. What if this were some of the crew returning! For one brief moment my mind was blank with fright, but the next I had taken my resolution. Swift as ever man prepared for an enemy I got two pistols and a musket, loading them and laying them on the deck ready for use. Then I went to Mr. Watson's strongbox, smashing the lid with an iron bar, and taking thence the longest sword I could find. That being of a good weight, and sufficiently keen, I selected a Turkish dagger, and a sailor's long knife, and two more revolvers, with some ammunition. Then I arranged my armoury and waited for the boat. It was now close enough to enable me to discern that there was but one man in it, a discovery that gave me confidence. With such an arsenal and the natural advantage of my position the deuce was in it if I couldn't give a good account of myself.

The man was rowing hard, and the boat came quickly over the sleeping water. When he was within hailing distance, I stepped to the bulwarks and leaned over. In the same moment, resting on his oars, he turned to look at me. My first care was to find out whether or not he was one of the crew, but a very brief examination sufficed to show that he was not. He began to pull again, and I, thinking my warlike preparations overdone, hastily put my weapons out of sight, reserving just a brace of pistols and a dagger to meet emergencies.

My visitor did not come close alongside, but held off a little distance, as if doubting the reception he should receive. He was an Arab, and showed signs of distress. "Row up!" I called in English, never expecting him to understand that language. "Allah is merciful!" he responded joyfully in the same tongue, and with two or three vigorous strokes he was alongside. Then for a minute or so we silently took stock of each other. I was not enamoured of his looks, and perhaps he was just as little in love with mine.

"You seem rather in a bad way," I remarked, speaking first.

"Allah is a mighty scourger," he said, with a shrug of his tawny shoulders.

"So he is," I replied. "How do you come to be alone and in such a plight?"

At this he worked himself into a sudden rage, gesticulating wildly, and talking of villains and robbery and outrage. His story was that he had been in command of a ship laden with a valuable cargo; that the pirates had plundered him, killed his crew, and that it was only by the greatest miracle he had escaped with his life. On my inquiring how he happened to know English, he replied, fawningly, that he had learned my beautiful tongue in Egypt and in Africa.

"An Arab slave dealer," I concluded at once. But his distress was evidently great, and I could not do less than take him on board. "Praise be to Allah for his mercies!" he exclaimed, clutching at the rope's end I let down to him.

He climbed with the agility of a cat, pouring out thanks and blessings, and when he reached the deck he insisted on embracing me in the most fraternal manner known to his race. He laid his forehead against mine, and threw his arm over my shoulder, clasping my side with the other, and laying his chin first on my left breast and then on my right, striking my palm with his, and giving other novel and embarrassing tokens of esteem and friendship, all the while invoking the choicest blessings of heaven upon my head. Then he kneeled with his face toward Mecca and repeated the Bizh-el-Bahr, or prayer for safety on the ocean wave. His devotions over, we raised his boat, which was a crazy kind of coracle.

(To be Continued.)

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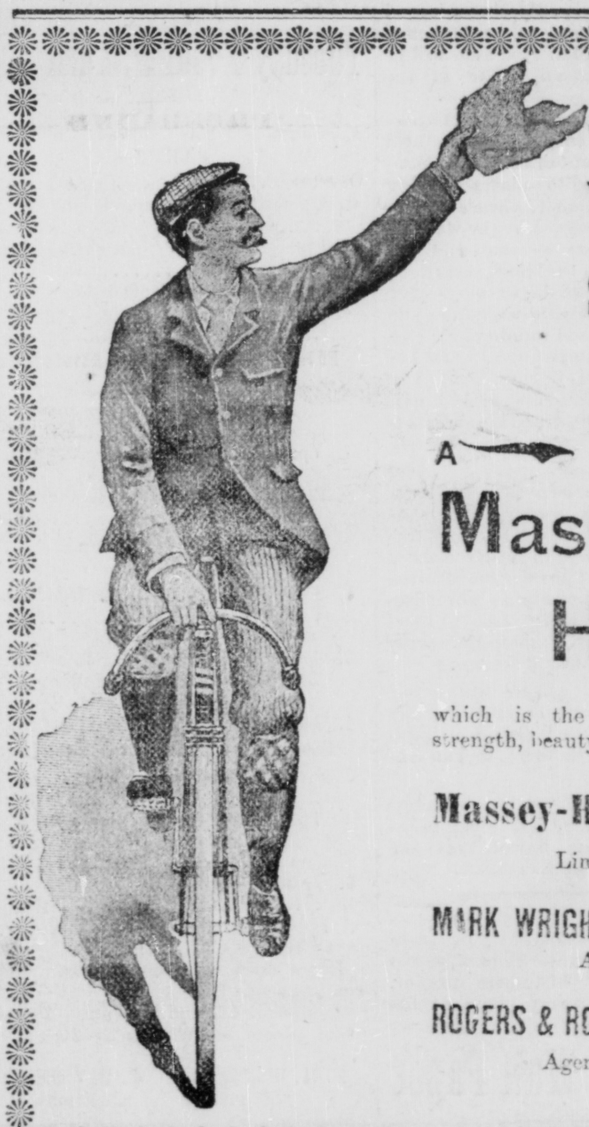

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