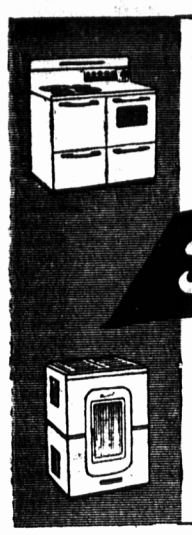

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Table Top

by Eden Phillpotts

CHAPTER XIII

Continued

"The simplest questions become difficult when you go into them deep enough," continued Angus. "This treasure for example. We handed over our rights in it to Pardo and he died convinced that he owned it all. But strictly speaking he couldn't. You've got to think where this treasure came from. Two thirds of it were stolen to start with. Benny Boss only owned one third. The rest belonged to the Garcia brothers with whom he was in partnership. I don't know what the law of treasure trove may be in Peru but the local authorit s are about as grasping as most other public bodies. They might put in an oar and make a claim for the lot.'"

"Then I hope the wretched stuff won't be worth twopence," said Tom's sweetheart.

They argued but were in no mind to examine the metal case.

"It's a hideous anti-climax anyway," declared Jane, "all dust and ashes now."

Her words had described the deck of the Iguana very correctly. The ship still held north but under conditions of night, for though it wanted still some hours to sunset, the sky was ebony black, torn by lightning. A tremendous volume of sound hurtled in the air; the rain of ashes fell heavily, and the crew were fighting to clear the decks. Electric lights had been rigged and every available hand sweated at the task. The sea had risen and the Iguana rolled, but did not pitch.

Tom and Angus mounted the bridge presently and spoke to Costa, who was full of new fears.

"This is not the end," he told them, "but I hope it may soon be the end of us if we can get away. I run north for another hour, then I turn west and presently head south. There is no land north of us. The breadth of the Pacific lies due south—the Marquesas. There we between; but the nearest land is due can get ample supplies if those islands are not also blowing up tonight. They have good anchorage and abundance of green food and fowl. Also, I hope, some coal for us."

An hour later the captain changed his course and turned to the south west. Table Top was now on their starboard bow, but hidden from them and its neighborhood only revealed by a blaze of light amid the universal darkness. Hot air in heavy gusts came off it and the volcanic glare fringed every wave of the sea with fire. A tremendous din roared off the island, but it was too dark to see what might be happening upon it. The scoria from aloft still poured upon them. Tom and Angus, though lame from the morning, helped the crew to flood the decks and wash the ashes off the ship.

Jane stayed below and assisted the cook to prepare a meal. He welcomed her, but like the rest of the hands was very frightened.

The travellers ate together towards nightfall, but Costa did not join them. He kept upon the bridge, under a pent roof lifted against the fall of ashes, and food was carried up to him.

Then, suddenly, the engines stopped and they knew that something must be wrong. Tom left them and hastened to learn the trouble while Angus and Jane talked together.

"We must all keep our nerves and go on with the diary," she said. "It shall be written if I have got to write every word myself, though we have only Felice's pictures of the ship and distant views of the island. All the wonderful photographs that he was going to make can never be taken now, but without photographs, nobody will believe a word of the book. Anyway it's got to be written. And you ought to do the bit about the spiders, Angus. I simply can't. I hate to think of them."

"I don't know the first thing about spiders," he confessed.

"But you know the last thing about them," she said.

"The spiders have all gone now, and every other living creature that may have been left there," he answered. "And if you want to hear the truth, Jane, I'm a long way short of happy yet—especially now the engines must have broken down. We're still not fifty miles from the island—perhaps not five-and-twenty—and if what I think is happening pretty fast really does happen—"

"Oh, don't croak. I've cried enough for one day," she said, and he expressed regret.

"Would you like to smash open the box and look at the treasure to pass the time?" he asked, but Jane declined.

"That would be the last straw," she declared, and they fell silent until Tom joined them.

It was she who spoke first when he came back.

"You ought both to go to bed and put up your feet and let me oil them again," she told them, but her sweetheart explained that it was impossible.

"We must lend a hand with the ashes all night," he replied. "They are coming down heavier than ever; but the damage isn't too serious; its' the danger of them setting us on fire. Carlos Paz is weeping over his engines, but working like a devil. It's nothing vital, and he counts to be moving again in a few hours. The trouble is that the crew have got their tails down. Costa's served a rum ration; but it's the damned ashes funking them. They make breathing bad. There's no serious sea to name yet. That's something to be good and the electric plant's all right. Come on, Angus. We can cheer 'em a bit."

"How far are we from the island, Tom?"

"Costa reckons about forty miles, but the drift is towards it. We'll soon get underway again and may be with morning it's going to be out of sight."

"I rather hope not, old man," said Maine, "not until we're a good few leagues further off."

They drank again and then limped on deck together.

The night was one long racket of hammering, escaping steam and a battle with the foul, falling scoria on deck.

To be continued

A constant shower of fine cosmic dust adds about 2,000,000 tons yearly to the earth's weight.

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Strange But True

By F. H. MacArthur

Believe it or not, but a tortoise left by Capt. James Cook in the Tonga Islands in the 18th century is still wondering around the the palace of the Queen, according to the National Geographic Society.

Doctors always tell us that exercise gets rid of fat. If it's so then let me in on how gals get a double chin.

John Wesley travelled 225,000 miles in half a century of preaching, atop the back of a horse.

When Allan Gould, a hotel owner of Merritt, B. C., drowned in Nicola Lake last July 27, draggers searched for his body in vain—that is until they called in one-eyed Harry, a 65-year-old Indian Medicine Man, who did strange things.

The Indian studied the surface of the lake for a few minutes then pointed to a spot. "Him down there," he said.

Several minutes later grappling hooks brought Gould's body up from 50 feet of water within three yards of the spot the Indian had indicated.

When Roger Fossen and his wife moved from Seattle, Wash., to Mavis, Minn., they left their dog Skippy behind. A week later the dog vanished. Then one morning the Fossen's found Skippy, whining at the door of their new home.

• • •

Many years ago the nine beautiful daughters of a poor widow in Czechoslovakia were carried away by a plague. The bells in the village church tolled to accompany their souls on their journey to heaven.

When the last child died the widow's grief was terrible to behold. Said she: "The bells have tolled for my daughters but when I'm gone no one will ring them for me."

But the day the widow died, a strange thing happened. The nine bells of the church carillon tolled though no human hand had touched them and made such heavenly music that the village folk believed they were rung by the souls of the deceased children who had heard their mother's lament.

Let me tell you about the climbing fish of India, Burma and Malay. These fish leave the water in time of drought and take to the land, sometimes to climb trees, probably with a view to finding water in the recesses of the branches. The climbing powers of these tiny fish have been the subject of many stories in days gone by, but only comparatively recently has reliable evidence come to hand.

• • •

The famous fighting fish comes from the same waters, and seldom attains a length of more than two inches. When two are placed in a glass bowl they at once give battle.

It's worse than a cock fight and the injuries inflicted are such that even the victor is seldom able to engage in another conflict, its fins being torn to ribbons. Fighting fish tournaments are controlled by the state and add considerable wealth to the country's revenue.

Frogs, toads, newts and salamanders, all breathe through their skins, while the mud skipper breathes through its tail. It would seem at first sight to be an extraordinary thing that the mud skipper should have become so modified by a change of habit as to have transferred its respiratory functions from its gills to its tail. Yet, Prof. Hickson who has investigated its functions says: "It is a well known and generally recognised fact."

You take it from there.

Every year snakes in India kill enough people to populate Summerside.

There's enough red corpuscles in a person's blood stream to cover 4/5 of an acre. About 1/10 of all the corpuscles die every 24 hours.

The cold, sunless spring of this year could be due to the explosion of atomic bombs, though scientists say no.

• • •

Looking through some old weather reports I came up with this: "In 1816 the Northern States and a large part of Canada had snow and frost every month of the year. Scientists explain the cold year by attributing it to the eruption of an island near Java. Powdered dust from the crater filled the upper air over a large portion of the earth for over a year." All of this poses a dangerous and immediate problem. Namely: if the cold winter of 1816 was caused by the blowing up of an island; if the cold, sunless spring of this year was caused by the explosion of atomic bombs; what would happen to the old world in the event of an atomic bomb war?

It's an amazing fact that the big blossom of the sunflower really does turn to the sun. It faces the sun each morning and turns slowly with it all day. Before sunrise the next morning it will still be facing west but by half an hour later it will have swung back all the way towards the east. This movement goes on day after day until the head becomes too heavy with seed to turn.

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