

On A Lonely Island

By Owen Oliver

I HAD come off the dog-watch about an hour, as I reckon, and was sleeping hard when we struck upon the reef. The jerk pitched me out of my bunk, and I lost my bearings and couldn't think where I was till I heard Tom Hands swearing. It was generally a few words and a lot of swears with Tom; but this time it was no words and all swearing; and I sat up on the floor and laughed at him.

"Must have struck a whale," I said.

"Whale!" roared Tom. "The cargo's shifted. That's what it is; and we'll be working double shifts till it's right."

We scrambled into our clothes and ran on deck; where the first mate told us off to get out a boat for the passengers. We had about a boatload aboard, though we were mostly cargo. Tom and I climbed into the cutter on the starboard beam; but as soon as we were in her the ship gave a lurch. We hung further and further over the water and I saw the deck tilt and tilt till it was like a wall, and the people were sliding down and clinging to the bulwarks. Little Mrs. Williams, who had always a pleasant word for us common sailors, was just beneath us, and Tom cut off a life-buoy and flung it to her, but she missed it. Then the

up and touched my head with a friendly grin. "Glad to see you, miss," I said. But she backed away from me with her eyes wide open, her hands going as if she were swimming, to keep me off. It was plain enough that she was in a mortal fright of me.

"Bless you, miss!" I told her. "I shan't hurt you. I'm Thompson—Jack Thompson—off the old ship. It's a bit of rough luck, this wreck, but we'll be more comfortable than you'd expect. There's eggs and shell-fish and fresh water, and I reckon we'll get no end of things from the wreck; and I've found a nice little cave that will do for a house, and—"

She gave a shriek and clenched her hands.

"If you touch me I'll kill myself," she declared, jumping back.

"You've got wrong ideas of me, miss," I said. "I wouldn't hurt you on any account. You shall have half the island to yourself, if you like."

"Swear it!" she cried, in a great state of excitement, "swear it!"—as if the word of a common sailor wasn't enough.

So I made believe to kiss a book, to pacify her.

"The truth and the whole truth," said I, holding out my hand.

"Draw a line!" she screamed, as if we were going to

proper spelling, and put it there instead. After that I didn't try to speak to her, but I knew she got on all right because I saw her cooking things in big shells. She used them for plates, too, and a tin for a cup; so took the hint for myself.

One day I saw that she dragged herself about as if she weren't well; and she didn't sing in the evening. The next day she seemed worse. The following day I didn't see her out at all. I was afraid to frighten her by calling after it was dark; but I sat down by the line to watch if she came out in the morning, and when she didn't I decided that the promise had to be broken and went along to the cave and called to her.

"Don't be afraid, Miss," I shouted. "I thought perhaps you weren't well."

"I am ill," she answered in a hoarse voice. "It's some kind of fever. I—I'm so thirsty."

I picked up the can that was lying outside, and ran off for some water.

"Shall I put it round the corner?" I asked.

"I can't stand," she said, with a groan. So I went in. She was lying on the sail I'd thrown over to her, and her teeth were chattering as with the ague, but she tried to laugh.

"A bit hard, those stones," I suggested; and she gave a great sigh.

"They make me ache," she owned.

So I fetched a lot of grass, and rolled up my coat (I didn't want it, having a jersey) for a pillow, and lifted her on to it, covering her up with the sail. Then I boiled her an egg, but she only ate half of it. The next time she wouldn't eat any, and I couldn't get her to touch anything else, although she kept drinking water.

"If only I could have some milk," she was always saying. "There was such a lot aboard." She meant the tinned stuff.

"Well," I said, "there might be some in the bows now. Perhaps I could float out with a plank, when the tide's going that way, and back again when it turns."

"No, no!" she cried. "Don't leave me! Don't leave me! Those horrid little goblins will take me if you do. She was light-headed, off and on, and I had to sit beside her, and pretend that I kept the goblins off. She got worse and worse, and at last she was so bad that she only moaned and didn't open her eyes, and couldn't swallow anything but water. She kept clutching as if she wanted to hold something, and I had to give her my hand to quiet her. Then she went off into a stupor, and I thought the end was coming. I didn't believe it was the fever that was killing her as much as having nothing she could take except water, and at last I made up my mind that I'd try to get her some milk from the ship.

I'd noticed the tide set that way when it was going out, about an hour before the turn, I took a plank, and floated with it, swimming and guiding it as well as I could, though I wasn't much of a swimmer. It was slack water by the reef, and I managed to steer into a little cove and climb up the rock, from which I could jump on the side of the old ship, as it lay over, and crawl in through a porthole. Then I slid and clambered about the inside, until I reached the galley, where I found a bunks and lockers in the fore-cabin, and a lot of things—blankets and other articles, lashing them to spars and boxes, and threw them over, thinking some of them might chance to float ashore. The milk I put in boxes, with some tools, and then fixed up a grating with planks. To this I fastened the boxes, and some more blankets, and let the whole thing like a raft into the water with a rope. I then slid down the rope, and cut it with my knife, and floated off. It seemed as if I was going to miss the island altogether, but for rowlocks I stuck two marlin spikes through the grating and sculled with an oar I'd taken; and after going back-ward and forward with the contrary currents about two hours, I drifted into a useful one; and at last I reached the island, just at the corner, and ran ashore. Then I walked knee-deep in the water, towing the raft, till I was opposite the cave, and hauled it up on the beach there.

I opened a tin of milk, mixing it with water, and gave her a spoonful (I'd taken a spoon). Then I gave her some brandy that I'd found aboard; and afterward covered her up with the blankets, so that she would get hot and sweat the fever. She breathed harder, and I hoped she'd be all right; but I fell asleep unaware, being dog-tired; and when I woke she was lying with her eyes open, looking at me.

"She said, 'I'm going to get better,' and I said, 'Thank God!' And she said, 'Yes' and smiled and went to sleep."

When she awoke I gave her more milk-and-water, and when she'd finished it she looked surprised and asked me where it came from, so I told her about my trip to the wreck. She lay staring at me with her eyes looking big in her pale face.

"If you hadn't reached the island again!" she said, with a shudder.

"You'd have been no worse off than if I hadn't gone," I explained.

"Oh!" she cried. "I wasn't thinking of myself. I was thinking that you risked your life for me." She held out her hand and I shook it. "I wish you were—the same side of the line," she said, and I felt as if I'd been doused with cold water.

"Ah!" I said. "The line—I know I'm a rough sort of chap, and don't fit company for the likes of you; but you needn't be afraid of me."

"I'm not frightened," she told me. "I think you are good and brave and honorable. I know you are. Only I wish there wasn't any line."

"You can rub it out with your foot," I said with a laugh.

"No," she said, with a choke and a little shake of her head. "I can't. It is you who must remove the line." But I shook my head. "You set it between us, and you must take it away. If you don't, I stay on my own side, once you're well and strong; but till you are I'm going to look after you."

She put her hands behind her head and lay there and laughed.

"I shall take my time getting well," she declared. "I liked being looked after, and I grined."

One evening she said she was "almost quite well," and we'd have another walk after tea. It was bright moonlight as we walked along the beach; and when we came to the line, stopped, looking down at it.

"The line that separates me from a good man," she said with a catch in her voice.

"It's easy to rub out, missie," I told her, "but it's for you to do, not me."

"This line," she said. "Yes—it's gone." She brushed her foot over a little bit. "But now—put the line between you and me. Don't you see it? We are rectified!"

"Why, of course, missie! I agreed. You're a lady, horn and hoed, and I'm a common sailor. You can't rub out that line."

"No," she said. "I can't; but you can. If you tried you might rise. You could try anyhow—I wish you would."

"It's no use, miss," I told her. "I'm who I was brought up to be, and what I am. There's the line be-

tween us, and there it will have to be."

"It hasn't," she cried, stamping her foot almost in a passion. "If you wanted to be friends with me—wanted it badly—you'd cross it. You'd try anyway."

"As to that, miss," I said very quietly, "if you wanted to be friends with me there wouldn't be any line. At least you wouldn't think about it."

"That's nonsense," she said sharply. "There is a line, and I do think about it. Won't you let me teach you spelling and grammar?"

And then I thought about the plank that I'd set up over little Mrs. Williams—not yet knowing the real facts about it—and felt as if I boiled up; and I just drew my toe along the line and made it deeper.

"There's the line of spelling and grammar," I said, "and I'll never step over it on this island or off it unless you ask me—leastways not without good cause, as I had—Well, now, you'd better go to sleep and keep those roses in your cheeks, missie; and it'll be sufficient cause to step over it when I can do things for you."

I didn't want to upset her for I had a liking for her, when all was said and done. But she stamped her foot and looked at me with her eyes blazing.

"You have made the line now," she cried, "and I'll never put my foot over it."

And she turned and ran.

For three days neither of us crossed the line, though we spent most of our time talking, one on each side. We were friendly enough, but both wished we hadn't said what we had. Then a ship came and took us off; and when we were finally on board the line was plain enough!

She wanted me to go to her friends when we landed, but I wouldn't, and I stayed at the port to look for a ship. I was shortly given a position by my old firm, who were very good to me, and then her lawyer came to see me. He was a pleasant old gentleman, and wanted to lend me money to start in a business.

"A man with your abilities," he said, "my dear Mr. Thompson, ought not to be content to pursue the calling of an ordinary seaman, respectable and—er—er—honorable as that calling may be."

client naturally desires to show her gratitude to you. I think you ought to consider her a little in the matter. Really now, my dear Mr. Thompson, you wouldn't think as well of her, if she didn't desire to be of friendly assistance to you. Now would you?"

"No, sir," I said, "that's so. She's quite right in making the offer, but I'm right, according to my ideas, in refusing. Please give her my very grateful thanks, and say that I shall think kindly of her for it."

"Umph!" said he. "Umph! I think you would show your appreciation better by sinking a little of your pride, and going to thank her yourself. She'll be very much hurt if you go abroad without seeing her."

"I'll call on her to-morrow," I said very promptly, for I wanted to see her badly enough, and was glad of an excuse, although I told myself that I was a fool to think so much of any one who was on the other side of a line over which there was no crossing.

I was a bit nervous when I saw her beautiful house, stammering when the servant opened the door and stared at me; but Miss Horton ran out and caught hold of my hands. She pulled me into the drawing-room, which was full of ornaments and pretty things, as I managed to remember afterwards. But I didn't think of them then, for she looked so lovely that she took my breath away. I made a line in the pattern of the carpet for a warning to myself, and felt as though there were sea-spray in my eyes.

"Dear friend," she said, "won't you let me offer you the least thing?—when you offered your life for me?"

I took my cap and staggered to my feet and turned to go, feeling that I couldn't stand it any longer.

"I'd do it any time," I said. "A dozen if I had them. Don't think it's because I don't want to come that I won't see you any more. It's just—just the line, missie—the line—God bless you."

I turned and was going. I couldn't see her for the mist in my eyes, and then I found her clinging to me.

"I've come—over the line," she sobbed, "because I love you,—and you love me!"

I kissed her and held her at arm's length. Then I kissed her again.



I HAD A TURN SEEING A WOMAN ROLLING A CASE UP THE BEACH

sea seemed to rise up at us and we were doused with a crash, just as I grabbed an oar. I was whirled about underneath the water till my breath was gone; and when I came up I went spinning round and round in a sort of whirlpool, bobbing under and up again till I was nearly choked. I stuck to the oar, but something hit me on the head, half dazing me. I never remembered properly what happened, only that I saw the ship had broken in two and left a bit of the bows sticking up on the reef. A woman swept by me, and I grabbed at her but didn't catch her. I heard one or two cries from the water, but none from the ship—what was left of it—and judged no one was there; and the cries soon stopped. So I tucked the oar under my chin, to keep my head up, and floated about in the dark. I kept saying to myself that it was a bad business, a bad business, but couldn't think about anything properly, except that I'd like to smoke, if I had a pipe and matches and tobacco. And soon I began to feel drowsy, and thought it wasn't much good holding on any longer. Perhaps I shouldn't have, only the moon came out between some black clouds, and I saw land ahead; and so I stuck to the oar. When I dozed and half let it go I got the water in my mouth, and that woke me. Presently something knocked my legs, and I found it was the land, and got ashore like a half-drowned rat, and squeezed the water out of my clothes. Then I tumbled down on the beach and went to sleep.

When the sun grew hot enough it woke me. My clothes were dry, but stiff and crusty with the salt, and I ached all over and was hungry and thirsty. I saw some fresh water running down from the land, and lay beside it, lapping it like a dog. Then I found some shell-fish like whelks and ate them. It occurred to me that some of the others might be left, so I went and looked out to sea, and saw the bows of the old ship on the reef about a mile away, but it was plain enough that no one was there. I started along the shore to look for them.

Five washed ashore altogether, and a quantity of wreckage. I dug five graves in the loose earth with a bit of plank for a spade; and I dug hers deepest. I cut five strips off the plank with my knife—hers was the widest—and stuck them up and scratched their names on them; and on hers I put "In loving memory" and I said a bit of the service that I could remember.

Next I walked along the shore, looking for more wreckage; and presently I came round the corner of a sandhill, and had a turn, seeing a woman toiling a little way up the beach! I didn't recognize her at first without her gold eye-glasses, but when she stood upright and stared at me, I saw it was Miss Horton, whom we called "Miss Haughty," because she was so high and mighty. She had a little money, and a lot of book-learning, and was about eight-and-twenty. She was good-looking, in a scornful sort of style, and turned up her mouth, and hardly looked at you when you spoke to her. So I'd rather have seen any of the other passengers than up on my island.

"Howsomever," I thought, "she'll be better than nobody." She's a woman, and not used to roughing it, so I'll have to give her the cave. And I walked

have hysterics. "Draw a line across the sand. That will be your side, and this will be mine, just as if it went right across the island, to those trees."

"Very well, miss," I agreed, shrugging my shoulders. "I'll draw a line, but you'd better change sides first. There's a cave this way—" I pointed to where I'd come from—"that will come in useful to you. The weather doesn't make as much odds to me."

She crossed over without even saying "Thank you," and I made a deep furrow in the sand, leaving the cave on her side.

"There you are, miss," I said, "but I've got to have liberty to go just there and back." I pointed to where the graves were.

"Why?" she asked sharply.

"Well," I told her, "I don't want to give you cause to fret, but you'd soon see for yourself. It's graves. Five of them!"

"Very well," she said with a shudder. "Now go, please, so that I can fetch the case."

She evidently wouldn't trust herself within arm's length of me, thinking that a common sailor hadn't the feelings of a man toward a helpless woman.

"Well," I said, "I'll go. You'll find the most shell-fish on that little spit; and there's a fresher of water just opposite, and birds' nests in the low bushes, but they're prickly. You'd better take a bit of plank to open them, but don't beat them down, or they'll not lay there again,—and some day you'll know that you thought wrong of me."

The following day I saw her near the line and wanted to call out and ask how she was getting on; but I noticed that she'd stuck in her belt a chopper that must have come ashore, and knew that she was going armed, as if I were an enemy. I took it rather to heart, and for a fortnight kept well away from her part of the island in the daytime, but I always crept along to hear her sing in the evening, feeling lonesome. Except for the lonesomeness I didn't do so badly. At first I lived mostly on the biscuits and tinned beef, but fancying the raw pork, or even the eggs, though they were easy enough to get. But after awhile it occurred to me that I could cook them a little in the sun, and I did, and liked them better that way. I thought she might not have hit upon it, so I scratched a message on a bit of wood, and left it for her.

"If you want eggs I've plenty. You can cook them in the sun. On a white stone with another behind them is the best way."

She scratched an answer underneath, and left one of the glasses-out-of-a-telescope beside it.

"Thanks. I've plenty. You can light a fire with this lens. I've another."

I thought it showed a neighborly feeling, and I'd hail her next chance, but I happened to go to the graves, and found she'd been there, and put up a new plank for Mrs. Williams instead of mine. I afterwards learned it was because mine had cracked from the sun; but I thought then that it was to correct the spelling, because I saw that she had put two "s" in the name, and only one "m" in the middle of "Mrs." and I'd put two. It annoyed me a great deal, and I spent three afternoons cutting a cross with



"I'VE COME OVER THE LINE," SHE SOBBED "BECAUSE I LOVE YOU"

"That's all I'm fit for, sir," I said, "although I thank you. I know who sent you, and you may tell your client, as you call her, that I'm much obliged—it's just what I'd expect; but what I did for her was what was a man's duty to do, and his right; and I don't want to be paid in any form. Give her my best wishes. It isn't as though I wouldn't like to see her, but I don't care to go and feel that things are different from when we were good friends on the island. I know she was right when she spoke about the line which was between us; and so I'm off on Saturday."

"Ah!" said the old gentleman. "Umph! your feeling of pride does you credit, Mr. Thompson; great credit. But—er—you are too chivalrous a man to—er—wish to hurt the feelings of a woman. You see—women have their duties and their rights, too, and—er—my

"Dear heart," I said, very solemn, "before God I do. Now listen to me, dear. Love isn't a matter of lines; and I'm not going to let my pride come between us. I've taken you for my own; and mine you're going to be."

"Yes," she said. "Yes!"

"But first," I told her, "I shall have to cross the line. I'm going to educate myself, and make myself more fit for you. I'm going to do it by myself, without your help. When I've done it, I'm coming to you. Well, I'm not going to wait till then, either. I'm coming to see you every time I'm home; and you shall tell me how I'm getting on, and when I'm over the line."

She agreed that that was right, and so we settled it. I went to the head of my old firm, that my father served too, the next morning and told him the whole story. He wouldn't allow me to go to sea yet, but gave me a shore position, so that I could go to night-school. The younger partner sometimes had me at his house, and taught me to speak properly. I learned faster than I expected; and when I'd mastered arithmetic and reached algebra and geometry I found that I had a gift for mathematics. They sent me to their office at Havre, for awhile, and then I learned French in a way that surprised everybody. I then passed some examinations and went for a voyage as a sort of super-cargo; on this I did some very good business for the firm, and when I came back I went straight to Violet. (That is her name.)

"I don't speak of the line now," I told her with a laugh, after we were over the first excitement. "I call it the equator!"

"Couldn't you cross the—the equator—now?" she whispered. "And stay with me?"

"No, dearest," I said. "It isn't a man's place to live on his wife's; but—suppose you come and stay with me! They've offered me a berth in the city, and there's a house, and—" I looked at her.

"It will be very nice," she said.

And then she kissed me.