Ch XI ~ Of the Casting Away of the Barque "Belinda"

The third of October had broken auspiciously with a bright sun and a cloudless sky. There had in the morning been a slight breeze, and a few little white wreaths of vapour drifted here and there like the scattered feathers of some gigantic bird, but, as the day wore on, such wind as there was fell completely away, and the air became close and stagnant.

The sun blazed down with a degree of heat which was remarkable so late in the season, and a shimmering haze lay upon the upland moors and concealed the Irish mountains on the other side of the Channel.

The sea itself rose and fell in a long, heavy, oily roll, sweeping slowly landward, and breaking sullenly with a dull, monotonous booming upon the rock-girt shore. To the inexperienced all seemed calm and peaceful, but to those who are accustomed to read Nature's warnings there was a dark menace in air and sky and sea.

My sister and I walked out in the afternoon, sauntering slowly along the margin of the great, sandy spit which shoots out into the Irish Sea, flanking upon one side the magnificent Bay of Luce, and on the other the more obscure inlet of Kirkmaiden, on the shores of which the Branksome property is situated.

It was too sultry to go far, so we soon seated ourselves upon one of the sandy hillocks, overgrown with faded grass-tufts, which extend along the coast-line, and which form Nature's dykes against the encroachments of the ocean.

Our rest was soon interrupted by the scrunching of heavy boots upon the shingle, and Jamieson, the old man-o'-war's man whom I have already had occasion to mention, made his appearance, with the flat, circular net upon his back which he used for shrimp-catching. He came towards us upon seeing us, and said in his rough, kindly way that he hoped we would not take it amiss if he sent us up a dish of shrimps for our tea at Branksome.

"I aye make a good catch before a storm," he remarked.

"You think there is going to be a storm, then?" I asked.

"Why, even a marine could see that," he answered, sticking a great wedge of tobacco into his cheek. "The moors over near Cloomber are just white wi' gulls and kittiewakes. What d'ye think they come ashore for except to escape having all the feathers blown out o' them? I mind a day like this when I was wi' Charlie Napier off Cronstadt. It well-nigh blew us under the guns of the forts, for all our engines and propellers."

"Have you ever known a wreck in these parts?" I asked.

"Lord love ye, sir, it's a famous place for wrecks. Why, in that very bay down there two o' King Philip's first-rates foundered wi' all hands in the days o' the Spanish war. If that sheet o' water and the Bay o' Luce round the corner could tell their ain tale they'd have a gey lot to speak of. When the Jedgment Day comes round that water will be just bubbling wi' the number o' folks that will be coming up frae the bottom."

"I trust that there will be no wrecks while we are here," said Esther earnestly.

The old man shook his grizzled head and looked distrustfully at the hazy horizon.

"If it blows from the west," he said, "some o' these sailing ships may find it no joke to be caught without sea-room in the North Channel. There's that barque out yonder—I daresay her maister would be glad enough to find himsel' safe in the Clyde."

"She seems to be absolutely motionless," I remarked, looking at the vessel in question, whose black hull and gleaming sails rose and fell slowly with the throbbing of the giant pulse beneath her. "Perhaps, Jamieson, we are wrong, and there will be no storm after all."

The old sailor chuckled to himself with an air of superior knowledge, and shuffled away with his shrimp-net, while my sister and I walked slowly homewards through the hot and stagnant air.

I went up to my father's study to see if the old gentleman had any instructions as to the estate, for he had become engrossed in a new work upon Oriental literature, and the practical management of the property had in consequence devolved entirely upon me.

I found him seated at his square library table, which was so heaped with books and papers that nothing of him was visible from the door except a tuft of white hair.

"My dear son," he said to me as I entered, "it is a great grief to me that you are not more conversant with Sanscrit. When I was your age, I could converse not only in that noble language, but also in the Tamulic, Lohitic, Gangelic, Taic, and Malaic dialects, which are all offshoots from the Turanian branch."

"I regret extremely, sir," I answered, "that I have not inherited your wonderful talents as a polyglot."

"I have set myself a task," he explained, "which, if it could only be continued from generation to generation in our own family until it was completed, would make the name of West immortal. This is nothing less than to publish an English translation of the Buddhist Djarmas, with a preface giving an idea of the position of Brahminism before the coming of Sakyamuni. With diligence it is possible that I might be able myself to complete part of the preface before I die."

"And pray, sir," I asked, "how long would the whole work be when it was finished?"

"The abridged edition in the Imperial Library of Pekin," said my father, rubbing his hands together, "consists of 325 volumes of an average weight of five pounds. Then tile preface, which must embrace some account of the Rig-veda, the Sama-veda, the Yagur-veda, and the Atharva-veda, with the Brahmanas, could hardly be completed in less than ten volumes. Now, if we apportion one volume to each year, there is every prospect of the family coming to an end of its task about the date 2250, the twelfth generation completing the work, while the thirteenth might occupy itself upon the index."

"And how are our descendants to live, sir," I asked, with a smile, "during the progress of this great undertaking:'"

"That's the worst of you, Jack," my father cried petulantly. "There is nothing practical about you. Instead of confining your attention to the working out of my noble scheme, you begin raising all sorts of absurd objections. It is a mere matter of detail how our descendants live, so long as they stick to the Djarmas. Now, I want you to go up to the bothy of Fergus McDonald and see about the thatch, and Willie Fullerton has written to say that his milk-cow is bad. You might took in upon your way and ask after it."

I started off upon my errands, but before doing so I took a look at the barometer upon the wall. The mercury had sunk to the phenomenal point of twenty-eight inches. Clearly the old sailor had not been wrong in his interpretation of Nature's signs.

As I returned over the moors in the evening, the wind was blowing in short, angry puffs, and the western horizon was heaped with sombre clouds which stretched their long, ragged tentacles right up to the zenith.

Against their dark background one or two livid, sulphur-coloured splotches showed up malignant and menacing, while the surface of the sea had changed from the appearance of burnished quicksilver to that of ground glass. A low, moaning sound rose up from the ocean as if it knew that trouble was in store for it.

Far out in the Channel I saw a single panting, eager steam vessel making ifs way to Belfast Lough, and the large barque which I had observed in the morning still beating about in the offing, endeavouring to pass to the northward.

At nine o'clock a sharp breeze was blowing, at ten it had freshened into a gale, and before midnight the most furious storm was raging which I can remember upon that weather-beaten coast.

I sat for some time in our small, oak-paneled sitting-room listening to the screeching and howling of the blast and to the rattle of the gravel and pebbles as they pattered against the window. Nature's grim orchestra was playing its world-old piece with a compass which ranged from the deep diapason of the thundering surge to the thin shriek of the scattered shingle and the keen piping of frightened sea birds.

Once for an instant I opened the lattice window, but a gust of wind and rain came blustering through, bearing with it a great sheet of seaweed, which flapped down upon the table. It was all I could do to close it again with a thrust of my shoulder in the face of the blast.

My sister and father had retired to their rooms, but my thoughts were too active for sleep, so I continued to sit and to smoke by the smouldering fire.

What was going on in the Hall now, I wondered? What did Gabriel think of the storm, and how did it affect the old man who wandered about in the night? Did he welcome these dread forces of Nature as being of the same order of things as his own tumultuous thoughts?

It was only two days now from the date which I had been assured was to mark a crisis in his fortunes. Would he regard this sudden tempest as being in any way connected with the mysterious fate which threatened him?

Over all these things and many more I pondered as I sat by the glowing embers until they died gradually out, and the chill night air warned me that it was time to retire.

I may have slept a couple of hours when I was awakened by some one tugging furiously at my shoulder. Sitting up in bed, I saw by the dim light that my father was standing half-clad by my bedside, and that it was his grasp which I felt on my night-shirt.

"Get up, Jack, get up!" he was crying excitedly. "There's a great ship ashore in the bay, and the poor folk will all be drowned. Come down, my boy, and let us see what we can do."

The good old man seemed to be nearly beside himself with excitement and impatience. I sprang from my bed, and was huddling on a few clothes, when a dull, booming sound made itself heard above the howling of the wind and the thunder of the breakers.

"There it is again!" cried my father. "It is their signal gun, poor creatures! Jamieson and the fishermen are below. Put your oil-skin coat on and the Glengarry hat. Come, come, every second may mean a human life!"

We hurried down together and made our way to the beach, accompanied by a dozen or so of the inhabitants of Branksome.

The gale had increased rather than moderated, and the wind screamed all round us with an infernal clamour. So great was its force that we had to put our shoulders against it, and bore our way through it, while the sand and gravel tingled up against our faces.

There was just light enough to make out the scudding clouds and the white gleam of the breakers, but beyond that all was absolute darkness.

We stood ankle deep in the shingle and seaweed, shading our eyes with our hands and peering out into the inky obscurity.

It seemed to me as I listened that I could hear human voices loud in intreaty and terror, but amid the wild turmoil of Nature it was difficult to distinguish one sound from another.

Suddenly, however, a light glimmered in the heart of the tempest, and next instant the beach and sea and wide, tossing bay were brilliantly illuminated by the wild glare of a signal light.

The ship lay on her beam-ends right in the centre of the terrible Hansel reef, hurled over to such an angle that I could see all the planking of her deck. I recognized her at once as being the same three-masted barque which I had observed in the Channel in the morning, and the Union Jack which was nailed upside down to the jagged slump of her mizzen proclaimed her nationality.

Every spar and rope and writhing piece of cordage showed up hard and clear under the vivid light which spluttered and flickered from the highest portion of the forecastle. Beyond the doomed ship, out of the great darkness came the long, rolling lines of big waves, never ending, never tiring, with a petulant tuft of foam here and there upon their crests. Each as it reached the broad circle of unnatural light appeared to gather strength and volume and to hurry on more impetuously until with a roar and a jarring crash it sprang upon its victim.

Clinging to the weather shrouds we could distinctly see ten or a dozen frightened seamen who, when the light revealed our presence, turned their white faces towards us and waved their hands imploringly. The poor wretches had evidently taken fresh hope from our presence, though it was

clear that their own boats had either been washed away or so damaged as to render them useless.

The sailors who clung to the rigging were not, however, the only unfortunates on board. On the breaking poop there stood three men who appeared to be both of a different race and nature from the cowering wretches who implored our assistance.

Leaning upon the shattered taff-rail they seemed to be conversing together as quietly and unconcernedly as though they were unconscious of the deadly peril which surrounded them.

As the signal light flickered over them, we could see from the shore that these immutable strangers wore red fezes, and that their faces were of a swarthy, large-featured type, which proclaimed an Eastern origin.

There was little time, however, for us to take note of such details. The ship was breaking rapidly, and some effort must be made to save the poor, sodden group of humanity who implored our assistance.

The nearest lifeboat was in the Bay of Luce, ten long miles away, but here was our own broad, roomy craft upon the shingle, and plenty of brave fisher lads to form a crew. Six of us sprang to the oars, the others pushed us off, and we fought our way through the swirling, raging waters, staggering and recoiling before the great, sweeping billows, but still steadily decreasing the distance between the barque and ourselves.

It seemed, however, that our efforts were fated to be in vain.

As we mounted upon a surge I saw a giant wave, topping all the others, and coming after them like a driver following a flock, sweep down upon the vessel, curling its great, green arch over the breaking deck.

With a rending, riving sound the ship split in two where the terrible, serrated back of the Hansel reef was sawing into her keel. The after-part, with the broken mizzen and the three Orientals, sank backwards into deep water and vanished, while the fore-half oscillated helplessly about, retaining its precarious balance upon the rocks.

A wail of fear went up from the wreck and was echoed from the beach, but by the blessing of Providence she kept afloat until we made our way under her bowsprit and rescued every man of the crew.

We had not got half-way upon our return, however, when another great wave swept the shattered forecastle off the reef, and, extinguishing the signal light, hid the wild denouement from our view.

Our friends upon the shore were loud in congratulation and praise, nor were they backward in welcoming and comforting the castaways. They were thirteen in all, as cold and cowed a set of mortals as ever slipped through Death's fingers, save, indeed, their captain, who was a hardy, robust man, and who made light of the affair.

Some were taken off to this cottage and some to that, but the greater part came back to Branksome with us, where we gave them such dry clothes as we could lay our hands on, and served them with beef and beer by the kitchen fire. The captain, whose name was Meadows, compressed his bulky form into a suit of my own, and came down to the parlour, where he mixed himself some grog and gave my father and myself an account of the disaster.

"If it hadn't been for you, sir, and your brave fellows," he said, smiling across at me, "we should be ten fathoms deep by this time. As to the Belinda , she was a leaky old tub and well insured, so neither the owners nor I are likely to break our hearts over her."

"I am afraid," said my father sadly, "that we shall never see your three passengers again. I have left men upon the beach in case they should be washed up, but I fear it is hopeless. I saw them go down when the vessel split, and no man could have lived for a moment among that terrible surge."

"Who were they?" I asked. "I could not have believed that it was possible for men to appear so unconcerned in the face of such imminent peril."

"As to who they are or were," the captain answered, puffing thoughtfully at his pipe, "that is by no means easy to say. Our last port was Kurrachee, in the north of India, and there we took them

aboard as passengers for Glasgow. Ram Singh was the name of the younger, and it is only with him that I have come in contact, but they all appeared to be quiet, inoffensive gentlemen. I never inquired their business, but I should judge that they were Parsee merchants from Hyderabad whose trade took them to Europe. I could never see why the crew should fear them, and the mate, too, he should have had more sense."

"Fear them I!" I ejaculated in surprise.

"Yes, they had some preposterous idea that they were dangerous shipmates. I have no doubt if you were to go down into the kitchen now you would find that they are all agreed that our passengers were the cause of the whole disaster."

As the captain was speaking the parlour door opened and the mate of the barque, a tall, red-bearded sailor, stepped in. He had obtained a complete rig-out from some kind-hearted fisherman, and looked in his comfortable jersey and well-greased seaboots a very favourable specimen of a shipwrecked mariner.

With a few words of grateful acknowledgment of our hospitality, he drew a chair up to the fire and warmed his great, brown hands before the blaze.

"What d'ye think now, Captain Meadows?" he asked presently, glancing up at his superior officer. "Didn't I warn you what would be the upshot of having those niggers on board the Belinda?"

The captain leant back in his chair and laughed heartily.

"Didn't I tell you?" he cried, appealing to us. "Didn't I tell you?"

"It might have been no laughing matter for us," the other remarked petulantly. "I have lost a good sea-kit and nearly my life into the bargain."

"Do I understand you to say," said I, "that you attribute your misfortunes to your ill-fated passengers?"

The mate opened his eyes at the adjective.

"Why ill-fated, sir?" he asked.

"Because they are most certainly drowned," I answered.

He sniffed incredulously and went on warming his hands.

"Men of that kind are never drowned," he said, after a pause. "Their father, the devil, looks after them. Did you see them standing on the poop and rolling cigarettes at the time when the mizzen was carried away and the quarter-boats stove? That was enough for me. I'm not surprised at you landsmen not being able to take it in, but the captain here, who's been sailing since he was the height of the binnacle, ought to know by this time that a cat and a priest are the worst cargo you can carry. If a Christian priest is bad, I guess an idolatrous pagan one is fifty times worse. I stand by the old religion, and be d—d to it!"

My father and I could not help laughing at the rough sailor's very unorthodox way of proclaiming his orthodoxy. The mate, however, was evidently in deadly earnest, and proceeded to state his case, marking off the different points upon the rough, red fingers of his left hand.

"It was at Kurrachee, directly after they come that I warned ye," he said reproachfully to the captain. "There was three Buddhist Lascars in my watch, and what did they do when them chaps come aboard? Why, they down on their stomachs and rubbed their noses on the deck—that's what they did. They wouldn't ha' done as much for an admiral of the R'yal Navy. They know who's who—these niggers do; and I smelt mischief the moment I saw them on their faces. I asked them afterwards in your presence, Captain, why they had done it, and they answered that the passengers were holy men. You heard 'em yourself."

"Well, there's no harm in that, Hawkins," said Captain Meadows.

"I don't know that," the mate said doubtfully. "The holiest Christian is the one that's nearest God, but the holiest nigger is, in my opinion, the one that's nearest the devil. Then you saw yourself, Captain Meadows, how they went on during the voyage, reading books that was writ on wood instead o' paper, and sitting up right through the night to jabber together on the quarter-deck.

What did they want to have a chart of their own for and to mark the course of the vessel every day?"

"They didn't," said the captain.

"Indeed they did, and if I did not tell you sooner it was because you were always ready to laugh at what I said about them. They had instruments o' their own—when they used them I can't say—but every day at noon they worked out the latitude and longitude, and marked out the vessel's position on a chart that was pinned on their cabin table. I saw them at it, and so did the steward from his pantry."

"Well, I don't see what you prove from that," the captain remarked," though I confess it is a strange thing."

"I'll tell you another strange thing," said the mate impressively. "Do you know the name of this bay in which we are cast away?"

"I have learnt from our kind friends here that we are upon the Wigtownshire coast," the captain answered, "but I have not heard the name of the bay."

The mate leant forward with a grave face.

"It is the Bay of Kirkmaiden," he said.

If he expected to astonish Captain Meadows he certainly succeeded, for that gentleman was fairly bereft of speech for a minute or more.

"This is really marvelous," he said, after a time, turning to us. "These passengers of ours cross-questioned us early in tile voyage as to the existence of a bay of that name. Hawkins here and I denied all knowledge of one, for on the chart it is included in the Bay of Luce. That we should eventually be blown into it and destroyed is an extraordinary coincidence."

"Too extraordinary to be a coincidence," growled the mate. "I saw them during the calm yesterday morning, pointing to the land over our starboard quarter. They knew well enough that that was the port they were making for."

"What do you make of it all, then, Hawkins?" asked the captain, with a troubled face. "What is your own theory on the matter?"

"Why, in my opinion," the mate answered, "them three swabs have no more difficulty in raising a gale o' wind than I should have in swallowing this here grog. They had reasons o' their own for coming to this God-forsaken—saving your presence, sirs—this God-forsaken bay, and they took a short cut to it by arranging to be blown ashore there. That's my idea o' the matter, though what three Buddhist priests could find to do in the Bay of Kirkmaiden is clean past my comprehension."

My father raised his eyebrows to indicate the doubt which his hospitality forbade him from putting into words.

"I think, gentlemen," he said, "that you are both sorely in need of rest after your perilous adventures. If you will follow me I shall lead you to your rooms."

He conducted them with old-fashioned ceremony to the laird's best spare bedroom, and then, returning to me in the parlour, proposed that we should go down together to the beach and learn whether anything fresh had occurred.

The first pale light of dawn was just appearing in the east when we made our way for the second time to the scene of the shipwreck. The gale had blown itself out, but the sea was still very high, and all inside the breakers was a seething, gleaming line of foam, as though the fierce old ocean were gnashing its white fangs at the victims who had escaped from its clutches.

All along the beach fishermen and crofters were hard at work hauling up spars and barrels as fast as they were tossed ashore. None of them had seen any bodies, however, and they explained to us that only such things as could float had any chance of coming ashore, for the undercurrent was so strong that whatever was beneath the surface must infallibly be swept out to sea.

As to the possibility of the unfortunate passengers having been able to reach the shore, these practical men would not hear of it for a moment, and showed us conclusively that if they had not been drowned they must have been dashed to pieces upon the rocks.

"We did all that could be done," my father said sadly, as we returned home. "I am afraid that the poor mate has had his reason affected by the suddenness of the disaster. Did you hear what he said about Buddhist priests raising a gale?"

"Yes, I heard him," said I. "It was very painful to listen to him," said my father. "I wonder if he would object to my putting a small mustard plaster under each of his ears. It would relieve any congestion of the brain. Or perhaps it would be best to wake him up and give him two antibilious pills. What do you think, Jack?"

"I think," said I, with a yawn, "that you had best let him sleep, and go to sleep yourself. You can physic him in the morning if he needs it."

So saying I stumbled off to my bedroom, and throwing myself upon the couch was soon in a dreamless slumber.