

Kingston William Henry Giles

Alone on an Island



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W.H.G. Kingston

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Chapter One

The *Wolf*, a letter-of-marque of twenty guns, commanded by Captain Deason, sailing from Liverpool, lay becalmed on the glass-like surface of the Pacific. The sun struck down with intense heat on the deck, compelling the crew to seek such shade as the bulwarks or sails afforded. Some were engaged in mending sails, twisting yarns, knotting, splicing, or in similar occupations; others sat in groups between the guns, talking together in low voices, or lay fast asleep out of sight in the shade. The officers listlessly paced the deck, or stood leaning over the bulwarks, casting their eyes round the horizon in the hopes of seeing signs of a coming breeze. Their countenances betrayed ill-humour and dissatisfaction; and if they spoke to each other, it was in gruff, surly tones. They had had a long course of ill luck, as they called it, having taken no prizes of value. The crew, too, had for some time exhibited a discontented and mutinous spirit, which Captain Deason, from his bad temper, was ill fitted to quell. While he vexed and insulted the officers, they bullied and tyrannised over the men. The crew, though often quarrelling among themselves, were united in the common hatred to their superiors, till that little floating world became a perfect pandemonium.

Among those who paced her deck, anxiously looking out for a breeze, was Humphry Gurton, a fine lad of fifteen, who had joined the *Wolf* as a midshipman. This was his first trip to sea. He had intended to enter the Navy, but just as he was about to do so his father, a merchant at Liverpool, failed, and, broken-hearted at his losses, soon afterwards died, leaving his wife and only son but scantily provided for.

Tenderly had that wife, though suffering herself from a fatal disease, watched over him in his sickness, and Humphry had often sat by his father's bedside while his mother was reading from God's Word, and listened as with tender earnestness she explained the simple plan of salvation to his father. She had shown him from the Bible that all men are by nature sinful, and incapable, by anything they can do, of making themselves fit to enter a pure and holy heaven, however respectable or excellent they may be in the sight of their fellow-men, and that the only way the best of human beings can come to God is by imitating the publican in the parable, and acknowledging themselves worthless, outcast sinners, and seeking to be reconciled to Him according to the one way He has appointed – through a living faith in the all-atoning sacrifice of His dear Son. Humphry had heard his father exclaim, "I believe that Jesus died for me; O Lord, help my unbelief! I have no merits of my own; I trust to Him, and Him alone." He had witnessed the joy which had lighted up his mother's countenance as she pressed his father's hand, and bending down, whispered, "We shall be parted but for a short time; and, oh! may our loving Father grant that this our son may too be brought to love the Saviour, and join us when he is summoned to leave this world of pain and sorrow."

Humphry had felt very sad; and though he had wept when his father's eyes were closed in death, and his mother had pressed him – now the only being on earth for whom she desired to live – to her heart, yet the impression he had received had soon worn off.

In a few months after his father died, she too was taken from him, and Humphry was left an orphan.

The kind and pious minister, Mr Faithful, who frequently visited Mrs Gurton during the last weeks of her illness, had promised her to watch over her boy, but he had no legal power. Humphry's guardian was a worldly man, and finding that there was but a very small sum for his support, was annoyed at the task imposed on him.

Humphry had expressed his wish to go to sea. A lad whose acquaintance he had lately made, Tom Matcham, was just about to join the *Wolf*, and, persuading him that they should meet with all sorts of adventures, offered to assist him in getting a berth on board her. Humphry's guardian, to save himself trouble, was perfectly willing to agree to the proposed plan, and, without difficulty, arranged for his being received on board as a midshipman.

"We shall have a jovial life of it, depend upon that!" exclaimed Matcham when the matter was settled. "I intend to enjoy myself. The officers are rather wild blades, but that will suit me all the better." Harry went to bid farewell to Mr Faithful.

"I pray that God will prosper and protect you, my lad," he said. "I trust that your young companion is a right principled youth, who will assist you as you will be ready to help him, and that the captain and officers are Christian men."

"I have not been long enough acquainted with Tom Matcham to know much about him," answered Humphry. "I very much doubt that the captain and officers are the sort of people you describe. However, I daresay I shall get on very well with them."

"My dear Humphry," exclaimed Mr Faithful, "I am deeply grieved to hear that you can give no better account of your future associates. Those who willingly mix with worldly or evil-disposed persons are very sure to suffer. Our constant prayer is that we may be kept out of temptation, and we are mocking God if we willingly throw ourselves into it. I would urge you, if you are not satisfied with the character of those who are to be your companions for so many years, to give up the appointment while there is time. I would accompany you, and endeavour to get your agreement cancelled. It will be better to do so at any cost, rather than run the risk of becoming like them."

"Oh, I daresay that they are not bad fellows after all!" exclaimed Humphry. "You know I need not do wrong, even though they do."

The minister sighed. In vain he urged Humphry to consider the matter seriously.

"All I can do, then, my young friend, is to pray for you," said Mr Faithful, as he wrung Harry's hand, "and I beg you, as a parting gift, to accept these small books. One is a book above all price, of a size which you may keep in your pocket, and I trust that you will read it as you can make opportunities, even though others may attempt to interrupt you, or to persuade you to leave it neglected in your chest."

It was a small Testament, and Harry, to please the minister, promised to carry it in his pocket, and to read from it as often as he could.

Humphry having parted from his friend, went down at once to join the ship.

Next day she sailed. Humphry at first felt shocked at hearing the oaths and foul language used, both by the crew and officers. The captain, who on shore appeared a grave, quiet sort of man, swore louder and oftener than any one. Scarcely an order was issued without an accompaniment of oaths; indeed blasphemy resounded throughout the ship.

Matcham only laughed at Humphry when he expressed his annoyance.

"You will soon get accustomed to it," he observed. "I confess that I myself was rather astonished when I first heard the sort of thing, but I don't mind it now a bit."

So Humphry thought, for Matcham interlarded his own conversation with the expressions used by the rest on board; indeed, swearing had become so habitual to him, that he seemed scarcely aware of the fearful language which escaped his lips.

By degrees, as Matcham had foretold, Humphry did get accustomed to the language used by all around, which had at first so greatly shocked him. Though he kept his promise to the minister, and carried the little Testament in his pocket, he seldom found time to read it.

He wished to become a sailor, and he applied himself diligently to learn his profession; and as he was always in a good temper and ready to oblige, the captain and officers treated him with more respect than they did Matcham, who was careless and indifferent, and ready to shirk duty whenever he could do so. Matcham, finding himself constantly abused, chose to consider that it

was owing to Humphry, and, growing jealous, took every opportunity of annoying him. Humphry, however, gained the good-will of the men by never swearing at them, or using the rope's-end: this the officers were accustomed to do on all occasions, and Matcham imitated them by constantly thrashing the boys, often without the slightest excuse.

As the ship sailed on her voyage, the state of affairs on board became worse and worse. On one occasion the crew came aft, complaining that their provisions were bad, and then that the water was undrinkable, when the captain, appearing with pistols in his hands, ordered them to go forward, refusing to listen to what they had to say. Another time they complained that they were stinted in their allowance of spirits, when he treated them in the same way. They retired, casting looks of defiance at him and the officers. On several occasions, when some of the men did not obey orders with sufficient promptitude, Humphry saw them struck to the deck by the first and second mates without any notice being taken by the captain. The officers, too, quarrelled among themselves; the first officer and the second refused to speak to each other; and the surgeon, who considered that he had been insulted, declined intercourse with either of them. The younger officers followed their bad example, and often and often Humphry wished that he had listened to the advice of his friend Mr Faithful, and had inquired the character of his intended companions before he joined the ship.

At the first port in South America at which the *Wolf* touched, the surgeon, carrying his chest with him, went on shore, and refused to return till the mates had apologised. As this they would not do, she sailed without him; and although the men might be wounded, or sickness break out, there was now no one on board capable of attending to them. Such was the condition of the *Wolf* at the time she was thus floating becalmed and alone on the wide ocean.

Chapter Two

Harry Gurton stood gazing on the glassy sea till his eyes ached with the bright glare, his thoughts wandering back to the days of his happy childhood, when he was the pride and delight of his beloved father and mother. He had come on deck only to breathe a purer air than was to be found below.

Soon after leaving the coast of South America a fever had broken out on board, and several of the crew lay sick in their berths. Their heartless shipmates, afraid of catching the complaint, took little care of them. Humphry could not bear to see them suffer without help, and from the first had done his best to attend on them. He constantly went round, taking them water and such food as he could induce the cook to prepare.

Tom Matcham was the only officer who had as yet been struck down by the fever. He lay in his berth tossing and groaning, complaining of his hard lot. The officers, who were annoyed by his cries, often abused him, telling him roughly not to disturb them.

"The cruel brutes! I will be revenged on them if I ever get well," exclaimed Matcham.

In vain Humphry tried to pacify him.

"Don't mind what they say, Tom," he observed. "I hope you may get well; but if you were to die, it would be dreadful to go out of the world with such feelings in your heart. I remember enough about religion to know that we should forgive those who injure us. If you will let me, I will try to say some of the prayers which my mother taught me when I was a child, and I will pray with you. I have got a Testament, and I should like to read to you out of it."

"I can't pray, and I don't want to hear anything from the Testament," answered Tom gloomily.

"It would be very dreadful if you were to go out of the world feeling as you now do," urged Humphry.

"What! you don't mean to say you think I am going to die!" exclaimed Tom in an agitated voice.

"I tell you honestly, Tom, that you seem as bad as the two poor fellows who died last week," said Humphry.

"Oh, you are croaking," groaned Tom, though his voice faltered as he spoke.

After talking for some time longer without being able to move him, Humphry was compelled to go forward to attend to some of the other men.

In the first hammock he came to lay Ned Hadow, one of the oldest, and apparently one of the most ruffianly of the crew. He seemed, however, to be grateful to Humphry for his kindness; and he acknowledged that if it had not been for him, he should have been fathoms down in the deep before then.

"I hope, however, that you are getting better now," said Humphry.

"Thanks to you, sir, I think I am," answered Ned. "I don't want to die, though I cannot say I have much to live for, nor has any one else aboard this ship, except to be abused and knocked about without any chance of gaining any good by the cruise."

"Perhaps we may do better by and by," observed Humphry.

"I have no hopes of that while such men as the captain and his mates have charge of the ship. Take my advice, Mr Gurton, if you have a chance, get out of her as fast as you can. You will thank me for warning you – it is the only way I have to show that I am grateful to you for your kindness."

Hadow's remarks made no deep impression upon Humphry, but he could not help occasionally recollecting them.

After visiting the other sick men, he went on deck to keep his proper watch; then, weary with his exertions, he turned into his berth to obtain the rest he so much needed.

He was awakened by hearing the cry of "All hands shorten sail!" He quickly sprang on deck.

A gale had suddenly sprung up. The ship was heeling over, and ploughing her way through the seething waters. The crew flew aloft. The loftier sails were taken in, and the top-sails were being closely reefed, when another blast, more furious than the former, struck the ship, and two poor fellows were hurled from the lee-yard-arm into the foaming waters. There was a cry from the crew, and several rushed to lower a boat – Humphry among them.

“Hold fast!” cried the captain; “let the fellows drown; you will only lose your lives if you attempt to save them.”

Still the men persisted, showing more humanity than they had exhibited in attending to their sick shipmates, when the captain swore that he would shoot any one who disobeyed him. Though spare spars and everything that could float had been hove overboard, the poor fellows in the water could no longer be seen.

The crew, with gloomy looks, assembled forward, muttering threats which did not reach the officers’ ears.

The change of weather had the effect of restoring some of the sick men to health, though several died. Among the first to appear on deck was Ned Hadow. He still looked weak and ill – the shadow of his former self. He was changed in other respects, and Humphry observed that he was quiet in his behaviour, and no longer swore in the way he had been accustomed to do.

Matcham remained in his berth. He seemed a little better, though he still refused to listen to Humphry when he offered to read the Bible to him, and when asked the reason, replied, “Because I am not going to let those fellows suppose that I am afraid to die. They would be sneering at me, and calling me a Methodist; and I don’t intend to die either, so I don’t see why I should bother myself by having religion thrust down my throat.”

“If you are not going to die, I suppose the case is different,” answered Humphry. “Still, I know that if you were, the Bible is the best book to read. I wish that I had read it oftener myself.”

“If I can get hold of it, I will take care that neither you nor I am troubled with it in future,” answered Matcham. “You have teased me too much about it already. I wish you would just try what the captain or mates would say to you if you were to bother them.”

Humphry put his little Testament into his pocket, determining that his messmate should not get hold of it. Still, much as he valued the book as a gift from his old friend, he looked upon it, as many other people do, as a book to be revered, and to be read in times of sickness or trouble; but he had little notion of the value of an open Bible, to be studied with prayer every day in the week, to serve as a light to his feet and a lamp to his path, and to guide him in the everyday affairs of life.

Humphry, wishing Matcham good evening, went on deck.

As he looked ahead, he saw in the distance a small island rising like a rock out of the blue ocean. The ship was standing towards it. The sun, however, was just then setting, and in a short time it was concealed from sight by the mists of night. As he was to keep the first watch with the third mate, he went down and took some supper. When he returned on deck, he found that the sky was overcast with clouds, and that the night was excessively dark. He could scarcely distinguish the man at the helm or the officer of the watch.

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