

Oxley James Macdonald

The Wreckers of Sable Island



James Oxley

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CHAPTER I

THE SETTING FORTH

A voyage across the Atlantic Ocean in the year 1799 was not the every-day affair that it has come to be at the present time. There were no "ocean greyhounds" then. The passage was a long and trying one in the clumsy craft of those days, and people looked upon it as a more serious affair than they now do on a tour round the world.

In the year 1799 few people thought of travelling for mere pleasure. North, south, east, and west, the men went on missions of discovery, of conquest, or of commerce; but the women and children abode at home, save, of course, when they ventured out to seek new homes in that new world which was drawing so many to its shores.

It was therefore not to be wondered at that the notion of Eric Copeland going out to his father in far-away Nova Scotia should form the subject of more than one family council at Oakdene Manor, the beautiful country seat of the Copeland family, situated in one of the prettiest parts of Warwickshire.

Eric was the only son of Doctor Copeland, surgeon-in-chief of the Seventh Fusiliers, the favourite regiment of the Duke of Kent, the father of Queen Victoria. This regiment formed part of the garrison at Halifax, then under the command of the royal duke himself; and the doctor had written to say that if the squire, Eric's grandfather, approved, he would like Eric to come out to him, as his term of service had been extended three years beyond what he expected, and he wanted to have his boy with him. At the same time, he left the matter entirely in the squire's hands for him to decide.

So far as the old gentleman was concerned, he decided at once.

"Send the boy out there to that wild place, and have him scalped by an Indian or gobbled by a bear before he's there a month? Not a bit of it. I won't hear of it. He's a hundred times better off here."

The squire, be it observed, held very vague notions about Nova Scotia, and indeed the American continent generally, in spite of his son's endeavours to enlighten him. He still firmly believed that there were as many wigwags as houses in New York, and that Indians in full war-paint and plumes were every day seen on the streets of Philadelphia; while as for poor little Nova Scotia, it was more than his mind could take in how the Duke of Kent could ever bring himself to spend a week in such an outlandish place, not to speak of a number of years.

So soon as Eric learned of his father's request, he was not less quick in coming to a conclusion, but it was of a precisely opposite kind to the squire's. He was what the Irish would call "a broth of a boy." Fifteen last birthday, five feet six inches in height, broad of shoulder and stout of limb, yet perfectly proportioned, as nimble on his feet as a squirrel, and as quick of eye as a king-bird, entirely free from any trace of nervousness or timidity, good-looking in that sense of the word which means more than merely handsome, courteous in his manners, and quite up to the mark in his books, Eric represented the best type of the British boy as he looked about him with his brave brown eyes, and longed to be something more than simply a school-boy, and to see a little of that great world up and down which his father had been travelling ever since he could remember.

"Of course I want to go to father," said he, promptly and decidedly. "I don't believe there are any bears or Indians at Halifax; and even if there should be, I don't care. I'm not afraid of them."

He had not the look of a boy that could be easily frightened, or turned aside from anything upon which he had set his heart, and the old squire felt as though he were seeing a youthful reflection of himself in the sturdy spirit of resolution shown by his grandson.

"But, Eric, lad," he began to argue, "whether the Indians and bears are plentiful or not, I don't see why you want to leave Oakdene, and go away out to a wild place that is only fit for soldiers. You're quite happy with us here, aren't you?" And the old gentleman's face took on rather a reproachful expression as he put the question.

Eric's face flushed crimson, and crossing over to where the squire sat, he bent down and kissed his wrinkled forehead tenderly.

"I am quite happy, grandpa. You and grandma do so much for me that it would be strange if I wasn't. But you know I have been more with you than I have with my own father; and now when he wants me to go out to him, I want to go too. You can't blame me, can you?"

What Eric said was true enough. The doctor's regiment had somehow come in for more than its share of foreign service. It had carried its colours with credit over the burning plains of India, upon the battle-fields of the Continent, and then, crossing to America, had taken its part, however ineffectually, in the struggle which ended so happily in the birth of a new nation. During all of his years Eric had remained at Oakdene, seeing nothing of his father save when he came to them on leave for a few months at a time.

These home-comings of the doctor were the great events in Eric's life. Nothing was allowed to interfere with his enjoyment of his father's society. All studies were laid aside, and one day of happiness followed another, as together they rode to hounds, whipped the trout-streams, shot over the coverts where pheasants were in plenty, or went on delightful excursions to lovely places round about the neighbourhood.

Dr. Copeland enjoyed his release from the routine of military duty quite as much as Eric did his freedom from school, and it would not have been easy to say which of the two went in more heartily for a good time.

It was just a year since the doctor had last been home on leave, and a year seems a very long time to a boy of fifteen, so that when the letter came proposing that Eric should go out to his father (it should have been told before that his mother was dead, having been taken away from him when he was a very little fellow), and spend three long years with him without a break, if the doctor had been in Kamtchatka or Tierra del Fuego instead of simply in Nova Scotia, Eric would not have hesitated a moment, but have jumped at the offer.

The old squire was very loath to part with his grandson, and it was because he knew it would be so that the doctor had not positively asked for Eric to be sent out, but had left the question to be decided by the squire.

Perhaps Eric might have failed to carry his point but for the help given him by Major Maunsell, a brother-officer of Doctor Copeland's, who had been home on leave, and in whose charge Eric was to be placed if it was decided to let him go.

The major had come to spend a day or two at Oakdene a little while before taking his leave of England, and of course the question of Eric's returning to Nova Scotia with him came up for discussion. Eric pleaded his case very earnestly.

"Now please listen to me a moment," said he, taking advantage of a pause in the conversation. "I love you, grandpa and grandma, very dearly, and am very happy with you here; but I love my father too, and I never see him, except just for a little while, when he comes home on leave, and it would be lovely to be with him all the time for three whole years. Besides that, I do want to see America, and this is such a good chance. I am nearly sixteen now, and by the time father gets back I'll have to be going to college, and then, you know, he says he's going to leave the army and settle down here, so that dear knows when I can ever get the chance to go again. Oh! please let me go, grandpa, won't you?"

Major Maunsell's eyes glistened as he looked at Eric and listened to him. He was an old bachelor himself, and he could not help envying Doctor Copeland for his handsome, manly son. At once he entered into full sympathy with him in his great desire, and determined to use all his influence in supporting him.

"There's a great deal of sense in what the boy says," he remarked. "It is such a chance as he may not get again in a hurry. There's nothing to harm him out in Halifax; and his father is longing to have him, for he's always talking to me about him, and reading me bits out of his letters."

So the end of it was that the major and Eric between them won the day, and after taking the night to think over it, the good old squire announced the next morning at breakfast that he would make no further objections, and that Eric might go.

The troop-ship in which Major Maunsell was going would sail in a week, so there was no time to be lost in getting Eric ready for the voyage, and for the long sojourn in the distant colony. Many were the trunks of clothing, books, and other things that had to be packed with greatest care, and their number would have been doubled if the major had not protested against taking the jams, jellies, pickles, medicines, and other domestic comforts that the loving old couple wanted Eric to take with him, because they felt sure he could get nothing so good out in Halifax.

All too quickly for them the day came when they were to say good-bye to their grandson, and the parting was a very tearful and trying one. Full of joy as Eric felt, he could not keep back the tears when his white-haired grandmother hugged him again and again to her heart, exclaiming fervently, —

"God bless and keep my boy! May his almighty arms be underneath and round about you, my darling. Put your trust in him, Eric, no matter what may happen."

And the bluff old squire himself was suspiciously moist about the eyes as the carriage drove away and Eric was really off to Chatham in charge of Major Maunsell, with whom he had by this time got to be on the best of terms.

At Chatham they found their ship in the final stage of preparation for the voyage. They were to sail in the *Francis*, a fine, fast gun-brig of about three hundred tons, which had in her hold a very valuable cargo, consisting of the Duke of Kent's library, together with a quantity of very costly furniture, precious wines, and other luxuries intended to make as comfortable as possible the lot of his royal highness in the garrison at Halifax. The major and Eric were assigned a roomy cabin to themselves, in which they at once proceeded to make themselves at home.

During the few days that intervened before the sailing of the *Francis*, Eric's enjoyment of the novel scenes around him could hardly be put into words. All he knew about the sea was what he had learned from a summer now and then at a watering-place; and the great gathering of big ships at Chatham; the unceasing bustle as some came in from long voyages and others went forth to take their places upon distant stations; the countless sailors and dock-hands swarming like ants hither and thither; the important-looking officers strutting about in gold-laced coats, and calling out their commands in such hoarse tones that Eric felt tempted to ask if they all had very bad colds; the shrill sound of the boatswains' whistles that seemed to have no particular meaning; the martial music of bands playing apparently for no other reason than just because they wanted to, — all this made up a wonder-world for Eric in which he found a great deal of delight.

There was just one cloud upon his happiness. Among his many pets at Oakdene his special favourite was a splendid mastiff that the squire had given him as a birthday present two years before. Prince was a superb animal, and devoted to his young master. No sooner had it been settled that Eric should go out to his father than the boy at once asked if his dog might not go with him. Major Maunsell had no objection himself, but feared that the captain of the *Francis* would not hear of it. However, he thought that Eric might bring the dog up to Chatham, and then if the captain would not let him on board he could be sent back to Oakdene.

Prince accordingly accompanied him, and a place having been found for him with a friend of the major's, his master had no peace of mind until the question was settled. Some days passed before he got a chance to see Captain Reefwell, who was, of course, extremely busy; but at last he managed to catch him one day just after lunch, when he seemed in a pretty good humour, and without wasting time preferred his request, trembling with eager hope as he did so. The gruff old sailor at first bluntly refused him; but Eric bravely returning to the charge, his kind heart was moved to the extent of making him say, —

"Well, let me have a look at your dog, anyway."

Hoping for the best, Eric ran off and returned with Prince. Captain Reefwell scanned the noble animal critically, and stretched out his hand to pat him, whereupon the mastiff gravely lifted his right paw and placed it in the captain's horny palm.

"Shiver my timbers! but the dog's got good manners," said the captain in surprise. "Did you teach him that?" turning to Eric.

"Yes, sir," replied Eric proudly; "and he can do other things too." And he proceeded to put the big dog through a number of tricks which pleased the old sailor so much that finally he said, with a smile, —

"All right, my lad. You may bring your dog on board. But, mind you, he comes before the mast. He's not a cabin passenger."

"Oh, thank you, sir! thank you, sir!" cried Eric joyfully. — "I won't let you in the cabin, will I, Prince? Isn't it splendid? You're to come with me after all." And he hugged the mastiff as though he had been his own brother.

CHAPTER II IN ROUGH WEATHER

It was the first of November when the *Francis* got off, and Captain Reefwell warned his passengers that they might expect a rather rough voyage, as they were sure to have a storm or two in crossing at that time of year. Eric protested that he would not mind; he was not afraid of a storm. Indeed, he wanted to see one really good storm at sea, such as he had often read about.

But he changed his tune when the *Francis* began to pitch and toss in the chops of the English Channel, and with pale face and piteous voice he asked the major "if a real storm were worse than this." A few days later, however, when he got his sea-legs all right, and the *Francis* was bowling merrily over the broad Atlantic before a favouring breeze, his courage came back to him, and he felt ready for anything.

The *Francis* was not more than a week out before the captain's prediction began to be fulfilled. One storm succeeded another with but little rest between, the wind blowing from all quarters in turn. Driven hither and thither before it, the *Francis* struggled gallantly toward her destination. So long as he was out in mid-Atlantic Captain Reefwell seemed quite indifferent to the boisterous weather. He told his passengers that he was sorry for the many discomforts they were forced to endure, but otherwise showed no concern. He was a daring sailor, and had crossed the ocean a score of times before. As they approached the American side, however, and the storm still continued, he grew very anxious, as his troubled countenance and moody manner plainly showed. The truth was that he had been driven out of his course, and had lost his reckoning, owing to sun and stars alike having been invisible for so many days. He had no clear idea of his distance from the coast, and unless he could soon secure a satisfactory observation the *Francis* would be in a perilous plight.

The first of December was marked by a storm more violent than any which had come before, followed by a dense fog which swathed the ship in appalling gloom. The captain evidently regarded this fog as a very grave addition to his difficulties. He hardly left the quarter-deck, and his face grew haggard and his eyes bloodshot with being constantly on the look-out. Realizing that a crisis was at hand, and determined to know the worst, Major Maunsell made bold to ask the captain to tell him the real state of affairs. Captain Reefwell hesitated for a moment, then muttering something about "might as well out with it," he laid his hand upon the major's shoulder, and looking straight into his eyes, with a strange expression of sympathy, said in his gravest tones, —

"Major, it's just this: unless I'm clean lost, we must now be somewhere near Sable Island. I'm expecting to hear the roar of its breakers any minute, and once the *Francis* gets amongst them, God help us all! Sable Island makes sure work." And he turned away abruptly, as though to hide his feelings.

Captain Reefwell's words sent a shudder straight and swift through Major Maunsell's heart. The latter already knew of the bad reputation of that strange island which scarcely lifts itself above the level of the Atlantic, less than a hundred miles due east from Nova Scotia. Stories that chilled the blood had from time to time floated up to Halifax — stories of shipwreck following fast upon shipwreck, and no one surviving to tell the tale.

But even more appalling than the fury of the storm that scourged the lonely island were the deeds said to be done by monsters in human guise who plied the wrecker's trade there, and, acting upon the principle that dead men tell no tales, had made it their care to put out of the way all whom even the cruel billows had spared.

With a heavy heart the major made his way back to the cabin, where he found Eric, upon whose bright spirits the long and stormy voyage had told heavily, looking very unhappy as he tried to amuse himself with a book. The boy was worn out by the ceaseless pitching and tossing of the

vessel. He felt both home-sick and sea-sick, as indeed did many another of the passengers, who with one accord were wishing themselves safely upon land again. He looked up eagerly as the major entered.

"What does the captain say, major?" he asked, his big brown eyes open their widest. "Will the storm soon be over, and are we near Halifax?"

Concealing his true feelings, the major replied with well-put-on cheerfulness, —

"The captain says that if this fog would only lift, and let him find out exactly where we are, Eric, he would be all right. There is nothing to do but to wait, and hope for the best." And sitting down beside Eric, he threw his arm about him in a tender, protecting way that showed how strongly he felt.

So intense was the anxiety on board the *Francis* that none of the passengers thought of going to their berths or taking off their clothes that night, but all gathered in the cabins, finding what cheer and comfort they could in one another's company.

In the main cabin were other officers besides Major Maunsell — namely, Captain Sterling of the Fusiliers, Lieutenant Mercer of the Royal Artillery, and Lieutenants Sutton, Roebuck, and Moore of the 16th Light Dragoons; while in the fore-cabin were household servants of the prince and soldiers of the line, bringing the total number of passengers up to two hundred.

During the night Captain Reefwell, seeing that it was no longer any use to conceal the seriousness of the situation, sent word to all on board to prepare for the worst, as the ship might be among the breakers at any moment. The poor passengers hastened to gather their most precious possessions into little bundles, and to prepare themselves for the approaching struggle with death.

The night wore slowly on, the sturdy brig straining and groaning as the billows made a plaything of her, tossing her to and fro as though she was no heavier than a chip, while the fierce storm shrieked through the rigging in apparent glee at having so rich a prize for the wreckers of Sable Island.

It was a brave band that awaited its fate in the main cabin. The men were borne up by the dauntless fortitude of the British soldier, and, catching their spirit, Eric manifested a quiet courage well worthy of the name he bore. He had Prince with him now, for the captain had himself suggested that he had better have the dog near at hand. The noble creature seemed to have some glimmering of their common peril, for he kept very close to his young master, and every now and then laid his huge head upon Eric's knee and looked up into his face with an expression that said as plainly as words, —

"Nothing but death can ever part us. You can depend upon me to the very uttermost."

And hugging him fondly, Eric answered, —

"Dear old Prince! You'll help me if we are wrecked, won't you?" at which Prince wagged his tail responsively, and did his best to lick his master's face.

Now and then some one would creep up on deck, and brave the fury of the blast for a few moments, in hope of finding some sign of change for the better; and on his return to the cabin the others would eagerly scan his countenance and await his words, only to be met with a sorrowful shake of the head that rendered words unnecessary.

Eric alone found temporary forgetfulness in sleep. He was very weary, and, though fully alive to the danger so near at hand, could not keep from falling into a fitful slumber, as he lay upon the cushioned seat that encircled the cabin, Prince stationing himself at his side and pillowing his head in his lap.

Poor Prince was by no means so handsome a creature now as when his good looks and good manners won the captain's heart. The long stormy passage had been very hard upon him. He had grown gaunt, and his smooth, shiny skin had become rough and unkempt. Otherwise, however, he was not much the worse, and was quite ready for active duty if his services should be needed.

Awaking from a light sleep, in which he dreamed that he and Prince were having a glorious romp on the lawn at Oakdene, which somehow seemed to be undulating in a very curious fashion, Eric caught sight of Major Maunsell returning to the cabin after a visit to the upper deck, and at once ran up to him and plied him with eager questions.

"Is the storm getting any better, and will it soon be daylight again?"

The major did his best to look cheerful as he answered, —

"Well, the storm is no worse, Eric, at all events, and it will not be long before daylight comes."

"But even if we should be wrecked," said Eric, looking pleadingly into the major's face, "we might all get ashore all right, mightn't we? I've often read of shipwrecks in which everybody was saved."

"Certainly, my boy, certainly," replied the major promptly, although deep down in his heart he seemed to hear Captain Reefwell's ominous words, "Sable Island makes sure work."

"And, major," continued Eric, "I'm going to keep tight hold of Prince's collar if we do get wrecked. He can swim ever so much better than I can, and he'll pull me ashore all right, won't he?"

"That's a capital idea of yours, my boy," said the major, smiling tenderly upon him. "Keep tight hold of Prince, by all means. You couldn't have a better life-preserver."

"I don't want to be wrecked, that's certain; but if we are, I'm very glad I've got Prince here to help me — the dear old fellow that he is!" And so saying, Eric threw himself down upon his dog and gave him a hearty hug, which the mastiff evidently much enjoyed. Day broke at last, if the slow changing of the thick darkness into a dense gray fog could rightly be called daybreak.

The *Francis* still bravely battled with the tempest. She had proved herself a trusty ship, and, with Captain Reefwell on the quarter-deck, more than a match for the worst fury of wind and wave.

But no ship that ever has been or ever will be built could possibly pass through the ordeal of the Sable Island breakers, whose awful thunder might at any moment be heard above the howling of the blast. At breakfast-time the worn and weary passengers gathered around the table for what would, in all probability, be their last meal on board the *Francis*, and perhaps their last on earth. The fare was not very tempting, for what could the cooks do under such circumstances? But the passengers felt no disposition to complain. Indeed, they had little appetite to eat, and were only making a pretence of doing so, when a sailor burst into the cabin, his bronzed face blanched with fear, as he shouted breathlessly, —

"Captain says for all to come up on deck. The ship will strike in a minute."

Instantly there was wild confusion and a mad rush for the companion-way; but Major Maunsell waited to take Eric's hand tightly into his before pressing on with the others. When they reached the deck an awful scene met their eyes. The fog had lifted considerably, so that it was possible to see some distance from the ship; and there, right across her bows, not more than a quarter of a mile away, a tremendous line of breakers stretched as far as eye could see.

Straight into their midst the *Francis* was helplessly driving at the bidding of the storm-fiend. No possible way of escape! Not only did the breakers extend to right and left until they were lost in the shifting fog, but the nearest line was evidently only an advance-guard; for beyond it other lines, not less formidable, could be dimly descried, rearing their snowy crests of foam as they rolled fiercely onward.

"Heaven help us!" cried Major Maunsell, as with one swift glance he took in the whole situation; and drawing Eric close to him, he made his way through the confusion to the foot of the main-mast, which offered a secure hold for the time being.

A few minutes later the *Francis* struck the first bar with a shock that sent everybody who had not something to hold on to tumbling upon the deck. But for the major's forethought, both he and Eric might at that moment have been borne off into the boiling surges; for a tremendous billow rushed upon the helpless vessel, sweeping her from stern to stem, and carrying away a number of the soldiers, who, having nothing to hold on by, were picked up like mere chips of wood and

hurried to their doom. Their wild cries for the help that could not be given them pierced the ears of the others, who did not know but that the next billow would treat them in like manner.

Again and again was the ill-starred ship thus swept by the billows, each time fresh victims falling to their fell fury. Then came a wave of surpassing size, which, lifting the *Francis* as though she had been a mere feather, bore her over the bar into the deeper water beyond. Here, after threatening to go over upon her beam-ends, she righted once more, and drove on toward the next bar.

CHAPTER III

THE WRECK

Major Maunsell gave a great gasp of relief when the brig righted.

"Keep tight hold of your rope, Eric," he cried encouragingly. "Please God, we may reach shore alive yet."

Drenched to the skin and shivering with cold, Eric held tightly on to the rope with his right hand and to Prince's collar with his left. Prince had crouched close to the foot of the mast, and the waves swept by him as though he had been carved in stone.

"All right, sir," Eric replied, as bravely as he could. "It's pretty hard work, but I'll not let go."

Rearing and plunging amid the froth and foam, the *Francis* charged at the second bar, struck full upon it with a force that would have crushed in the bow of a less sturdy craft, hung there for a few minutes while the breakers, as if greedy for their prey, swept exultantly over her, and then, responding to the impulse of another towering wave, leaped over the bar into the deeper water beyond.

But she could not stand much more of such buffeting, for she was fast becoming a mere hulk. Both masts had gone by the board at the last shock, and poor little Eric certainly would have gone overboard with the main-mast but for his prompt rescue by the major from the entangling rigging.

"You had a narrow escape that time, Eric," said the major, as he dragged the boy round to the other side of the mast, where he was in less danger.

The passage over the bars having thus been effected, the few who were still left on board the *Francis* began to cherish hopes of yet reaching the shore alive.

Between the bars and the main body of the island was a heavy cross-sea, in which the brig pitched and tossed like a bit of cork. Somewhere beyond this wild confusion of waters was the surf which broke upon the beach itself, and in that surf the final struggle would take place. Whether or not a single one of the soaked, shivering beings clinging to the deck would survive it, God alone knew. The chances of their escape were as one in a thousand – and yet they hoped.

There were not many left now. Captain Sterling was gone, and Lieutenants Mercer and Sutton. Besides the major and Eric, only Lieutenants Roebuck and Moore of the cabin passengers were still to be seen. Of the soldiers and crew, almost all had been swept away; but Captain Reefwell still held to his post upon the quarter-deck by keeping tight hold to a belaying-pin.

The distance between the bars and the beach was soon crossed, and the long line of foaming billows became distinct through the driving mist.

"Don't lose your grip on Prince, my boy," called the major to Eric. "We'll strike in a second, and then –"

But before he could finish the sentence the ship struck the beach with fearful force, and was instantly buried under a vast mountain of water that hurled itself upon her as though it had long been waiting for the chance to destroy her. When the billow had spent its force, the decks were clear. Not a human form was visible where a moment before more than a score of men had been clinging for dear life. Hissing and seething like things of life, and sending their spray and spume high into the mist-laden air, the merciless breakers bore their victims off to cast them contemptuously upon the beach. Then, ere they could scramble ashore, they would be caught up again and carried off by the recoil of the wave, to be once more dashed back as though they were the playthings of the water.

The major and Eric were separated in the wild confusion; but Eric was not parted from Prince. About his brawny neck the mastiff wore a stout leathern collar, and to this Eric clung with a grip that not even the awful violence of the breakers could unloose. Rather did it make his sturdy fingers but close the tighter upon the leathern band.

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