Here be Dragons

A Tale of Shipwreck and Discovery

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Author of 'The Beast of Berlin', 'The Road to Venice', 'Mutiny', 'The Shadow of Wallgau', etc.

DEDICATED

To all adventurous children

who are not too modern

to despise a tale of discovery

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Chapter 1

In which an English ex-captain is travelling to the Holy Land – A fearful storm is described – Several horrifying days on the deep.

It was not very big – to tell the truth, it was rather small, about the size of a man's hand and rising from the West. But I, Jeremiah Handown, remembered the book of the prophet Samuel and how Elisha's little cloud had turned from just such a small speck to a mighty rainstorm, and hardly dared to believe that it would not come to at least a little squall. The captain of the *Dogtooth*, sailing east from Malta to the Holy Land, via Crete, had prophesied doom already. And although I do not believe in modern-day prophets, I could not take the expert captain's sayings lightly. I turned, my fifty-years bones creaking slightly, and descended below decks to the tallow-lit darkness of the hold. Sacks of grain and other provisions

thronged the cramped merchant vessel with goods. At the end was the cabin in which I and my three sons were berthed during the voyage. It was their first sea voyage – I had at one time been a captain, before retiring to the clergy - and had taken us all the way from Portsmouth to ancient eastern Europe. Now, thankful to be on the last leg to Palestine, we were in the Mediterranean Sea, heading eastwards. As I passed through the hold, I met one of the sailors battening things down in preparation for the storm.

'Good morning, mistah', the sailor said respectfully, 'I've a feeling its goin' to be a very strong bustah, its bein' late in the season.'

'I believe it', I replied – I had been a captain myself in my younger days after all – 'It's much too late to be sailing. I knew we should have wintered in Malta.'

'Oh well, oo am I to make orders?' shrugged the sailor, 'Cap'n Wesley sayed we must press on urgent like, and 'e 'oped we'd make Gaza

Jeremiah Handown spotted dark clouds out to sea

before the winter storms, but hobviously ‘e was wrong, speaking with respect.’
‘Indeed’, I agreed, ‘But maybe we can put in for Crete and try for Chania before the winter storms get too ferocious.’
With that I made for the private cabin and went in. Frederik and his younger brothers Johann and Ludwig were only just awake, the hour being early. Frederik at fourteen was the oldest and consequently the wisest. Behind him came Johann at twelve and Ludwig at ten. Their names were due to the fact that my wife was Austrian. She had not come with us on this voyage, having been taken ill with Italian fever in Rome, and planning to join us in Jerusalem at a later date, where we were going to work as Anglican missionaries.
‘Out of bed, you lot!’ I cried, ‘We will soon be engulfed by a storm, and you can’t sleep all day!’
Johann jumped straight out of his bunk at once. Ludwig rolled out, hitting the floor with

a thump. Frederik yawned and scrambled down, stretching.
'It's jolly dark in here', he said, 'You can't tell when it's getting-up time or bedtime. Is it light outside, father?'
'It was by the last time I looked', I replied, 'But the clouds will be gathering by now and in a little while storm will be upon us.'
And it came quicker than anyone had expected – almost before everything was ready. The sky grew black and lowering, and the sea turned into a vast expanse of surging mountains, black and evil-looking, with white wicked eyes that stared and glared before plunging into the darkness of the wave-troughs. Captain Wesley gnashed his teeth. It looked frighteningly dark, almost like night. The first gust took him by surprise. It was so strong that it swept him violently to the deck. The ship quivered to her innermost timbers, and the foresail shot out into the darkness with a howl, as though some frightful beast had suddenly reached out and plucked it off. Then came the rain, with a

crack of thunderous hail-like force they pounded on the decks, driven horizontally by the immensely powerful wind. A huge wave surged over the decks, covering them in salty water.

'Batton down the hatches!' screamed Captain Wesley, struggling towards his cabin, 'Take in the rest of the sail!'

The next wicked gust tore most of the sails to shreds. It brought another slobbering monster aboard that washed a couple of sailors out overboard. Captain Wesley was driven to a wild temper of despondency. Who was a match against such winds as these? He cuffed the instruments in his cabin with wrath and blamed his lucky stars for deserting him. The sailors were struggling manfully, deserted by their captain, to haul in the sail and rescue or prevent their own entry to the raging sea. Two had already perished. The next gust finished their work by tearing down the remaining sail and ripping it to shreds. Down below, I and my children sat in the darkness of the hold in the weak and

flickering light of the candle. Around us every timber of the ship shook to its roots, and every beam quivered, every spar trembled like it had the ague. The scream of the wind sounded louder than avalanches about our heads, the waves thundered louder than the Niagara, a cacophonous howl, roar and groan of the elements, not to mention the thunder of the rain. A cry rose up from every lip, 'Good Lord, deliver us!'

I was concerned. In all my life I, having been a captain with much maritime experience, had not experienced such high winds.

'We can only pray God that it will be of short duration', I told my sons. But that was not to be. For days on end it continued - no one knew how long – night and day were alike. Driven to and fro, the sailors knew not where they were, or when it was. They did not eat but laboured to try and keep some kind of course. First one mast then the next, then all for masts were washed away. Say to the winds, 'flee away', or to the waves, 'remove!' They will not heed you, nor regard you. Nor

did they regard us. Reeling to and fro and staggering drunkenly, one and all, even Captain Wesley, cried out to God for deliverance. But it seemed, and could scarcely be otherwise, that they were lost.

'We are beyond hope', I told my sons, 'Unless a miracle happens. At any moment we could be wrecked in these island-infested waters. But let us not be found wanting in faith but commit ourselves to God.'

So saying we knelt in prayer. All was darkness, darkness and at every pound of the waves the ship shook and grovelled, now merely a mutilated hull floating on the waters and tossed to and fro by the winds and the waves. On what must have been the fifth or sixth day, morning or night, who knew which, the captain committed suicide, driven insane by his already callow wit. The ship was thrown into a quandary, all those in succession to the captain having been washed overboard. And then, to cap it all, at the height of the confusion, the ship was discovered to be breaking in half.

Chapter 2

In which they desert the sinking ship – They make landfall – The storm abates – Breakfast is procured.

A cry of alarm rang through the stricken ship. 'We are breaking up! Desert the ship! Each man for his life!'

Down in the hold, I stood up. 'Come boys', I told my sons, 'We must go on deck.'

And oh, what a confusion of waves, wind and rain hit us, as, clinging to one another so as not to be swept overboard, we scrambled above. The wind nearly tore us away.

The 40 survivors of a once 120-strong ship, all ordinary seamen, had all fitted into one of the three boats, but there was no room for more.

'Jeremiah!' cried one of the sailors, 'You and the lads will have to take the gig alone. You're

an old sailor and shouldn't have any trouble. Simply try to keep up with us!'

'We'll try', I shouted back, as we took our places in the other gig and were cast off. For a few horrible moments we were thrown to and fro among the waves like matchsticks, before, kneeling inside, we each took and oar and plied with all our might. In moments the other gig was lost to us in a sea of surging roaring and howling bloodthirsty waves that leapt and cowered with fierce glowering countenances and furious passions, which swept and dashed the *Dogtooth* to bits. All plied their oars with a will and in moments, the breaking ship was separated from us by a wall of dashing breakers, lost in a sea of enormous black bulldogs. The next few hours were a nightmare. Tossed and capered with by the evil passions of the deep, intent of a meal, the gig was thrown like a ping-pong ball among the angry breakers. Fighting with all the angry elements, her crew attempted to move her eastwards – but the waves wanted her westwards, away from all probable land,

so we were obliged to desist and abandon it to the passions of the sea. Away we swept – eastwards, due to the sea's hypocrisy – and then westwards again. The impact came as a shock enough. One moment we were in a nightmare of a boiling sea, the next, there was a tremendous crash, and the gig began to brake to a thousand matchstick-sized pieces, leaving its inhabitants in the sea. We scrambled and swam, at length casting ourselves on the rocks, above the foam and roar and crash of the breakers. We clung to the rocks, enshrouded in mist and swirling spray, hardly daring to believe that it was true and that we were holding onto that blessed substance, and to feel the strength, the enormous strength of the rocks beneath our grasp. And so we escaped, all safe to land. Scrambling further, we cleared ourselves well up above the waves, soaked through and cold, and there we knelt and thanked God for our deliverance from the fury of the storm. We did not know what time it was, but I reckon now it was night. Exhausted,

however, with fatigue and cold we huddled together beneath a crag and there fell immediately into an exhausted sleep, deep and profound. The storm must have abated in the night, for when I awoke, the sun was shining, and the sky was hazy and clear. The sea was calmed and my sons slept peacefully beside each other, in clothes that had by now almost dried out, according to the sun's rays' doing. It was a barren country – large dry mountains covered in shrubs and small trees rose around, and a narrow and rocky valley led up from where we landed. The coast was rocky, but much of it was surrounded by white beaches. Further along one of these, the remains of the ship, not, however, broken in half although hardly recognisable, lay. Not a trace of the gig was left, however. I remembered St. Paul having been shipwrecked in just such Mediterranean shores and had touched on savages. Smiling, I was thankful that today, in the 19th century, there were few such people left in Greece. It was very likely that we had hit upon some

inhabited land, and that at least one village would be here, and I was certain that it was some part of Crete, a very large island. I calculated mentally. We had been at sea seven days – as near as I could make out – and being driven south at a lick anyone could name. With any nautical knowledge I calculated. A strange feeling gnawed at me. It came out too far south and west for Crete, but I shook such a thought away. No known island lay between Crete and Africa. And besides, we would soon enough find out. Frederik began to stretch and to yawn and sat up.

'Hullo', he said, 'the sun is out!' and stood up.

'Yes indeed', I agreed. One by one, Johann and then Ludwig awoke also.

'I'm famished', declared Johann, 'We haven't been at fodder particularly since the storm started.'

'Come', I said, 'What shall we eat for breakfast? There isn't much to be had!'

'We could have a look on the remains of the ship', suggested Frederik hopefully.

‘Certainly’, I said, ‘Light a fire, you three, and be ready for when I come back. I shall go and see if there is anything to be had on the hulk.’ So saying, I set out. The ship was in an even more sorry state than what I imagined to be the case. I could enter through the hull, where the sands had torn an enormous gash in the side. There was quite a bit there; grain, salt meat and other provisions along with muskets, swords, gunpowder and shot. Otherwise there was very little save quantities of tin which the ship had been carrying to trade in the lands it passed along the way. I collected some salted meat and other readily edible foods and weapons and returned to the others, who by this time had succeeded in lighting a fire with some flint and steel which Frederik had always with him out of habit from striking campfires back at home.

‘The wood is extraordinarily dry’, Ludwig said, ‘After all that rain.’

They lit a fire on the beach

‘We are in a very dry part of the world’, I answered him, ‘Even at this time of year.’
And so saying we set to cooking our strange breakfast. After our hunger had been abated and we devoured less rapidly, I announced my plan of action.
‘This is probably some desolate promontory of Crete or a nearby island’, I said, ‘And so if we go far enough we should strike upon civilisation. So this morning, that is, now, we shall set off up the mountains to find a general direction in which to head.’
‘Perhaps we shall find a minotaur cave’, said Ludwig, ‘It was in just such a place as this.’
‘Well, I would prefer it if we found an ordinary Greek town for now’, I said, ‘Much as the discovery of such a cave would no doubt prove interesting.’
So we set out, each bestowed with a gun and necessary ammunition in case we met pirates which are numerous – innumerable even - on such a coast as this.

Chapter 3

In which the land is scouted out – It is found to be a desert island – No sign of Crete – The Fauna of the island – A place to live is discovered – A dwelling is constructed.

We started up the narrow glen at the head of which we had landed. A small brook ran down the middle of it, useful as we went along to quench our thirst. The land was rocky and barren, and the steep sides of the glen were parched and covered in shrubby trees and low, sparse vegetation. The glen itself had larger trees in it which grew by the stream to benefit from its water. Frederik, who walked beside me said that he could see a strange bird circling above.

'It looks like an eagle with a pink head', he said, 'A disgusting sight, without feathers on its head.'

'Vulture', said I.

‘Well, that makes it a real desert’, said Johann, ‘It’s a wonder that anyone can live here, let alone a whole tribe.’

‘Most Greeks have no more water problems than us in Britain or Austria’, I said, ‘Because it does rain – as we found out last night – just not so much, and if you are careful with your resources, you can make them last a very long time, and needless to say, the Greeks use their water wisely. Besides which, the pirates of the Mediterranean, the Arabs, often stop on Greek islands to take on water – as well as booty of course – as water is much more plentiful there than in their native North Africa, the Sahara Desert.’

It was yet early in the morning, but the sun was getting hotter as we toiled upwards and upwards. We could hear the squawk and screech of vultures circling about a carcass nearby, but otherwise all was utter silence, other than the babble of the stream. Johann who had scrambled up the side of the glen, came back down announcing that the vultures were tearing up the carcass of some

variety of goat. We came around a bend in the rocky glen and found that it ended abruptly here, fenced in on three sides by cliffs where the stream proceeded at a seeping trickle from the rock. Up above from the crags we could hear the screaming of eagles nesting in an eyrie invisible against the blinding sky.

'Come', I said, 'We shall have to climb.'

Scrabbling madly at the loose rocky slopes, we forged a path up through them to the mountain above. From there it was a gentler incline to the craggy summit. Johann and Ludwig were the first to reach it. They looked around bewildered. Ludwig called down, 'We can't see anything!'

Frederik and I hurried up. What a shock met my eyes! This was no part of Crete, it was a small island – and what was more, through all the island, completely visible to us from that lofty perch, there was no sign of habitation. And what was even worse still was that, neither to North, South, East or West were there any visible islands. In vain we searched the horizon for the merest shade

No sign of Crete

of mountains or land, but none could we see, and it was a very clear day, too. Nor any bank of clouds was visible in any direction. Desperately I redid my calculations again – again came the answer that we would be approximately in the area of 33.5° north and 20° east, as near as I could make it. The nearest land in any direction from that position was Crete at 35° north, 25° east, and the neighbouring island of Gavdon from which Crete was clearly visible was only 50 miles from the main island. It made no sense, and I told my children so.

'Maybe we have hit upon a new island', suggested Frederik.

'Highly likely', said I and then shook off my gloom, 'in any case we had better make ourselves at home here. We are bound to be here a long time, possibly until summer, when we can signal to the next ship that happens along.'

Secretly, however, I had my fears. This was far out of the ordinary trade route for one

thing, and in pirate-infested waters for another.

The first question was, where to set up our accommodation or shelter. Frederik had the first suggestion.

‘I can see that the valleys in the North of the island are much greener than those in other places’, said he, ‘So perhaps we aught to descend to them and have a look.’

‘First rate’, I said, ‘Come along.’

‘Race you down, Ludwig’, said Johann, and they darted off. Frederik and I made a detour to have a look at the goat carcass. Its long curving horns were clearly visible.

‘Wild goat alright’, I said.

‘And my, what a stink’, said Frederik. It was far from pleasant, so we made off after the others who had by now reached the glen. A larger stream ran through this one, and it was, though steep and rocky, full of larch trees that clung to the scanty soil, providing shade from the glare of the sun. Overall, it was much more inhabitable than the other