

INTO THE PRIMITIVE

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Two or Three Small Fish Lay Faintly Wriggling on the Surface.

SYNOPSIS.

The story opens with the shipwreck of the steamer on which Miss Genevieve Leslie, an American heiress, Lord Winthrop, an Englishman, and Tom Blake, a brusque American, were passengers. The three were tossed upon an uninhabited island and were the only ones not drowned. Blake recovered from a drunken stupor, shunned on the boat, because of his roughness, became a hero as preserver of the helpless pair. The Englishman was suing for the hand of Miss Leslie.

CHAPTER II.—Continued.

"Oh, but Mr. Blake, I am sure it must be a mistake; I am sure that if it is explained to papa—"

"Yes; we'll cable papa to-night. Meantime, we've something else to do. Suppose you two get a hustle on yourselves, and scrape up something to eat. I'm going out to see what's left of that blamed old tub."

"Surely you'll not venture to swim out so far!" protested Winthrop. "I saw the steamer sink as we cast off."

"Looks like a mast sticking up out there. Maybe some of the rigging is loose."

"But the sharks! These waters swarm with the vile creatures. You must not risk your life!"

"Cause why? If I do, the babes in the woods will be left without even the robins to cover them, poor things! But cheer up!—maybe the mud-hens will do it with lovely water-lilies."

"Please, Mr. Blake, do not be so cruel!" sobbed Miss Leslie, her tears starting afresh. "The sun makes my head ache dreadfully, and I have no hat or shade, and I'm becoming so thirsty!"

"And you think you've only to wait, and half a dozen stewards will come running with parasols and ice water. Neither you nor Winthrop seem to 've got your eyes open. Just suppose you get busy and do something. Winthrop, chase yourself over the mud, and get together a mess of fish that are not too dead. Must be dozens, after the blow. As for you, Miss Jenny, I guess you can pick up some reeds and rig a headgear out of this handkerchief— Wait a moment. Put on my coat, if you don't want to be broiled alive through the holes of that peek-a-boo."

"But I say, Blake—" began Winthrop.

"Don't say—do!" rejoined Blake; and he started down the muddy shore.

Though the tide was at flood, there was now no cyclone to drive the sea above the beach, and Blake walked a quarter of a mile before he reached the water's edge. There was little surf, and he paused only a few moments to peer out across the low swells before he commenced to strip.

Winthrop and Miss Leslie had been watching his movements; now the girl rose in a little flurry of haste, and set to gathering reeds. Winthrop would have spoken, but, seeing her embarrassment, smiled to himself, and began strolling about in search of fish.

It was no difficult search. The marshy ground was strewn with dead sea-creatures, many of which were already shriveling and drying in the sun. Some of the fish had a familiar look, and Winthrop turned them over with the tip of his shoe. He even went so far as to stoop to pick up a large mullet; but shrank back, repulsed by its stiffness and the unnatural shape into which the sun was warping it.

He found himself near the beach, and stood for half an hour or more watching the black dot far out in the water—all that was to be seen of Blake. The American, after wading off-shore another quarter of a mile, had reached swimming depth, and was heading out among the reefs with steady, vigorous strokes. Half a mile or so beyond him Winthrop could now make out the goal for which he was aiming—the one remaining topmast of the steamer.

"By Jove, these waters are full of sharks!" murmured Winthrop, staring at the steadily receding dot until it disappeared behind the wall of surf which spumed up over one of the outer reefs.

A call from Miss Leslie interrupted his watch, and he hastened to rejoin her. After several failures, she had contrived to knot Blake's handkerchief to three or four reeds in the form of a little sunshade. Her shoulders were protected by Blake's coat. It made a heavy wrap, but it shut out the blistering sun rays, which, as Blake had foreseen, had quickly begun to burn the girl's delicate skin through her open-work bodice.

Thus protected, she was fairly safe from the sun. But the sun was by no means the worst feature of the situation. While Winthrop was yet several yards distant, the girl began to complain to him. "I'm so thirsty, Mr. Winthrop! Where is there any water? Please get me a drink at once, Mr. Winthrop!"

"But, my dear Miss Leslie, there is no water. These pools are all seawater. I must say, I'm deuced dry myself. I can't see why that cad should go off and leave us like this. Indeed, it is a shame—Oh, I'm so thirsty! Do you think it would help if we ate something?"

"Make it all the worse. Besides, how could we cook anything? All these reeds are green."



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"But Mr. Blake said to gather some fish. Had you not best—"

"He can pick up all he wants. I shall not touch the beastly things."

"Then I suppose there is nothing to do but wait for him."

"Yes, if the sharks do not get him."

Miss Leslie uttered a little moan, and Winthrop, seeing that she was on the verge of tears, hastened to reassure her. "Don't worry about him, Miss Genevieve! He'll soon return, with nothing worse than a blistered back. Fellows of that sort are born to hang, you know."

"But if he should be—if anything should happen to him!"

Winthrop shrugged his shoulders, and drew out his silver cigarette case. It was more than half-full, and he was highly gratified to find that neither the cigarettes nor the vesta matches in the cover had been reached by the wet.

"By Jove, here's luck!" he exclaimed, and he bowed to Miss Leslie. "Pardon me, but if you have no objections—"

The girl nodded as a matter of form, and Winthrop hastened to light the cigarette already in his fingers. The smoke by no means tended to lessen the dryness of his mouth; yet it put him in a reflective mood, and in thinking over what he had read of shipwrecked parties, he remembered that a pebble held in the mouth is supposed to ease one's thirst.

To be sure, there was not a sign of a pebble within miles of where they sat; but after some reflection, it occurred to him that one of his steel keys might do as well. At first Miss Leslie was reluctant to try the experiment, and only the increasing dryness of her mouth forced her to seek the promised relief. Though it failed to quench her thirst, she was agreeably surprised to find that the little flat bar of metal eased her craving to a marked degree.

Winthrop now thought to rig a shade as Miss Leslie had done, out of reeds and his handkerchief, for the sun was scorching his unprotected head. Thus sheltered, the two crouched as comfortably as they could upon the half-dried crest of the hummock and waited impatiently for the return of Blake.

CHAPTER III. The Worth of Fire.

THOUGH the sea within the reefs was fast smoothing to a glassy plain in the dead calm, they did not see Blake on his return until he struck shallow water and stood up to wade ashore. The tide had begun to ebb before he started landward, and though he was a powerful swimmer, the long pull against the current had so tired him that when he took to wading he moved at a tortoise-like gait.

"The bloomin' loafer!" commented Winthrop. He glanced quickly about, and at sight of Miss Leslie's arching brows, hastened to add: "Beg pardon! He—ah—reminds me so much of a navy, you know."

Miss Leslie made no reply.

At last Blake was out of the water and toiling up the muddy beach to the spot where he had left his clothes. While dressing he seemed to recover from his exertions in the water, for the moment he had finished he sprang to his feet and came forward at a brisk pace.

As he approached, Winthrop waved his fifth cigarette at him with languid enthusiasm, and called out as heartily as his dry lips would permit: "I say, Blake, deuced glad the sharks didn't get you!"

"Sharks?—bah! All you have to do is to splash a little, and they haul off."

"How about the steamer, Mr. Blake?" asked Miss Leslie, turning to face him.

"All under but the maintopmast— curse it!—wire rigging at that! Couldn't even get a bolt."

"A bolt?"

"Not a bolt; and here we are as good as naked on this infernal—Hey, you! what you doing with that match? Light your cigarette—light it!—Damnation!"

Heedless of Blake's warning cry, Winthrop had struck his last vesta, and now, angry and bewildered, he stood staring while the little taper burned itself out. With an oath, Blake sprang to catch it as it dropped from between Winthrop's fingers. But he was too far away. It fell among the damp rushes, spluttered, and flared out.

For a moment Blake knelt, staring at the rushes as though stupefied; then he sprang up before Winthrop, his bronzed face purple with anger.

"Where's your matchbox? Got any more?" he demanded.

"Last one, I fancy—yes; last one, and there are still two cigarettes. But look here, Blake, I can't tolerate your talking so deucedly—"

"You idiot! you—you— Hell! and every one for cigarettes!"

From a growl Blake's voice burst into a roar of fury, and sprang upon Winthrop like a wild beast. His hands closed upon the Englishman's throat, and he began to shake him about, paying no heed to the blows his victim showered upon his face and body, blows which soon began to lessen in force.

Terror-stricken, Miss Leslie put her hands over her eyes, and began to scream—the piercing shriek that will unnerve the strongest man. Blake paused as though transfixed, and as the half-suffocated Englishman struggled in his grasp, he flung him on the ground and turned to the screaming girl.

"Stop that squawking!" he said. The girl cowed down. "So; that's better. Next time keep your mouth shut."

"You—you brute!"

"Good! You've got a little spunk, eh?"

"You coward—to attack a man not half your strength!"

"Steady, steady, young lady! I'm warm enough yet; I've still half a mind to wring his fool neck."

"But why should you be so angry? What has he done, that you—"

"Why—why? Lord! what hasn't he done? This coast fairly swarms with beasts. We've not the smell of a gun;

and now this idiot—this dough-head—has gone and thrown away our only chance—fire—and on his measly cigarettes!" Blake choked with returning rage.

Winthrop, still panting for breath, began to creep away, at the same time unclipping a small penknife. He was white with fear; but his gray eyes—which on shipboard Blake had never seen other than offensively supercilious—now glinted in a manner that served to alter the American's mood.

"That'll do," he said. "Come here and show me that knife."

"I'll show it you where it will do the most good," muttered Winthrop, rising hastily to repel the expected attack.

"So you've got a little sand, too," said Blake, almost good-naturedly. "Say, that's not so bad. We'll call it quits on the matches. Though how you could go and throw them away—"

"Deuce take it, man! How should I know? I've never before been in a wreck."

"Neither have I—this kind. But I tell you, we've got to keep our think tanks going. It's a guess if we see tomorrow, and that's no joke. Now do you wonder I got hot?"

"Indeed, no! I've been an ass, and here's my hand to it—if you really mean it's quits."

"It's quits all right, long as you don't run out of sand," responded Blake, and he gripped the other's soft hand until the Englishman winced. "So; that's settled. I've got a hot temper, but I don't hold grudges. Now, where're your fish?"

"I—well, they were all spoiled."

"Spoiled?"

"The sun had shriveled them."

"And you call that spoiled! We're like to eat them rotten before we're through with this picnic. How about the pools?"

"Pools? Do you know, Blake, I never thought of the pools. I stopped to watch you, and then we were so anxious about you—"

Blake grunted and turned on his heel to wade into the half-drained pool in whose midst he had been deposited by the hurricane.

Two or three small fish lay faintly wriggling on the surface. As Blake splashed through the water to seize them his foot struck against a living body which floundered violently and flashed a brilliant forked tail above the muddy water. Blake sprang over the fish, which was entangled in the reeds, and with a kick flung it clear out upon the ground.

"A coryphene!" cried Winthrop, and he ran forward to stare at the gorgeously colored prize.

"Coryphene?" repeated Blake, following his example. "Good to eat?"

"Fine as salmon. This is only a small one, but—"

"Fifteen pounds if an ounce!" cried Blake, and he thrust his hand in his pocket. There was a moment's silence, and Winthrop, glancing up, saw the other staring in blank dismay.

"What's up?" he asked.

"Lost my knife."

"When?—in the pool? If we felt about—"

"No; aboard ship, or in the surf—"

"Here is my knife."

"Yes; almost big enough to whittle a match! Mine would have done us some good."

"It is the best steel."

"All right; let's see you cut up the fish."

"But you know, Blake, I shouldn't know how to go about it. I never did such a thing."

"And you, Miss Jenny? Girls are supposed to know about cooking."

"I never cooked anything in all my life, Mr. Blake, and it's alive—and I am very thirsty, Mr. Blake!"

"Lord!" commented Blake. "Give me that knife."

Though the blade was so small, the American's hand was strong. After some little haggling, the coryphene was killed and dressed. Blake washed both it and his hands in the pool, and began to cut slices of flesh from the fish's tail.

"We have no fire," Winthrop reminded him, flushing at the word.

"That's true," assented Blake, in a cheerful tone, and he offered Winthrop two of the pieces of raw flesh. "Here's your breakfast. The trimmed piece is for Miss Leslie."

"But it's raw! Really, I could not think of eating raw fish. Could you, Miss Leslie?"

Miss Leslie shuddered. "Oh, no!—and I'm so thirsty I could not eat anything."

"You bet you can!" replied Blake. "Both of you take that fish and go to chewing. It's the stuff to ease your thirst while we look for water. Good Lord!—in a week you'll be glad to eat raw snake. Fimnicky over clean fish, when you swallow canvas-back all but raw, and beef running blood, and raw oysters with their stomachs full of disintegrated animal matter, to put it politely. You couldn't tell rattlesnake broth from chicken, and dog makes first-rate veal—when you've got to eat it. I've had it straight from them that knows that over in France they eat snails and fish-worms. It's all a matter of custom or the style."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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