

## **Out Of Exile**

*By Wilbur Daniel Steele*

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Among all the memories of my boyhood in Urkey Island the story of Mary Matheson and the Blake boys comes back to me now, more than any other, with the sense of a thing seen in a glass darkly. And the darkness of the glass was my own adolescence.

I know that now, and I'm sorry. I'm ashamed to find myself suspecting that half of Mary Matheson's mature beauty in my eyes may have been romance, and half the romance mystery, and half of that the unsettling discovery that the other sex does not fade at seventeen and wither quite away at twenty, as had been taken somehow for granted. I'm glad there is no possibility of meeting her again as she was at thirty, and so making sure: I shall wish to remember her as the boy of sixteen saw her that night waiting in the dunes above the wreck of the "India ship," with Rolldown Nickerson bleating as he fled from the small, queer casket of polished wood he had flung on the sand, and the bridegroom peering out of the church window, over the moors in Urkey Village.

The thing began when I was too young to make much of it yet, a wonder of less than seven days among all the other bright, fragmentary wonders of a boy's life at six. Mainly I remember that Mary Matheson was a fool; every one in Urkey Village was saying that.

I can't tell how long the Blake boys had been courting her. I came too late to see anything but the climax of that unbrotherly tournament, and only by grace of the hundredth chance of luck did I witness even one act of that.

I was coming home one autumn evening just at dusk, loitering up the cow street from the eastward where the big boys had been playing "Run, Sheep, Run," and I watching from the vantage of Aunt Dee Nickerson's hen-house and getting whacked when I told. And I had come almost to the turning into Drugstore Lane when the sound of a voice fetched me up, all eyes and ears, against the pickets of the Matheson place.

It was the voice of my cousin Duncan, the only father I ever knew. He was constable of Urkey Village, and there was something in the voice as I heard it in the yard that told you why.

"Drop it, Joshua! Drop it, or by heavens----!"

Of Duncan I could see only the back, large and near. But the faces of the others were plain to my peep-hole between the pickets, or as plain as might be in the falling dusk. The sky overhead was still bright, but the blue shadow of the bluff lay all across that part of the town, and it deepened to a still bluer and cooler mystery under the apple-tree canopy sheltering the dooryard. I never see that light to this day, a high gloaming sifted through leaves on turf, without the faintest memory of a shiver. For that was the first I had even known of anger, the still and deadly anger of grown men.

My cousin had spoken to Joshua Blake, and I saw that Joshua held a pistol in his hand, the old, single-ball dueling weapon that had belonged to his father. His face was white, and the pallor seemed to refine still further the blade-like features of the Blake, the aquiline nose, the sloping, patrician forehead, the narrow lip, blue to the pressure of the teeth.

That was Joshua. Andrew, his brother, stood facing him three or four paces away. He was the younger of the two, the less favored, the more sensitive.

He had what no other Blake had had, a suspicion of freckle on his high, flat cheek. And he had what no one else in Urkey had then, a brace of gold teeth, the second and third to the left in the upper jaw, where Lem White's boom had caught him, jibing off the Head. They showed now as the slowly working lip revealed them, glimmering with a moist, dull sheen. He, too, was white.

His hands were empty, hanging down palms forward. But in his eyes there was no look of the defenseless: only a light of passionate contempt.

And between the two, and beyond them, as I looked, stood Mary, framed by the white pillars of the doorway, her hands at her throat and her long eyes dilated with a girl's fright more precious than exultation. So the three remained in tableau while, as if on another planet, the dusk deepened from moment to moment: Gramma Pilot, two yards away, brought supper to her squealing sow; and further off, out on the waning mirror of the harbor, a conch lowed faintly for some schooner's bait.

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"Drop it, Joshua!" Duncan's voice came loud and clear.

And this time, following the hush, it seemed to exercise the devil of quietude. I heard Mary's breath between her lips, and saw Andrew wheel sharply to pick a scale from the tree-trunk with a thumb-nail. Joshua's eyes went down to the preposterous metal in his hand; he shivered slightly like a dreamer awakening and thrust it in his pocket. And then, seeing Duncan turning toward the fence and me, I took the better part of valor and ran, and saw no more.

There were serious men in town that night when it was known what a pass the thing had come to; men that walked and women that talked. It was all Mary's fault. Long ago she ought to have taken one of them

and "sent the other packing." That's what Miah White said, sitting behind the stove in our kitchen over the shop; that's what Duncan thought as he paced back and forth, shaking his head. That's what they were all saying or thinking as they sat or wandered about.

Such are the difficulties of serious men. And even while it all went on, Mary Matheson had gone about her choosing in the way that seemed fit to youth. In the warm-lit publicity of Miss Alma Beedie's birthday-party, shaking off so soon the memory of that brief glint of pistol-play under the apple-trees, she took a fantastic vow to marry the one that brought her the wedding-ring--promised with her left hand on Miss Beedie's album and her right lifted toward the allegorical print of the Good Shepherd that the one who, first across the Sound to the jeweler's at Gillyport and back again, fetched her the golden-ring--that he should be her husband "for better or for worse, till death us do part, and so forth and so on, Amen!"

And those who were there remembered afterwards that while Joshua stood his ground and laughed and clapped with the best of them, his brother Andrew left the house. They said his face was a sick white, and that he looked back at Mary for an instant from the doorway with a curious, hurt expression in his eyes, as if to say, "Is it only a game to you then? And if it's only a game, is it worth the candle?" They remembered it afterward, I say; long afterward.

They thought he had gone out for just a moment; that presently he would return to hold up his end of the gay challenge over the cakes and cordial. But to that party Andrew Blake never returned. Their first hint of what was afoot they had when Rolldown Nickerson, the beachcomber, came running in, shining with the wet of the autumn gale that began that night. He wanted Joshua to look out for his brother. Being innocent of what had happened at the party, he thought Andrew had gone out of his head.

"Here I come onto him in the lee of White's wharf putting a compass into the old man's sail-dory, and I says to him, 'What you up to, Andrew?' And he says with a kind of laugh, 'Oh, taking a little sail for other parts,' says he--like that. Now, just imagine, Josh, with this here weather coming on--all hell bu'sting loose to the north'rd!"

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They say that there came a look into Joshua's eyes that none of them had ever seen before. He stood there for a moment, motionless and silent, and Rolldown, deceived by his attitude, was at him again.

"You don't realize, man, or else you'd stop him!"

"Oh, I'll stop him!" It was hardly above a breath.

"I'll stop him!" And throwing his greatcoat over his shoulders, Joshua went out.

You may believe that the house would not hold the party after that. Whispering, giggling, shivering, the young people trooped down Heman Street to the shore. And there, under the phantom light of a moon hidden by the drift of storm-clouds, they found Andrew gone and all they saw of Joshua was a shadow--a shadow in black frock-clothes--wading away from them over the half-covered flats, deeper and deeper, to where the Adams sloop rode at her moorings, a shade tailing in the wind. They called, but he did not answer, and before they could do anything he had the sail up, and he, too, was gone, into the black heart of the night.

It is lonesome in the dark for a boy of six when the floor heaves and the bed shivers and over his head the shingles make a sound in the wind like the souls of all the lost men in the world. The hours from two till dawn that night I spent under the table in the kitchen, where Miah White and his brother Lem had come to talk with Duncan. And

among the three of them, all they could say was "My heavens! My heavens!" I say till dawn; but our kitchen might have given on a city air-shaft for all the dawn we got.

It is hard to give any one who has lived always in the shelter of the land an idea of the day that followed, hour by waiting hour--how folks walked the beaches and did not look at each other in passing, and how others, climbing the bluff to have a better sight of the waters beyond the Head, found themselves blinded by the smother at fifty yards and yet still continued to stare.

Of them all, that day, Mary Matheson was the only one who kept still. And she was as still as an image. Standing half-hidden in the untidy nook behind the grocery, she remained staring out through the harbor mists from dawn till another heavy night came down, and no one can say whether she would have gone home then had not the appalled widow, her mother, slipped down between the houses to take her.

She was at home, at any rate, when Joshua Blake came back.

After all that waiting and watching, no one saw him land on the battered, black beach, for it was in the dead hour of the morning; of the three persons who are said to have met him on his way to Mary's, two were so tardy with their claims that a doubt has been cast on them. I do believe, tho, that Mother Polly Freeman, the west-end midwife, saw him and spoke with him in the light thrown from the drug-store window (where, had I only known enough to be awake, I might have looked down on them from my bed-room and got some fame of my own).

She says she thought at first he was a ghost come up from the bottom of the sea, with his clothes plastered thin to his body, weed in his hair, and his face drawn and creased like fish-flesh taken too soon out of the pickle. Afterward, when he spoke, she thought he was crazy.

"I've got it!" he said, taking hold of her arm. Opening a blue hand he held it out in the light for her to see the ring that had bitten his palm with the grip. "See, I've got it, Mother Poll!" She says it was hardly more than a whisper, like a secret, and that there was a look in his eyes as if he had seen the Devil face to face.

She meant to run when he let her go, but when she saw him striding off toward Mary Matheson's her better wisdom prevailed; following along the lane and taking shelter behind Gramma Pilot's fence, she waited, watched, and listened, to the enduring gain of Urkey's sisterhood.

She used to tell it well, Mother Poll. Remembering her tale now, I think I can see the earth misting under the trees in the calm dawn, and hear Joshua's fist pounding, pounding, on the panels of the door.

It must have been queer for Mother Poll. For while she heard that hollow pounding under the portico, like the pounding of a heart in some deep bosom of horror--all the while she could see Mary herself in an upper window--just her face resting on one cold, still forearm on the sill. And her eyes, Mother Poll says, were enough to make one pity her.

It was strange that she was so lazy, not to move or to speak in answer while the summons of the triumphant lover went on booming through the lower house. He must have wondered. Perhaps it was then that the first shadow of the ghost of doubt crept over him, or perhaps it was when, stepping out on the turf, he raised his eyes and discovered Mary's face in the open window.

He said nothing. But with a wide, uncontrolled gesture he held up the ring for her to see. After a moment she opened her lips.

"Where's Andrew?"

That seemed to be the last straw: a feverish anger laid hold of him. "Here's the ring! You see it! Damnation, Mary! You gave your word and I took it, and God knows what I've been through. Now come! Get your things on and bring your mother if you like--but to Minister Malden's you go with me now! You hear Mary? I'll not wait!"

"Where's Andrew?"

"Andrew? Andrew? Why the devil do you keep on asking for Andrew? What's Andrew to you--now?"

"Where is he?"

"Mary, you're a fool!"

Her voice grew if anything more monotonous; his, higher and wilder.

"You're a fool," he cried again, "if you don't know where Andrew is."

"He's gone."

"Gone, yes! And how you can say it like that, so calm--God!"

"I knew he was going," she said. "He told Rolldown he was going to other parts. But I knew it before that--when he turned at the door and looked at me, Joshua. He said it as plain: 'If that's love,' he said, 'then I'm going off somewhere and forget it, and never come back to Urkey any more.'"

The deadness went out of her voice, and it lifted to another note.

"Joshua, he's got to come back, for I can't bear it. I gave you my word, and I'll marry you--when Andrew comes back to stand at the wedding. He's got to--got to!"



Mother Poll said that Joshua stared at her--simply stood there and stared up at her in the queer, cold dawn, his mouth hanging open as if with a kind of horror. Sweat shone on his face. Turning away without a word by and by he laid an uncertain course for the gate, and leaving it open behind him went off through the vapors of the cow street to the east.

As they carried him along step by step, I think, the feet of the cheated gambler grew heavier and heavier, his shoulders collapsed, the head, with the memory in it he could never lose, hung down, and hell received his soul.

It is impossible in so short a space to tell what the next ten years did to those two. It would have been easier for Mary Matheson in a city, for in a city there is always the blankness of the crowd. In a village there is no such blessed thing as a stranger, the membership committee of the only club is the doctor and the midwife, and all the houses are made of glass.

In a city public opinion is mighty, but devious. In a village, especially in an island village, it is as direct and violent as any "act of God" written down in a ship's insurance papers. A word carries far over the fences, and where it drops, like a swelling seed, a dozen words spring up.

"It's a shame, Milly, a living shame, as sure's you're alive."

"You never said truer, Belle. As if 'twa'n't enough she should send Andy to his death o' drownding----"

"Well, I hope she's satisfied, what she's done for Joshua. I saw him to the post-office last evening, and the hang-dog look of him----"

"Yes, I saw him, too. A man can't stand being made a fool of...."

So, in the blue of a wash-day morning the words went winging back and forth between the blossoming lines. Or, in a Winter dusk up to the westward, where old Mrs. Paine scuttled about under the mackerel-twine of her chicken-pen:

"Land alive, it's all very well to talk Temp'rance, and I'm not denying it'd be a mercy for some folks--I ain't mentioning no names--not even Miah White's. But, land sakes how you going to talk Temp'rance to a man bereft and be-fooled like Joshua Blake? Where's your rime-nor-reason? Where's your argument?"

Or there came Miah White himself up our outside stair on the darkest evening of our Spring weather, and one glance at his crimson face was enough to tell what all the Temperance they had preached to him had come to. Miah turned to the bottle as another man might to prayer.

"By the Lord!" he protested thickly. "Something's got to be done!"

"Done? About what?" I remember my cousin peering curiously at him through the smoke and spatter of the sausage he was frying.

"About Josh, of course, and her. I tell you, Dunc, 'tain't right, and I'll not bear it. I'll not see Josh, same as I seen him this night, standing there in the dark of the outside beach and staring at the water like a sleep-walker, staring and staring as if he'd stare right through it and down to the bottom of the sea where his brother lay, and saying to himself, Who's to pay the bill? Who's to pay the bill? No, siree! You and I are young fellows, Dunc, but we ain't so young we can't remember them boys' father, and I guess he done a thing or two for us, eh?"

"Yes," Duncan agreed calmly. "But what's to be done?"

"God knows! But look here, Dunc, you're constable, ain't you?"

Duncan smiled pityingly, as if to say, "Don't be an idiot, Miah."

"And if you're constable, and a man owns a bill he won't pay, why then you've something to say in it, ain't I right? Well, here's a bill to pay, fair and square. All this wool she'd pull over our eyes about Andrew and the India ship--as if that made a mite of difference one way or the other! No, siree, Dunc, she give her word to take the man that fetched the ring--that man's Joshua--the bargain's filled on his side--and there you are. Now, you're constable. I take it right, Duncan, you should give that girl a piece of your mind; give her to understand that, India ship yes, India ship no, she's got a bill to pay and a man's soul to save from damnation everlasting."

All Duncan could do with him that night was to smile and shake his head, as much as to say, "You're a wild one, Miah, sure enough."

About Mary's sullen, stubborn belief in the "India ship," pretended or real as it may have been with her, but already growing legendary, I know only in the largest and mistiest way.

It is true there had been a ship that looked like an east-going clipper in our waters on that fateful night. Every one had seen it before dark came on, standing down from the north and laying a course to weather the Head if possible before the weather broke. It was Mary's claim that Andrew had pointed it out to her and spoken of it--in a strange way, a kind of a wistful way, she said. And later that night, what better for a man on the way to exile than a heaven-sent, outbound India ship, hove to under the lee of the Head.

Yes, yes, it was so--it must be so. And when they laughed at her in Urkey Village and winked sagely at her assumption of faith, then she asked them to tell her one thing: had any one's eyes seen Andrew's boat go down--actually.

"If Joshua will answer me, and say that he knows Andrew went down! Or if any of you will tell me that Andrew's body ever came ashore on any of the islands or the main!"

It was quite absurd, of course, but none of them could answer that, none but Miah White, and he only when he had had a drop out of the bottle and perceived that it weighed not an ounce in either scale.

Picked out so and written down, you would think this drama overshadowed all my little world. Naturally it didn't. You must remember I was a boy, with a thousand other things to do and a million other things to think of, meals to eat, lessons to hate, stones to throw, apples to steal, fights to fight. I take my word that by the time I was nine or ten the whole tragic episode had gone out of my head. Meeting Mary Matheson on the street, where she came but rarely, she was precisely as mysterious and precisely as uninteresting as any other grown-up. And if I saw Joshua Blake (who, pulling himself by the bootstraps out of drink and despair, had gone into Mr. Dow's law-office and grown as hard as nails)--if I saw him, I say, my only romantic thought of him was the fact that I had broken his wood-shed window, and that, with an air of sinister sagacity, he had told several boys he knew who the culprit was. (A statement, by the way, which I believed horribly for upward of eighteen months.)

I believe that we knew, in a dim sort of way, that the two were "engaged," just as we knew, vaguely, that they never got married. And that was the end of speculation. Having always been so, the phenomenon needed no more to be dwelt on than the fact that when the wind was in the east John Dyer thought he was Oliver Cromwell, or that Minister Malden did not live with his family.

John Dyer had been taken beyond the power of any planetary wind; Minister Malden (as I have told in another place) had gone back to live with his family: and I had been away to Highmarket Academy for

two years, before I had sudden and moving reason to take stock of that long-buried drama.

It was three days after I had come home for the long vacation, and, being pretty well tired out with sniffing about the island like a cat returned to the old house, I sprawled at rest on the "Wreck of the Lillian" stone in the graveyard on Rigg's Dome.

It was then, as the dusk crept up from the shadow under the bluff, that I became aware of another presence among the gravestones and turned my head to peer through the barberries that hedged the stone, thinking it might be one of the girls. It was only Mary Matheson. Vaguely disappointed, I should have returned my gaze to the sea and forgotten her had it not been for two things.

One of them was her attitude. That made me keep on looking at her, and so looking at her, and having come unwittingly to a most obscurely unsettled age, I made a discovery. This was that Mary Matheson, at the remote age of thirty, had a deeper and fuller beauty than had any of the girls for whose glances I brushed my hair wet and went to midweek prayer-meeting.

I find it hard to convey the profound, revolutionary violence of this discovery. It is enough to say that, along with a sensation of pinkness, there came a feeling of obscure and unreasoning bitterness against the world.

My eyes had her there, a figure faintly rose-colored against the deepening background of the sea. She stood erect and curiously still beside a grave, her hands clenched, her eyes narrowed. In Urkey they always put up a stone for a man lost at sea; very often they went further for the comfort of their souls and mounded the outward likeness of an inward grave. Well, that was Andrew's stone and Andrew's grave. Some one in the Memorial Day procession last week

had laid a wreath of lilacs under the stone. And now, wandering alone, Mary Matheson had come upon it.

I saw her bend and with a fierce gesture catch up the symbol of death and fling it behind her on the grass. Afterward, as she stood there with her breast heaving and her lips moving as if with pain, I knew I should not be where I was, watching; I knew that no casual ears of mine should hear the cry that came out of her heart:

"No, No, No! They're still trying to kill him--still trying to kill him--all of them! But they sha'n't! They sha'n't!"

I tell you it shook me and it shamed me. I thought I ought to cough or scuff my feet or something, but it seemed too late for that. Moreover the play had taken another turn that made me forget the moralities, quite, and another actor had come quietly upon the scene.

I can't say whether Joshua, seeing Mary on her way to the Dome, had followed her, or whether he had been strolling that way on his own account. He was there, at all events, watching her from beyond the grave, his head slightly inclined, his hands clasped behind him, and his feet apart on the turf. The color of dusk lent a greenish cast to his bloodless face, and the night wind, coming up free over the naked curve of the Dome and flapping the long black tails of his coat, seemed but to accentuate the dead weight of his attitude.

When a minute had gone by I heard his dry voice.

"So, Mary, you're at it again?"

"But they sha-n-t!" She seemed to take flame. "It's not right to Andrew nor me. They do it just to mock me, and I know it, and oh! I don't care, but they sha'n't, they sha'n't!"

"Mary," said Joshua, all the smoldering anger of the years coming in his voice, "Mary, I think it's time you stopped being a fool. We've all had enough of it, Mary. Andrew is dead."

She turned on him with a swift, ironical challenge.

"You say it now? You know now? Perhaps you've just made sure; perhaps you've seen his body washed up on one of the beaches--just to-day? Or then why so tardy, Joshua? If you knew, why couldn't you say it in so many words ten years ago--five years ago? Why?"

"Because----"

"Yes, because? Because?" There was something incredibly ruthless, tiger-like, about this shadow-dwelling woman. "Say it now, Joshua; that you know of a certainty Andrew went down. I dare you again!"

Joshua said it.

"I know of a certainty Andrew went down that night."

"How do you know? Did you see him go down? Tell me that!"

For a moment, for more than a long moment, her question hung unanswered in the air. And as, straining forward, poised, vibrant, she watched him, she saw the hard, dry mask he had made for himself through those years grow flabby and white as dough; she saw the eyes widening and the lips going loose with the memory he had never uttered.

"Yes," he cried in a loud voice. "You bring me to it, do you?" The man was actually shaking. "Yes, then, I saw Andrew go down that night. I heard him call in the dark. I saw his face on the water. I saw his hand reaching up as the wave brought him by--reaching up to me. I could almost touch it--but not quite. If you knew what the sea was

that night, and the wind; how lonely, how dark! God! And here I stand and say it out loud! I couldn't reach his hand--not quite.... I've told you now, Mary, what I swore I'd never tell.... Damn you!"

With that curse he turned unsteadily on his heel and left her. The shadows among the gravestones down hill laid hands on his broken, shambling figure, and he became a shadow. Once the shadow stumbled. And as if that distant, awkward act had aroused Mary from a kind of lethargy, she broke forward a step, reaching out her arms.

"Joshua!" she called to him, "Joshua, Joshua, come back!"

In the last faint light from the sky where stars began to come, her face was wet with tears of pity and repentance; pity for the man who had walled himself in with that memory; repentance for the sin of her blindness.

"Joshua!" she called again, but he did not seem to hear.

It was too much for me. Feeling more shame than I can tell, and with it a new gnawing bitterness of jealousy, I sneaked out of hiding by the "Lillian" stone and down the Dome toward the moors.

"Good Grandmother!" I know I grew redder and redder as I walked. "I hope I don't have to see her again--the old thing!"

But I did, and that before many minutes had elapsed. For fetching back into the village by the ice-house and the back-side track, I was almost in collision with a hurrying shade in the dark under Dow's willows. It was Mary. I shall not forget the queer moment of suspense as she peered into my face, nor the touch of her fingers on my arm, nor the sigh.

"Oh--you're--you're the Means boy."



An embarrassment, pathetic only now in memory, came upon her.

"I--I wonder----" Her confusion grew more painful and her eyes went everywhere in the dark. "You don't happen to have seen any one--any--you haven't seen Mr. Blake, have you?"

"No!" I shook off the hand that still lay, as if forgotten, on my outraged arm. "What you want of him? He's no good!"

With that shot for parting I turned and stalked away. Behind me after a moment, I heard her cry of protest, dismal beyond words.

"Why do you say that, boy? What do you mean by that?"

Having meant nothing at all, except that I would have slain him gladly, I kept my bitter peace and held my way to the westward, leaving her to find her way and her soul in the blind, black shadows under the willow-trees.

No one who lived in Urkey Village then will forget the day it was known that Mary Matheson was going to marry Joshua Blake, at last. An isolated village is like an isolated person, placid-looking to dullness, but in reality almost idiotically emotional. More than anything else, when the news had run, it was like the camp-meeting conversion of a simple soul. First, for the "conviction of sin," there was the calling-up of all the dark, forgotten history, the whispered refurbishing of departed gossip, the ghosts of old angers. Then like the flood of Mercy, the assurance that all was well, having ended well. Everything was forgiven and forgotten, every one was to live happily ever after, and there must be a wedding.

Surely a wedding! The idea that Minister Malden should come quietly to the house and so have it done without pomp or pageantry--it is laughable to think how that notion fared at the hands of an aroused village. Flowers there were to be, processions, veils, cakes, rice,

boots, all the properties dear to the heart of the Roman mob. In the meantime there was to be a vast business of runnings and stitchings, of old women beating eggs and sifting flour, of schoolgirls writing "MARY BLAKE" on forbidden walls with stolen chalk. Dear me!

You might think Mary and Joshua would have rebelled. Curiously, they seemed beyond rebelling. Joshua, especially, was a changed man. His old, hard mask was gone; the looseness of his lips had come to stay, and the wideness of his eyes. One could only think that happiness long-deferred had come under him like a tide of fate on which he could do no more than drift and smile. He smiled at every one, a nervous, deprecatory smile; to every proposal he agreed: "All right! Splendid! Let's have it done--" And one got the sense somehow of the thought running on: "--right away! Make haste, if you please. Haste! For God's sake, haste!"

If he were hailed on the street, especially from behind, his eyes came to the speaker with a jerk, and sometimes his hand went to his heart. Seeing him so one bright day, and hearing two old men talking behind me, I learned for the first time that the Blake boys' father had died of heart-disease. It is odd that it should have come on Joshua now, quite suddenly, along with his broken mask and his broken secret, his frightened smile, and his, "All right! Splendid!"--("Make haste!")

But so it was. And so we came to the day appointed. We had a dawn as red as blood that morning, and tho it was clear, there was a feeling of oppression in the air--and another oppression of people's spirits. For the bride's party had the "hack," and Mrs. Dow had spoken for the only other polite conveyance, the Galloway barge, and what was to come of all the fine, hasty gowns in case it came on for a gale or rain?

Is it curious that here and there in that hurrying, waiting afternoon a thought would turn back to another day when a storm was making and a tall ship standing down to weather the Head? For if there was a menace of weather to-day, so, too, was there a ship. We seemed to

grow conscious of it by degrees, it drew on so slowly out of the broad, blue, windless south. For hours, in the early afternoon, it seemed scarcely to move on the mirroring surface of the sea. Yet it did move, growing nearer and larger, its huge spread of canvas hanging straight as cerecloth on the poles, and its wooden flanks, by and by, showing the scars and rime of a long voyage put behind it.

Yes, it seems to me it would have been odd, as our eyes went out in the rare leisure moments of that afternoon and fell upon that presence, worn and strange and solitary within the immense ring of the horizon, if there had not been somewhere among us some dim stirring of memory, and of wonder. Not too vivid, perhaps; not strong enough perhaps to outlast the ship's disappearance. For at about five o'clock the craft, which had been standing for the Head, wore slowly to port, and laying its course to fetch around the western side of the island, drifted out of our sight beyond the rampart of the bluffs.

Why it should have done that, no man can say. Why, in the face of coming weather, the ship should have abandoned the clear course around the Head and chosen instead to hazard the bars and rips that make a good three miles to sea from Pilot's Point in the west--why this hair-brained maneuver should have been attempted will always remain a mystery.

But at least that ship was gone from our sight, and by so much out of our minds. And this was just as well, perhaps, for our minds had enough to take them up just then with all the things overlooked, chairs to fetch, plants to borrow, girls' giggling errands--and in the very midst of this eleventh-hour hub-bub, the sudden advent of storm.

What a catastrophe that was! What a voiceless wail went up in that hour from all the bureaus and washstands in the length of Urkey Village! And how glad I was! With what a poisonous joy did I give thanks at the window for every wind-driven drop that spoiled by so much the wedding of a woman nearly twice my age!

The lamps on the street were yellow blurs, and the wind was full of little splashing and screechings and blowing of skirts and wraps when I set out alone for Center Church, wishing heartily I might never get there. That I didn't is the only reason this story was ever told. Not many got there that night (of the men, that is), or if they did they were not to stay long, for something bigger than a wedding was afoot.

The first wind I had of it crossed my path at Heman Street, a huge clattering shadow that turned out to be Si Pilot's team swinging at a watery gallop toward the back-side track, and the wagon-body full of men. I saw their faces as they passed under the Heman Street lamp, James Burke, Fred Burke, Sandy Snow, half a dozen other surfmen home for the Summer from the Point station, and Captain Cook himself hanging on to Sandy's shoulder as he struggled to get his Sunday blacks wriggled into his old, brown oil-cloths. In a wink they were gone, and I, forgetting the stained lights of Center Church, was gone after them. Nor was I alone. There were a dozen shades pounding with me; at the cow street we were a score. I heard the voices of men I couldn't see.

"Aground? Where to?"

"On the outer bar; south'rd end of the outer bar they tell me."

The voices came and went, whipped by the wind.

"What vessel'd you say? Town craft?"

"No--that ship."

"What? Not that--that--India ship!"

"Yep--that India ship."

"India ship"--"India ship!" I don't know how it seemed to them, but to me the sound of that legendary name, borne on the gale, seemed strangely like the shadow of some one coming cast across a stage.

I'll not use space to tell how I got across the island; it would be only the confused tale of an hour that seems but a minute now. I lost the track somewhere short of Si Pilot's place, and wading the sand to the west came out on the beach, without the slightest notion of where I was.

I only know it was a majestic and awful place to be alone; majestic with the weight of wind and the rolling thunder of water; the more awful because I could not see the water itself, save for the rare gray ghost of a tongue licking swiftly up the sand to catch at my feet if I did not spring away in time. Once a mother of waves struck at me with a huge, dim timber; I dodged it, I can't say how, and floundered on to the south, wondering as I peered over my shoulder at the dark if already the ship had broken, and if that thing behind me were one of the ribs come out of her.

That set me to thinking of all the doomed men near me clinging to slippery things they couldn't see, cursing perhaps, or praying their prayers, or perhaps already sliding away, down and down, into the cold, black caves of the sea. And then the shadows seemed to be full of shades, and the surf-tongues were near to catching my inattentive feet.

If the hour across the island seems a minute, the time I groped along the beach seems nights on end. And then one of the shades turned solid, and I was in such a case I had almost bolted before it spoke and I knew it for Rolldown Nickerson, the beachcomber.

He was a good man in ways. But you must remember his business was a vulture's business, and something of it was in his soul. It came out in good wrecking weather. On a night when the bar had caught a fine

piece of profit, I give you my word you could almost see Rolldown's neck growing longer and nakeder with suspense. He would have made more of his salvaging had he carried a steadier head: in the rare, golden moments of windfall he sometimes failed to pick and choose. Even now he was loaded down with a dim collection of junk he had grabbed up in the dark, things he knew nothing of, empty bottles and seine-floats, rubbish he had probably passed by a hundred times in his daylight rounds. The saving circumstance was that he kept dropping them in his ardor for still other treasures his blind feet stumbled on. I followed in his wake and I know, for half a dozen times his discards got under my feet and sent me staggering. Once, moved by some bizarre, thousandth chance of curiosity, I bent and caught one up in passing.

Often and often since then I have wondered what would have happened to the history of the world of my youth if I had not been moved as I was, and bent quite carelessly in passing, and caught up what I did.

Still occupied with keeping my guide in eye, I took stock of the thing with idle fingers; in the blackness my finger-tips were all the eyes I had for so small a thing. It was about the size of a five-pound butter box, I should say; it seemed as it lay in my hand a sort of an old and polished casket, a thing done with an exotic artistry, broad, lacquered surfaces and curves and bits of intricate carving. And I thought it was empty till I shook it and felt the tiny impact of some chambered weight. Already the thing had taken my interest. Catching up I touched Rolldown's arm and shouted in his ear, over the roll of the wind and surf:

"What you make of this, Rolldown?"

He took it and felt it over, dropping half his rubbish in the act. He shook it. It seemed to me I could see his neck growing longer.

"Got somethin' into it," he rumbled.

"Yes, I know. Now let me have it back, Rolldown."

"Somethin' hefty," he continued, and I noticed he had dropped the rest of his treasures now and clung to that. "Somethin' hefty--and valu'ble!"

"But it's mine, I tell you!"

"'Tain't neither! 'Tain't neither!"

He was walking faster all the while to shake me off, and I to keep with him; our angry voices rose higher in the gale.

I can't help smiling now when I think of the innocent pair of us that night, puffing along the sand in the blind, wet wind, squabbling like two children over that priceless unseen casket, come up from the waters of the sea.

"It's mine!" I bawled, "and you give it to me!" And I grabbed at his arm again. But this time, letting out a squeal, he shook me off and fled inshore, up the face of the dune, and I not far behind him.

And so, pursued and pursuing, we came suddenly over a spur of the dunes and saw below us on the southward beach the drift-fire the life-savers had made. There were many small figures in the glow, a surf-boat hauled up, I think, and a pearly huddle of alien men.

But on none of this could I take my oath; my thoughts had been jerked back too abruptly to all the other, forgotten drama of that night, the music and the faces in Center Church, the flowers, the bridegroom, and the bride.

For there on the crest before me, given in silhouette against the fire-glow, stood the bride.

How she came there, by what violence or wild stratagem she had got away, what blind path had brought her, a fugitive, across the island--it was all beyond me. But no matter; there she stood before me on the dune at Pilot's Point, as still as a lost statue, tulle and satin, molded by the gale, sheathing her form in low relief like shining marble, her stone-quiet hands at rest on her unstirring bosom, her face set toward the invisible sea.... It was queer to see her like that: dim, you know; just shadowed out in mystery by the light that came a long way through the streaming darkness and died as it touched her.

Peering at her, the strangest thought came to me, and it seemed to me she must have been standing there just so, not for minutes, but for hours and days; yes, standing there all the length of those ten long years, erect on a seaward dune, unmoved by the wild, moving elements, broken water, wailing wind, needle-blown sand--as if her spirit had flown on other business, leaving the quiet clay to wait and watch there till the tides of fate, turning in their appointed progress, should bring back the fabled ship of India to find its grave on the bars at Pilot's Point.

She must have been all ready to go to the church; perhaps she was actually on her way, and it was on the wind of the cow street that the blown tidings of the "India ship" came to her ears. I can't tell you how I was moved by the sight of her in the wistful ruin of bride's-clothes. I can't say what huge, disordered purposes tumbled through my brain as I stood there trying to cough or stir or by some such infinitesimal violence let her know that I, Peter Means, was there--that I understood--that I was stronger than all the men in Urkey Island--that over my dead body alone should any evil come to her now, forever and ever and ever.



As I tell you, I don't know what would have happened then, with all my wild, dark projects of defense, had not the whole house of trance come tumbling about my ears to the tune of a terrified bleating close at hand. It was Rolldown Nickerson, I saw as I wheeled; my forgotten enemy, flinging down the precious old brown casket he had robbed me of, and, still giving vent to that thin, high note of horror, careening, sliding, and spattering off down the sandslope. And as he vanished and his wail grew fainter around a shoulder of the dune, another sound came also to my ears. It was plain that his blind gallop had brought him in collision with another denizen of the night; the protesting outburst came on the wind, and it was the voice of Miah White--Miah the prophet, the avenger, drunk as a lord and mad as one exalted.

There was no time for thought; I didn't need it to know what he was after. Mary had heard, too, and knew, too; it was as if she had been awakened from sleep, and her eyes were "enough to make one pity her," in the old words of Mother Poll. Seeing them on me, and without so much as a glance at the casket-thing which the roll of the sand had brought to rest near her feet, I turned and ran at the best of my legs, down the sand, around the dune's shoulder out of sight, and fairly into the arms of the angel of vengeance. I can still see the dim gray whites of his eyes as he glared at me, and smell the abomination of his curse. But I paid no heed; only made with a struggle to go on.

"This way!" I panted. "To the north'rd! She's heading to the north'rd. I saw her dress just there, just now----"

A little was enough to turn him. As I plunged on, making inland, I heard him trailing me with his ponderous, grunting flesh. His ardor was greater than mine; as we ran I heard his thick voice coming nearer and nearer to my ear.

"'She shall come back,' says I, 'with the hand of iron,' says I."

As always in this exalted state his phraseology grew Biblical.

"'Thou shalt stay here,'" I heard him grunting. "'Here to the church thou shalt stay, Joshua,' says I. 'And she shalt come back with the hand of iron--the hand of iron!'"

"Yes!" I puffed. "That's right, Miah; only hurry. There!" I cried.

The rain had lessened, and a rising moon cast a ghost through the wrack, just enough to let us glimpse a figure topping a rise before us. That it was no one but Rolldown, still fleeing the mystery and bleating as he fled, made no difference to the blurred eyes of Miah; he dug his toes into the sand and flung forward in still hotter chase--after a still-faster-speeding quarry.

I'll tell you where we caught Rolldown. It was before the church, within the very outpouring of the colored windows. When Miah discovered who his blowing captive was his rage, for a moment, was something to remember. Then it passed and left him blank and dreary with defeat. The beachcomber himself, pale as putty through his half-grown beard, was beseeching us from the pink penumbra of the Apostle Paul: "You seen it? You seen what I seen?" but Miah wouldn't hear him, and mounting the steps and passing dull-footed through the vestry, came into the veiled light and heavy scent of breath and flowers. Following at his heels I saw the faces of women turned to our entrance with expectation.

Do you know the awful sense of a party that has fallen flat? Do you know the desolation of a hope long deferred--once more deferred?

Joshua was standing in the farthest corner, beyond the pews where Miss Beedie's Sunday School class held. Looking across the sea of inquiring and disappointed faces, I saw him there, motionless, his back turned on all of us. He had been standing so for an hour, they

said, staring out of a window at his own shadow cast on the churchyard fence.

It was a distressing moment. When Miah had sunk down in a rear pew and bowed his head in his hands I really think you could have heard the fall of the proverbial pin. Then, with a scarcely audible rustle, all the faces became the backs of heads and all the eyes went to the figure unstirring by the corner window. And after that, with the same accord, the spell of waiting was broken, whispering ran over the pews, the inevitable was accepted. Folks got up, shuffling their feet, putting on their wraps with the familiar, mild contortions, still whispering, whispering--"What a shame!"--"The idea!"--"I want to know!"

But some among them must have been still peeping at Joshua, for the hush that fell was sudden and complete. Turning, I saw that he had turned from the window at last, showing us his face.

\* \* \* \* \*

Now we knew what he had been doing for himself in that long hour. His face was once more the mask of a face we had known so many years as Joshua Blake, dry, bitter, self-contained, the eyes shaded under the lids, the lips as thin as hate. He faced us, but it was not at us he looked; it was beyond us, over our heads, at the corner where the door was.

There, framed in the doorway, stood the tardy bride, a figure as white and stark as pagan stone, and a look on her face like the awful, tranquil look of a sleep-walker. Neither did she pay any heed to us, but over our heads she met the eyes of the bridegroom. So for a long breath they confronted each other, steadily. Then we heard her speak.

"He's come!" she said in a clear voice. "Andrew's come back again."

Still she looked at Joshua. He did not move or reply.

"You understand?" I tell you, I who stood under it, that it was queer enough to hear that voice, clear, strong, and yet somehow shattered, passing over our heads. "You understand, Joshua? Andrew's come back to the wedding, and now I'll marry you--if you wish."

Even yet Joshua did not speak, nor did the dry anger of his face change. He came walking, taking his time, first along the pews at the front, then up the length of the aisle. Coming down a few steps, Mary waited for him, and there was a kind of a smile now on her lips.

Joshua halted before her. Folding his hands behind him he looked her over slowly from head to foot.

"You lie!" That was all he said.

"Oh, no, Joshua. I'm not lying. Andrew has come for the wedding."

"You lie," he repeated in the same impassive tone. "You know I know you lie, Mary, for you know I know that Andrew is dead."

"Yes, yes--" She was fumbling to clear a damp fold of her gown from something held in the crook of her arm. "But I didn't say----"

With that she had the burden uncovered and held forth in her outstretched hand.

She held it out in the light where all of us could see--the thing Rolldown had discarded from his treasures, that I had picked up and been robbed of in the kindly dark--the old brown casket-thing with the polished surfaces and the bits of intricate and ghastly carvings that had once let in the light of day and the sound of words--the old, brown, sea-bitten, sand-scoured skull of Andrew Blake, with the two gold teeth in the upper jaw dulled by the tarnishing tides that had

brought it up slowly from its bed in the bottom of the sea. And to think that I had carried it, and felt of it, and not known what it was!

It lay there supine in the nest of Mary's palm, paying us no heed whatever, but fixing its hollow regard on the shadows among the rafters. And Joshua, the brother, made no sound.

His face had gone a curious color, like the pallor of green things sprouting under a stone. His knees caved a little under his weight, and as we watched we saw his hands moving over his own breast, where the heart was, with a strengthless gesture, like a caress. After what seemed a long while we heard his voice, a whisper of horrible fascination.

"Turn it over!"

Mary said nothing, nor did she move to do as he bade. Like some awful play of a cat with a mouse she held quiet and watched him.

"Mary--do as I say--and turn it over!"

Her continued, unanswering silence seemed finally to rouse him. His voice turned shrill. Drawing on some last hidden reservoir of strength, he cried, "Give it to me! It's mine!" and made an astonishing dart, both hands clawing for the relic. But my cousin Duncan was there to step in his way and send him carroming along the fringe of the crowd.

The queer fellow didn't stop or turn or try again; sending up all the while the most unearthly cackle of horror my ears have ever heard, he kept right on through the door and the packed vestry, clawing his way to the open with that brief gift of vitality.

It was so preposterous and so ghastly to see him carrying on so, with his white linen and his fine black wedding-clothes and the gray hair that would have covered a selectman's head in another year--it was all

so absurdly horrible that we simply stood as we were in the church and wondered and looked at Mary Matheson and saw her face still rapt and quiet, and still set in that same bedevilled smile, as if she didn't know that round tears were running in streams down her cheeks.

"Let him go," was all she said.

They didn't let him go for too long a time, for they had seen the stamp of death on the man's face. When they looked for him finally they found him lying in a dead huddle on the grass by Lem White's gate. I shall never forget the look of him in the lantern-light, nor the look of them that crowded around and stared down at him--Duncan, I remember, puzzled--Miah cursing God--and three dazed black men showing the whites of their eyes, strange negroes being brought in from the wreck: for the ship was no India ship after all, but a coffee carrier from Brazil.

But seeing Miah made me remember that long-forgotten question that the lips of this dead man had put to the deaf sea and the blind sky.

"Who is to pay the bill? Who is to pay the bill?"

Well, two of the three had helped to pay the bill now for a girl's light-hearted word. But I think the other has paid the most, for she has had longer to meet the reckoning. She still lives there alone in the house on the cow street. She is an old woman now, but there's not so much as a line on her face nor a thread of white in her hair, and that's bad. That's always bad. That's something like the thing that happened to the Wandering Jew. Yes, I'm quite sure Mary has paid.

\* \* \* \* \*

But I am near to forgetting the answer to it all. I hadn't so long to wait as most folks had--no longer than an hour of that fateful night. For when I got home to our kitchen I found my cousin Duncan already

there, with the lamp lit. I came in softly on account of the lateness, and that's how I happened to surprise him and glimpse what he had before he could get it out of sight.

I don't know yet how he came by it, but there on the kitchen table lay the skull of Andrew Blake. When I took it, against his protest, and turned it over, I found what Joshua had meant--a hole as clean and round as a gimlet-bore in the bulge at the back of the head. And when, remembering the faint, chambered impact I had felt in shaking the unknown treasure on the beach, I peeped in through the round hole, I made out the shape of a leaden slug nested loosely between two points of bone behind the nose--a bullet, I should say, from an old, single-ball dueling pistol--such a pistol as Joshua Blake had played with in the shadow of apple-trees on that distant afternoon, and carried in his pocket, no doubt, to the warm-lit gaiety of Alma Beedie's birthday party....

FOOTNOTE:

[16] Copyright, 1919, by The Pictorial Review Company. Copyright, 1921, by Wilbur Daniel Steele.