

**WILLIAM
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THE CASTAWAY

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The Castaway

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W. W. Jacobs

The Castaway / Odd Craft, Part 2

THE CASTAWAY

Mrs. John Boxer stood at the door of the shop with her hands clasped on her apron. The short day had drawn to a close, and the lamps in the narrow little thorough-fares of Shinglesea were already lit. For a time she stood listening to the regular beat of the sea on the beach some half-mile distant, and then with a slight shiver stepped back into the shop and closed the door.

The little shop with its wide-mouthed bottles of sweets was one of her earliest memories. Until her marriage she had known no other home, and when her husband was lost with the *North Star* some three years before, she gave up her home in Poplar and returned to assist her mother in the little shop.

In a restless mood she took up a piece of needle-work, and a minute or two later put it down again. A glance through the glass of the door leading into the small parlour revealed Mrs. Gimpson, with a red shawl round her shoulders, asleep in her easy-chair.

Mrs. Boxer turned at the clang of the shop bell, and then, with a wild cry, stood gazing at the figure of a man standing in the door-way. He was short and bearded, with oddly shaped shoulders, and a left leg which was not a match; but the next moment Mrs. Boxer was in his arms sobbing and laughing together.

Mrs. Gimpson, whose nerves were still quivering owing to the suddenness with which she had been awakened, came into the shop; Mr. Boxer freed an arm, and placing it round her waist kissed her with some affection on the chin.

"He's come back!" cried Mrs. Boxer, hysterically.

"Thank goodness," said Mrs. Gimpson, after a moment's deliberation.

"He's alive!" cried Mrs. Boxer. "He's alive!"

She half-dragged and half-led him into the small parlour, and thrusting him into the easy-chair lately vacated by Mrs. Gimpson seated herself upon his knee, regardless in her excitement that the rightful owner was with elaborate care selecting the most uncomfortable chair in the room.

"Fancy his coming back!" said Mrs. Boxer, wiping her eyes. "How did you escape, John? Where have you been? Tell us all about it."

Mr. Boxer sighed. "It 'ud be a long story if I had the gift of telling of it," he said, slowly, "but I'll cut it short for the present. When the *North Star* went down in the South Pacific most o' the hands got away in the boats, but I was too late. I got this crack on the head with something falling on it from aloft. Look here."

He bent his head, and Mrs. Boxer, separating the stubble with her fingers, uttered an exclamation of pity and alarm at the extent of the scar; Mrs. Gimpson, craning forward, uttered a sound which might mean anything—even pity.

"When I come to my senses," continued Mr. Boxer, "the ship was sinking, and I just got to my feet when she went down and took me with her. How I escaped I don't know. I seemed to be choking and fighting for my breath for years, and then I found myself floating on the sea and clinging to a grating. I clung to it all night, and next day I was picked up by a native who was paddling about in a canoe, and taken ashore to an island, where I lived for over two years. It was right out o' the way o' craft, but at last I was picked up by a trading schooner named the *Pearl*, belonging to Sydney, and taken there. At Sydney I shipped aboard the *Marston Towers*, a steamer, and landed at the Albert Docks this morning."

"Poor John," said his wife, holding on to his arm. "How you must have suffered!"

"I did," said Mr. Boxer. "Mother got a cold?" he inquired, eying that lady.

"No, I ain't," said Mrs. Gimpson, answering for herself. "Why didn't you write when you got to Sydney?"

"Didn't know where to write to," replied Mr. Boxer, staring. "I didn't know where Mary had gone to."

"You might ha' wrote here," said Mrs. Gimpson.

"Didn't think of it at the time," said Mr. Boxer. "One thing is, I was very busy at Sydney, looking for a ship. However, I'm 'ere now."

"I always felt you'd turn up some day," said Mrs. Gimpson. "I felt certain of it in my own mind. Mary made sure you was dead, but I said 'no, I knew better.'"

There was something in Mrs. Gimpson's manner of saying this that impressed her listeners unfavourably. The impression was deepened when, after a short, dry laugh *a propos* of nothing, she sniffed again—three times.

"Well, you turned out to be right," said Mr. Boxer, shortly.

"I gin'rally am," was the reply; "there's very few people can take me in."

She sniffed again.

"Were the natives kind to you?" inquired Mrs. Boxer, hastily, as she turned to her husband.

"Very kind," said the latter. "Ah! you ought to have seen that island. Beautiful yellow sands and palm-trees; cocoa-nuts to be 'ad for the picking, and nothing to do all day but lay about in the sun and swim in the sea."

"Any public-'ouses there?" inquired Mrs. Gimpson.

"Cert'nly not," said her son-in-law. "This was an island—one o' the little islands in the South Pacific Ocean."

"What did you say the name o' the schooner was?" inquired Mrs. Gimpson.

"*Pearl*," replied Mr. Boxer, with the air of a resentful witness under cross-examination.

"And what was the name o' the captin?" said Mrs. Gimpson.

"Thomas—Henery—Walter—Smith," said Mr. Boxer, with somewhat unpleasant emphasis.

"An' the mate's name?"

"John Brown," was the reply.

"Common names," commented Mrs. Gimpson, "very common. But I knew you'd come back all right—I never 'ad no alarm. 'He's safe and happy, my dear,' I says. 'He'll come back all in his own good time.'"

"What d'you mean by that?" demanded the sensitive Mr. Boxer. "I come back as soon as I could."

"You know you were anxious, mother," interposed her daughter. "Why, you insisted upon our going to see old Mr. Silver about it."

"Ah! but I wasn't uneasy or anxious afterwards," said Mrs. Gimpson, compressing her lips.

"Who's old Mr. Silver, and what should he know about it?" inquired Mr. Boxer.

"He's a fortune-teller," replied his wife. "Reads the stars," said his mother-in-law.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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