BECKE LOUIS

YORKE THE ADVENTURER

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Содержание

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Chapter I

In that delightful and exciting book, written by Captain Joshua Slocum, and entitled, "Sailing Alone Round the World," there is a part wherein the adventurous American seaman relates how he protected himself from night attacks by the savages by a simple, but efficient precaution. It was his custom, when he anchored for the night off the snow-clad and inhospitable shores of Tierra del Fuego, to profusely sprinkle his cutter's deck with sharp tacks, and then calmly turn in and sleep the sleep of the just; for even the horny soles of the Fuegian foot is susceptible to the business end of a tack; and, as I read Slocum's story, I smiled, and thought of dear old Yorke and the *Francesco*.

I first met Yorke early in the "seventies." Our vessel had run in under the lee of the South Cape of New Britain to wood and water, and effect some repairs, for in working northward through the Solomon Group, on a special mission to a certain island off the coast of New Guinea, we had met with heavy weather, and had lost our foretopmast. In those days there was not a single white man living on the whole of the south coast of New Britain, from St. George's Channel on the east, to Dampier's Straits on the

west—a stretch of more than three hundred miles, and little was known of the natives beyond the fact of their being treacherous cannibals. In Blanche Bay only, on the northern shore, was there a settlement of a few adventurous English traders—the employees of a rich German company—and these were only acquainted with the natives in their own vicinity. Even the masters of trading vessels avoided the south coast of the great island, not only on account of the dangerous character of its inhabitants, but also because there was not, they thought, anything to tempt them to risk their and their crews' lives—for the shore nearly everywhere presented a line of dense unbroken forest, with but scanty groves of coco-palms at long intervals, and even had there been many such groves, no communication could be had with the people. In the wild days of the "seventies" the practice of cutting up and drying the coconut into what is known as "copra" had scarcely made any headway in those parts of New Britain, New Ireland, and the Solomon and New Hebrides Groups which were visited by trading vessels—the nuts were turned into oil by a crude and wasteful process known as "rotting."

The captain of our little vessel was one of the oldest and most experienced trading skippers in the Western Pacific, grim, resolute, and daring, but yet cautious of his men's lives, if not of his own; so when he decided to anchor under the lee of the South Cape, he chose a part of the coast which seemed to be but scantily inhabited. The dense forest which came down to the water's edge concealed from view any village that might have

been near us; but the presence of smoke arising from various spots denoted that there were some natives living in the vicinity, though we could not see any canoes.

We brought to about half a mile from the shore. Two boats were at once lowered, manned, and armed, and under the captain's guidance, set out to search for water, which we knew we should have but little difficulty in finding, even on the south coast of New Britain, which is not nearly so well watered as the northern shore of the island. In the captain's boat were six men besides himself; I was in charge of the covering boat, manned by six native seamen and carrying three water-casks—all we could stow.

Pulling in together, close to the shore, the captain then went ahead, my boat following at the regulation distance of fifty yards, only four hands rowing in each, leaving four men to keep a look-out for natives.

Presently the skipper turned to me, and pointed shoreward.

"That's the place for us, Drake—between those two spurs—just round this point. There's bound to be water there."

The place which he indicated was about two miles distant to the eastward, and the crews gave way with good will, for the prospect of having a drink of pure water after the brackish and ill-smelling stuff we had been drinking for a fortnight, was very pleasing. Although but a little past nine o'clock in the morning the day was intensely hot, and windless as well, and the perspiration was streaming down the naked chests and backs of our sturdy

native sailors. The only sounds that broke the silence were the cries of birds—cockatoos and large green and scarlet parrots, which screamed angrily at us as the boats passed close in to the dense, steamy jungle of the littoral.

Just as the captain's boat rounded the point, we heard a cry of astonishment from his crew, a cry that was echoed by ourselves half a minute later; for there in the centre of a small landlocked bay, was a cutter lying at anchor! She appeared to be of about thirty or forty tons, had an awning spread aft, and presented a very weather-worn appearance; her rudder was gone, and the upper part of her stern badly damaged. There was no one visible on deck, but presently, in answer to the captain's hail, the face of an old, white-haired man, appeared above the companion.

"Come on board," he called out in clear, vigorous tones, and we saw him take up a broom, which was lying on the skylight, and begin to sweep the after-deck vigorously with one hand, the other being in a sling.

"Guess he's a lunatic," said Captain Guest, turning to me with a laugh. But we had no time to indulge in surmises, for in a few minutes we were drawing up alongside; the stranger was standing at the stern, broom in hand, watching us.

"Step on board here, over the stern, please," he said, and then he added quickly, "but are you all wearing boots?"

"No," answered the captain, now quite sure the old man was wrong in his head, "some of my men have no boots."

"Then they had better not come aboard," he said with a quiet,

amused smile, as he saw our puzzled faces.

The moment Captain Guest and myself stepped over the rail and shook hands with the stranger, we saw the reason for the broom—the entire deck, except the small space aft which had just been swept, was covered with broken glass!

"Glad to see you, gentlemen. My name is Yorke, and this cutter is the *Francesco*."

"And my name is Guest. I am master of the brigantine *Fray Sentos*, of Sydney, lying just round the point, and this is Mr. Drake, my supercargo."

"Sit down here on the skylight, gentlemen, out of the way of the glass—my cabin is very small."

"Guess it would have to be a pretty big one if you had another two men like yourself to share it," said Guest with a laugh, as he surveyed our new friend's proportions. And indeed he was right, for Yorke was over six feet in height, rather stout, and with a chest like a working bullock. His face and neck were deeply bronzed to a dark tan, and presented a striking and startling yet pleasing contrast to his snowy-white hair, moustache, and eyebrows; his clear, steely blue eyes were in consonance with the broad, square jaw, and the man's character revealed itself in his features—strong, courageous, dominant, and self-reliant.

The moment Captain Guest mentioned that our men were thirsty and would like a drink of water, Yorke became the soul of hospitality, and told them to come on board and help themselves, while for Guest and myself he produced a couple of bottles of

excellent Tennant, and took a glass of it himself.

"Now, do you know, gentlemen," he said as he sat down on the cutter's rail, facing us, "this morning I had a dream? I thought I heard some one call out, 'All ready there, for'ard?' and I heard the rattle of a cable through the hawse-pipes. Then I woke and looked at the clock—it was just half-past seven."

"And at half-past seven we let go anchor, a good four miles from here. Surely you could not have heard us at such a distance."

"No, that's a fact. So, when I did hear you hail just now I knew my dream was verified. As a rule, dreams aren't worth a bag of shakings."

"Where are your crew, captain?" I asked.

"Ah, now I've a yarn to tell you. I'm the only man on board—my mate and every man of my crew were massacred about six weeks ago off the north end of New Ireland, and I only escaped by the skin of my teeth. And now you can guess the meaning of all this glass on the deck. There's plenty of niggers all around us here, and that broken glass is a splendid protection for me at night time. Since I lost my men they have made two attempts to cut me off at night time, once at a place just the other side of Cape St. George and once near here. But," and he laughed softly, "they didn't stay on deck more than five seconds, I can assure you. I'll tell you the whole yarn presently. But say, captain—can you help me to a new rudder? I lost mine a week ago, and having a bad hand have not been able to do anything towards making one myself."

"Certainly I will. I'll send my carpenter to you as soon as we get back to the ship; or, better still, we'll tow you down to the Fray Bentos. But we are in want of water and firewood, and I should like to take some of both back with me."

He thanked Guest warmly, and added that, although the cutter had no rudder, she would steer very well with a sweep; and then he informed us there was good running water within a couple of cables' length of the cutter, also plenty of wood, and offered to take us to the place. We need not, he said, apprehend any attack by the natives, as our party was too large, and the spot where we could fill the casks was in fairly open country, and by stationing a sentry or two on each side of the creek, we could both wood and water with safety.

"There is a village about six miles along the coast from here, and no doubt it was the people from there who boarded me the other night, for I saw a lot of canoes on a little beach there. I think it must be the largest village for many miles hereabout. Now, do you see all those columns of smoke? Some, you will notice, are very thin and bluish, while others are almost black; the thin ones are only from native ovens, the others are signals to the various smaller villages to the eastward—by this time every nigger within fifty miles of us knows that your ship is at anchor. I hope you left plenty of men on board?" "Plenty, and ours is a well-armed crew." Just as he was stepping into the captain's boat, I asked him what was the matter with his hand. He replied carelessly that he had "managed to get a bit of a knock," and would be glad if I

would look at it when we returned to the cutter, as it was rather painful at times.

The boats were soon under way for the shore, and in a quarter of an hour we entered a narrow but deep creek, not wide enough to permit us using our oars; but this was of no consequence, for each boat carried half a dozen canoe paddles. Within a hundred yards up from the entrance we found the water to be quite fresh, and while some of the men started to fill the casks, the rest, except the sentries, made for a clump of about a dozen coconut-trees growing close beside a magnificent grove of areca-palms. Every nut that was young enough to drink was quickly thrown down, and carried to the boats. Then we set to work to collect firewood, and two or three dry, solid logs were dragged down into the creek, lashed together, and then, with them and the filled water casks in tow, we returned merrily to the *Franceses* hoisted up our water casks, swept up all the glass, shovelled it into a hogshead standing on the deck, hoisted her mainsail, and hove up her anchor, glad of having accomplished our task so easily and so quickly. A light air had sprung up, and the vessel, aided by the boats, made good progress towards our brigantine, despite the logs towing astern.

Our new friend asked me if I would mind coming below with him, as it was past three o'clock, and quite time we had something to eat and drink.

The cabin certainly was small, but was spotlessly clean, and exceedingly well furnished. It contained three bunks, two of

which were hidden from view by neat cretonne curtains.

"That was my poor young mate's bunk," he said sadly, "and the other was the boatswain's. Now, will you please pass these up on deck?"

From a locker he took out a dozen or more of ale, two bottles of spirits, and a number of tins of beef, sardines, etc., together with an ample supply of biscuit. These I passed up to Guest, who, at Yorke's request, ordered the boats alongside, so that the crews could get some dinner, and a stiff glass of grog all round. Then we ourselves ate a most hearty meal, rendered the more enjoyable by the deliciously cool beer—a liquor which, until that day, we had not tasted for quite four or five months. As soon as we had finished, I asked him to let me examine his hand.

"Can you do a bit of cutting?" he asked, as I began to remove the bandages.

"Rather," answered Guest for me, "Drake loves to dig out a bullet, especially—doesn't he, Napoleon?"

Napoleon was one of our native crew—a short, nuggety little Tongan, who, in an attack made on our boats nearly a year before, had received a bullet in the calf of the leg. I had succeeded in extracting it without unduly mutilating the patient, for I had once acted as amateur assistant to a medical missionary in Samoa, and had seen a good many bullets extracted during a very lively six months' native war.

When I saw the condition of Yorke's hand, I was startled. It was enormously swollen from the tips of the fingers to the wrist,

and badly lacerated and bruised all over the back, and presented a very dangerous appearance. The pain he had endured, and was enduring at the moment, must have been something atrocious, and I felt a sudden respect and admiration for a man who could attend to *our* wants before thinking of himself.

"Good heavens!" said Guest sympathisingly, "how did it happen?"

He told us that ten days previously the cutter had struck on a reef in the night. She bumped heavily three or four times, but would have worked across the reef without serious damage, as there was a good breeze, had not a sea taken her on the bows, thrown her aback, and driven her stern first against the one exposed portion of the reef, tearing away her rudder, and smashing all the upper part of her stern. Yorke, who was half-stunned by the boom swinging over, and striking him on the head as he was rising to his feet after being hurled along the deck, felt that he had received an injury to his hand, which was bleeding profusely. But just then he gave no thought to it, for the next two or three seas fortunately carried the cutter over the reef into deep water and safety. When he came to examine his hand, he found it had been crushed, probably by a piece of the heavy hardwood rail, and several splinters were protruding from the back and wrist. These he had succeeded in extracting, but the pain continued to increase day by day, and the palm of the hand began to swell and gather.

"Perhaps there's a bit of timber in there yet," he remarked to

us.

I thought so also, and so did Guest, and after torturing the poor fellow a few minutes, I located the exact spot—just below the ball of the thumb.

"Captain Yorke," I said, "I can cut it out, I am sure. But, frankly, the thumb is a dangerous thing for an amateur surgeon to meddle with, and–"

"I know," he interrupted quietly, "but I'd rather run the risk of lockjaw than the certainty of blood poisoning, and I know that that is what it will turn to. Last night I made up my mind to cut into the damned thing this morning if that last poultice I put on had no effect. Now go ahead. There's a bottle of carbolic acid below, which will be useful, and my pocket-knife has a razor-edge."

In less than five minutes I set to work, and in a few more, to my intense satisfaction—for I felt nervous—the thing was done, and I had extracted a piece of wood half an inch long, and as thick as a small quill. Then Guest and I carefully washed the wound over and over again in a solution of carbolic acid, and in half an hour the hand was bound up *pro tem*. Poor Yorke bore the pain without the twitching of an eyelid, and I felt a sincere thankfulness when, two hours later, we saw the change that relief from intense physical suffering had effected in his features.

When we reached the brigantine, I was able to bandage the injured hand in a more shipshape and proper manner, as we had an ample supply of lint and other requirements; and within ten

days he could use his hand freely, though it took a much longer time for a thorough recovery. That he was deeply grateful to us he showed us in many quiet ways; and before he had been with us a week, both the captain and myself, and, indeed, every one else on board the *Fray Bentos* had grown to like the man immensely, though at times he would become unaccountably moody and silent, and keep to himself, only speaking in answer to a direct question. But, even then, he never attempted to directly avoid us, and was always civil, even to any of our native crew who might speak to him.

"Guess he thinks a lot about those poor men of his," said Guest to me one day.

That first evening we had a very pleasant supper. Yorke was with us, and during the meal he gave us a detailed account of his voyage, and of the massacre of his little vessel's company.

Chapter II

He had, he told us, bought the *Francesco* at Sourabaya about three years before, and after making several trading voyages between Manila and the Ladrone Islands—voyages which did not pay as well as he had anticipated—he fell in with the master of a Hobart Town whaler, who strongly advised him to go farther eastwards and southwards, particularly about the Admiralty Group and their vicinity, where a few colonial vessels were doing very well, trading for coconut oil, beche-de-mer, sandalwood, tortoise-shell and pearl-shell. Yorke took his advice and made a very successful voyage to the Admiralties, taking a cargo of pearl-shell to Singapore. This he sold very profitably, and was soon at sea again. On reaching the Admiralty Group, however, he was prevented from trading by the hostility of the natives, though on his previous visit they had been very friendly; and so, fearing that they might cut off the vessel, he decided to leave. He had with him a native of Yap, one of the Caroline Islands—a man who had wandered about the North and South Pacific from his boyhood. His name was Rul, and he was not only a good seaman and an expert diver, but spoke fluently nearly a score of Melanesian and Micronesian dialects.

On the evening of the day that the cutter left Callie Harbour, on Admiralty Island, Yorke called his six men together, and told them that he was very undecided what to do. (I found

out afterwards that he had a way of taking his crew into his confidence—"It pleases them," he said, "and has proved very useful on a number of occasions when their goodwill meant much to me ").

After telling them that he did not like to risk their lives by trying to return to Callie Harbour, he asked if they were willing to sail with him to the southwestern coast of New Guinea, where, he had heard, there was a great deal of pearl-shell to be bought from the natives. At the same time he pointed out to them that it would be a risky undertaking; he had no chart of that part of the Western Pacific, and, if they lost the ship, they would stand but little chance of escaping from the cannibal natives.

"Then," he went on, "this fellow Rul said that although he and the other natives on board were quite willing to go anywhere with me, *he* knew of a place only two days' sail away to the eastward where there was not only plenty of black-edge pearl-shell, but hawkbill turtle-shell as well. He had, he said, been cast away there in a whaleship, and remained on the island three months, could speak a little of the language, and gave me the names of several villages and harbours, but did not know the name of the island as a whole.

"I brought up my chart, and in a few seconds I discovered the names he had mentioned. The island was New Hanover, and, with the northerly breeze then blowing, I knew we should be there in twenty-four hours. So I made up my mind to try the place; for Rul was a thoroughly trustworthy fellow, and I knew

I could depend on him.

"My mate was a young American named Ted Merriman, a native of New London, Connecticut, a fine sailorman, and a good navigator. My boatswain, too, was one of the right sort; and, as for the rest, although they were all natives, they were good seamen, and I had never had a sulky look from any one of them since they first shipped with me.

"We anchored just off a village which Rul knew, and in a few minutes the people came off to us in crowds and filled the deck. Many of them recognised Rul, and they all showed great friendliness and eagerness to trade; and I, like a cocksure fool, was thrown off my guard."

He ceased speaking, sighed, then lit his pipe and smoked in silence for awhile, and it was evident to us all that, although he was not an emotional man, he was strongly affected by the memory of the tragedy, and reproached himself keenly.

"Everything went well for the two following days," he resumed; "the natives had over ten tons of good black-edge shell, all of which I bought from them, paying for it principally in tobacco. It was worth to me in Singapore about £65 a ton, and only cost me about £3 a ton, so you may imagine that I felt very well satisfied. Then, besides the pearl-shell I bought nearly five hundredweight of splendid hawkbill turtle-shell, giving but two or three sticks of tobacco for an entire carapace of thirteen plates weighing between two and three pounds, and, as you know, hawkbill shell is worth eight dollars a pound in Hongkong, and

much more in London or Hamburg."

"Captain Yorke," said Guest, with a laugh, "you should not have told us this. Drake here is a very good fellow, but in business matters—as a supercargo—he'd cut the throat of his best friend."

"Don't believe that, Captain Yorke," I said, "but at the same time I wish you had not told us of this place. You certainly have the prior right of discovery, and ought to have the benefit, so I promise you I will not repeat to our owners anything you now tell us."

Yorke's face changed, and his bright blue eyes looked into ours with such a kindly expression that the fascination he already possessed over me deepened quickly.

"You and Captain Guest are welcome to my knowledge, but I trust you will use it for your own benefit, and not consider your owners. Tell me now, gentlemen, would they consider *you*? Would they give you a handsome bonus for putting, say, five, or six thousand pounds into their pockets?"

"I daresay they would give us each a cheque for fifty pounds," said Guest meditatively.

"Then keep the thing dark," said the big man energetically, "keep it dark. Why should you, Captain Guest, and you, Mr. Drake, enrich your owners by imparting to them this information? I tell you, gentlemen, that all shipowners are alike, at least I never ran across any that showed much consideration for any one else's welfare. Nine out of every ten will work the soul out of their ship-masters and officers, who, when they grow too

old to go to sea, are chucked out into the gutter to die of poverty, unless they have laid by a nest-egg for their old age."

"That is true enough," assented Guest, "and our esteemed employers are no better than the general run. So we will look on what you have just told us as private; by and by we will all talk over the matter, and see if we cannot go into the thing together."

Yorke nodded. "I'm with you. I've always played a lone hand hitherto, but I think that I can pull very well with men like you."

Then he resumed his story.

"On the morning of the third day I went ashore with my gun to have a few hours' shooting on a large swamp, situated about three miles inland from the village. One of the natives had told Rul that there were great numbers of wild duck and plover there, and offered to guide me to the place; so, telling Merriman that I would be back in time for dinner, I started with the guide. The gun I had with me was a double-barrelled pin-fire Lefaucheux breech-loader, and just before I left the cutter, I put in a couple of cartridges, intending to have a shot at some cranes which I saw walking about on the beach. Most fortunately for me, they flew away before I could get near enough. Besides the gun, I brought with me a Sharp's rifle, as the guide said that we should most likely see a wild pig or two about the swamp. The rifle I gave to him to carry, but the ten cartridges for it I put in my coat pocket, together with about twenty cartridges for the gun.

"On landing at the village, I was met by the head man, who wanted to know if I would buy a couple of pigs from him. I told

him to take them on board to the mate, who would pay him; then, the guide leading, we struck out into the forest. After going about a mile or so, the nigger was joined by half a dozen young bucks, all armed with spears and clubs. I asked the guide, who spoke a little English, what they wanted; he replied that they wished to see me shoot.

"'Very well,' I said, 'go ahead then, all of you.'

"The bucks grinned, but instead of going ahead stepped back to let me pass, and fell in, in single file at the rear, the guide still leading. Now, I didn't like that at all, and I turned round to tell them to go in front of me; I was just in time to save myself from getting a spear through my back—as it was, it whizzed through the side of my coat, and in another second the nigger who threw it had a charge of shot through his brains. Then, slewing round, I was just able to drop the guide, who was running off with the rifle. I hit him in the back, and saw him fall, then took cover behind a big tree to load again; but every other nigger had vanished, and then I heard a sound that filled me with dread for those on board the cutter—the loud, hoarse bellowing of conch shells.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.