

Blue Bottles

THANK HEAVEN FOR THESE TWO ISLAND CASTAWAYS WITH
A SENSE OF HUMOR

By Leland Hall

IF the ship had not, on the very eve of reaching the American coast, run into a fog and slowed down to creep through the night on soundings, Angus might not have drunk quite so much. Still, he was naturally fond of good liquor. Moreover, the passengers—belated officers of the A. E. F., commercials with a nose for trade, and nurses flat as oatmeal water now that they had lost the effervescent war spirit—had bored him to dryness throughout the long trip. In any case, he would doubtless have drunk freely.

Well, he was happy. He slouched in the smoking saloon, smiling engagingly at nothing, babbling little airs to himself. His uniform was askew, his brown hair rumpled; but his eye was bright, and his smile was as winning as ever. Perhaps God gave him good humor to make it hard for him to attain heaven. Sometimes it seems that way. Angus, alas, had yet to deny himself the peaches of earth that fell into his arms. His smile brought them down—all the girls, all the widows, and now and then a wife.

He was singing away softly to himself, and, without knowing what he did, he was putting matches into a blue bottle. The matches happened to be scattered on the table. The bromoseltzer bottle, its contents having braced him against the movement of the sea, had happened to linger, empty, in his pocket.

The voices of the gamblers, whom Angus would not have disturbed for worlds, were low and infrequent. The air was thick with smoke. Some one returned quietly from outside to sit in at the game again.

"We just passed a bell buoy," he announced.

"Near land. Give me two cards!"

"Ding dong, ding dong," Angus sang dreamily.

He did not want to play cards. He knew enough not to play in this mood of benevolence. Frankly, he wanted to fall in love with some one. All through the voyage he had missed love. The nurses and lady physicians on board the steamer did not inspire any such feeling.

Angus went out on deck. A discreet serenade along a corridor in the darkened bowels of the ship might open a door to him; and all cats are alike in the dark.

The deck was deserted, and dripping with the fog. The steamer moved so slowly that not even the sound of water brushing at her side came up from below. The foghorn roared methodically.

Angus wandered down the wet deck. Forward of amidships, in shadow, he saw a person lying wrapped in rugs in a steamer chair.

He could not be mistaken—it was a girl, and one he had not seen before. Though her face was mostly in the shadow of her hat, a misty bar of light fell across her mouth and chin. Her lips were red, the only spot of color on the deck; and they were young lips. Even enveloped as she was in her rug, there was something shapefully about her. The amorous devil in Angus went over the top.

"Having a good time by yourself?" he began, standing hatless and cajoling before her.

"Did you speak to me?"

She could not respond otherwise. Even though amorous devils were more than welcome on homeward-bound ships, there were habitual moves left in the game yet.

But Angus jumped several moves, and landed on the chair beside her. They were alone. He glanced swiftly along the decks. They were absolutely alone. Bending his head, he saw that she was pretty and select.

"I'm lonely, too," he murmured.

Women did not often move away from him after he had smiled. As a matter of fact, the girl's quiescence, which he found provocative, was due in part to her high spirit, and in part to her being so closely wrapped in her rug that she could not easily move. But all he saw was that she did not move; and in an instant he had done—skillfully, yet ingenuously, too—what no gentleman should have done. He kissed her.

She could not get out of her chair at once.

Angus was a little abashed; but he was not precisely sorry. When she called him names, he said:

"Oh, là, là!"

When she threatened to report him to the captain of the ship, he said again:

"Oh, là, là!"

Then there came a nasty shock.

"My husband will have something to say to you!"

He stood up, not hurriedly, but in woeful astonishment.

"Your husband? Oh, là!" Only one "là" this time, be it marked; but still the molehill rather than the mountain, and always the good humor. "But, I say, it's his fault! He shouldn't let you travel alone."

Angus thus dismissed the husband for the present. This meant that he entertained no thought of serious consequences; but he began to feel a little rueful—not for his act, which had sprung from an impulse in no way unfriendly, but for her reaction, which so disproportionately bristled with antagonism. She oughtn't to take it so hard.

He saw that she was trying to get out of her chair, and he stepped forward with outstretched hand, to take her rug and carry it for her. He had no sooner laid hold of the rug than she tried to wrest it from him. This was mere temper, and he held on the more tenaciously for a chance to explain, to make everything right. They tugged each other along the slippery deck, she in silence, he with soothing, mollifying phrases, half comical.

He couldn't take it quite seriously. She slipped more than he, and he saw that she would soon bring up against the railing—which meant that she would then be stalled, so to speak, and he could deliver the rug to her with a bow and a deep word of conciliation. He had already begun to hope that,

their brief but high-spirited intercourse being thus terminated, they might begin again in an amicable moderation.

"Steady! Steady, now—that's a good girl! Please!"

She had brought up against the railing, as he expected. Then, to his staggering horror, she disappeared over the side of the ship. She screamed once, falling. The rug dangled in his hands.

He suffered the nightmare sensation of being rooted, for an instant's eternity; after which he found himself in the chilling sea. The ship, even as it vanished through the fog, vanished in every connotation from his mind. Only long afterward was he thankful that its slowness had reduced the suction in its wake.

She answered him, and he got to her. She was keeping herself afloat.

"For God's sake!" The water took his breath; she, too, was breathless. The thrust of her arm in swimming seemed to push him from her. "Let me help you!" he cried in despair.

Later he managed to say:

"Bell buoy this evening. We're close to the shore."

She was choking. He caught hold of her and held her up.

"What is your name?"

She could just whisper:

"Honorée—"

He caught a surer hold.

"Take it easy," he gasped. "Easy!"

Then his free arm struck a log that was floating in the sea. With the muffler that was around her neck, he bound her hands to the log.

II

THE feel of land beneath his feet restored him strength to stagger forward; but he had not the strength to lift her. He could just drag her like a sack up from the edge of the water. Then he collapsed on the sand beside her.

In the relativity of time and space, the recovery of his will was as infinitesimally gradual as the spread of life over the planet. He became conscious that he was alive; he willed to go on living; he remembered himself; he remembered the girl. Then began the painful struggle to move. He raised his hand; he extended his arm. They fell across the body beside him. Then the slow grasp of the fact that she moved, breathing. Patience that was almost geological,

measureless intervals; and at last the recognition of their danger—cold; and the conception of a purpose—fire.

So it came to pass, in time, that he crawled through the obscure fog for wood; that he opened his knife with his teeth; that, with hands rendered nearly uncontrollable by convulsions of shivering, he whittled a few dry shavings. So it came to pass, duly, that he searched his pockets for matches.

He laid his findings on the sand by his knees. Matches he had felt; but he saw their heads a phosphorescent paste on his finger tips. He put down his wet tobacco pouch, and the soft lump which had been a package of cigarettes. He put down what his numb hand was slow to recognize—a bottle.

Because it puzzled him, he took that up again. He pried out the cork; and there were dry matches in that bottle, which in any light had been blue.

III

WHEN Angus awoke, it was light; but there was no telling how far the day had advanced, whether it was morning or afternoon, for the fog clung thick over land and water. He was dazed, full of pain, thirsty. The reality was beyond his comprehension.

The girl lay by the fire, bent almost double. Angus went near her in aching suspense. She might be dead, all doubled up and motionless like that. When he saw that she was breathing, he stumbled away from the fire and wandered down the beach in the fog, seeking water.

By following the edge of the sea he came to a little rocky promontory, where, in the hollows of the rocks, he found pools of rain water. He drank again and again, and yet again; and then he sat down with his head in his hands. He began to shudder in dread, not of her blame, but of his own full consciousness of his responsibility. This, he knew, must come upon him.

He tried to recall just what had happened. He remembered that he had been slightly intoxicated, that he had kissed a girl without giving her warning, that she had taken a violent dislike to him and had threatened him with—her husband. Deuced awkward, now! He was sure he had not pushed her overboard. Some careless member of the old tub's crew must have left a gate in the railing unfastened. Yet his own responsibility was terrific.

The possibility of her being afraid of him presented itself to his mind; but its ugliness was so revolting, and he was so kind-hearted himself, that he simply refused to reckon with it. On the other hand, it was hardly worth while to reckon with other sentiments—anger, hatred, vindictiveness. Whatever she might feel, the whole affair was now up to him entirely. He was sorry to his heart's core, and he would say so; but for the time being they were here in this incredible situation, and it was his manifest duty to *do* something for her—to do anything, everything, to make it as easy for her as he could.

To begin with, she might be thirsty when she awoke, as he had been. He would bring her water in—the blue bottle he found in his pocket. As he held it in his hand and looked at it, he smiled with an affectionate gratitude.

He was still light-headed; and he looked for food in a daze threaded with memories of a wholly unrelated past. He gathered mussels from the weeds of the lower rocks, the deep, cold blue of their shells undimmed in the mist. He was thankful they kept their shells shut up tight, and did not stick out their heads, like snails. What did they call snails over there in France, where he had been a soldier, and where they ate snails? *Escargots*—that was the word. He had never brought himself to eat one. Perhaps the girl had. They could talk about France after they had eaten.

There were crabs in a pool; but one pinched his finger when he picked it up, and he concluded that they were not soft-shelled crabs, such as one ate with *sauce tartare*. It slid down the weeds into the black water, over which the fog seemed to float heavily. Angus shuddered even to look into the veiled water, the horror of the night before was still so quick in him. He hoped she would not refer to it; but, of course, she would.

"What's done is done," he said, as he stood on the sand, determined to go back to the girl.

That was most of his philosophy, and he knew not how to complain.

He was destined, before he returned, to come upon a clam; so he threw away his mussels and dug clams. When he retraced his way through the fog back to the fire, his pockets were full of clams. In one hand he carried an old lard pail that he had discovered in the jetsam along the shore, and

in the other the blue bottle, full of water for her to drink. He smiled in friendliness.

She was sitting up, dazed, as he had been, looking into the embers. For the first time he saw her face entirely. She was pale, but there were the red lips that had tempted him the night before. Thank God, they did not droop!

Her eyebrows, which looked, against her pale skin, as if they might have been penciled in black, were a little drawn, in an expression of bewilderment. The poor child's hat was floating somewhere in the Atlantic, and her hair, unequivocally red, tumbled abundantly about her head and shoulders, warm against the fog. The proportions of her face, even in its trouble, were remarkably harmonious. As he stood looking at her through the haze of fog and smoke and steam, Angus felt that she was reserved, a little willful, and—the Lord bless her!—wholly without rancor.

At last she looked at him, with gray eyes, well set. She was only a trifle startled, but she waited for him to speak.

"Are you warm now?" he began.

"Yes, thank you."

"Dry?"

"Fairly dry, I think."

Putting down his lard pail, he went around the fire, extending the blue bottle.

"What is that?" she asked him, trying to gather her hair.

"Water for you to drink. I thought you might be thirsty. I was."

Failing in an effort to get to her feet, she lay back, with her hands over her forehead. He knelt beside her, anxious, clumsy.

"You're not hurt?"

She shook her head.

"I am thirsty. Give me some water."

Propped against his knee, she drank from the blue bottle, which he held to her lips. She drank slowly, having to breathe between swallows. His arm was about her shoulders, his cheek was nearly touching hers. It gave him a strange emotion; and his heart swelled, too, with admiration for her pluck, with gratitude scarcely definable for the toleration which he so little merited.

When she had drunk, she became conscious of her position, blushed, and drew away from him—from his eyes, perhaps, which too ardently implored her to be merciful. Her own widened a little.

"Are you the man who—"

He answered her question mutely, with a humble nod. Her expression was that of

a person making an effort to remember; and to Angus this was unpleasant, keeping him in suspense as to what her recollection might excite. Better have done with that, quick!

"You remember—I bothered you. I pushed you against the railing, and you—"

"There was a gate of some sort in that railing. I am never likely to forget how I felt when it gave way!" She paused, to look at him with a directness steadied by intent. "Up to that point I remember—very distinctly."

Angus swallowed. If he nevertheless returned her look without flinching, it was because he felt that if she saw him flinch, she could only think him mean-spirited; in which case she would certainly be afraid of him.

"After that," he said, "we were in the sea, I do not know how long; and after that, we were here."

"You got me here?"

"I think we just drifted. Now, please, rest a little longer. I've got something for breakfast. I say, do you like clams?"

"No."

She sighed, but not because of the clams, as Angus well knew. Her mind was not at rest. She was trying not to surrender to distrust and anxiety.

He had been kneeling beside her, and now he stood up.

"Last night I was intoxicated," he said. The color came and went in her face. "I'm not, now. Please understand that."

He went over to the fire, whence he called cheerfully to her:

"I'm going to make you some clam broth. It's nice, and it will be hot."

One by one, he dropped the clams into the lard pail. They brought up the level of the water so that it overflowed and sank into the sand. Thereupon he narrated for her the fable of the fox who had to drink out of the crane's jug.

All the time the thought ran in his head:

"She's the loveliest, pluckiest girl I've ever seen. If only she'll let me, I can turn this advantage to a happy ending."

His heart beat high with the hope of an expiation that would count for something more than mere words. He could *do* for her. He was already feeding her; and then, just as the broth was about cooked, the soft solder of the lard pail melted and let the liquor drain away.

It was with a sober face, if not a sad

one, that he invited her to sip what was left of juice in the hot shells, carrying them to her in fingers that shifted gingerly in fear of the heat. He himself ate the boiled clams without enthusiasm. They were, he realized, somewhat tougher than leather; and they so excited his thirst again that no sooner had they thus breakfasted than he limped off to drink up another pool of rain water.

Having slaked his thirst, and dashed water in his face as well, he rose gayly above his unwonted depression.

"Heavens," he thought, "she is wonderful!"

IV

ANGUS returned, humming, through the fog, to find her standing in the mingled mist and smoke, evidently refreshed and stronger. That was splendid of her! She was full of pluck.

She gathered her hair into a braid or twist; and this suggested, unhappily for him, that she was less helpless, less at a loss, less easy to do for, perhaps, than she had first seemed. He took in a little sail.

"We're in an awful mess," he said, uttering the truth more incontrovertibly than he had wished to do.

"How soon can you get me out of it?"

He had had a dear illusion that if they got on well together, it wouldn't be so bad after all. Evidently she had entertained no such idea. She wanted to know exactly where they were. He thought they might be on an island in one of the bays along the coast of Maine, near the mouth of a river, perhaps; for the logs along the beach had evidently escaped from lumber drives.

"But I'm afraid," he concluded, "that until the fog lifts, we can't form any definite notion of where we are."

"Can you get me to shore?"

He looked at her wretchedly; but she had no mercy.

"I believe the fog sometimes hangs for weeks over these islands," she said.

She had given no special stress to the words, but they fell like a heavy reproach upon Angus. He tried to say something, to speak out his sense of guilt. Unable to do it, he turned to rolling more logs into the fire.

She watched him thoughtfully for a minute or so.

"Did you build this fire?" she asked.

"How could you ever light a fire?"

"I had some dry matches in a blue bottle. I don't remember how they got there."

"What a funny thing to have. Oh, you had been drinking!"

Her voice trailed off, and again the color flushed in her face. He bit his lip in silence before her; but when he looked up again, she was calm and serene and smiling, without trace of bitterness.

"Never mind now," she said. "You saved my life. Thank you!"

His eyes must have beamed. He half stretched out his hands toward her. From the frozen hours in the sea, her name swept into his heart, and from his heart to his lips.

"Honorée—"

"I am Mrs. Corliss."

It was as if he had bumped his head against a door ajar. There was, of course, no possibility of saying what he had intended. She was speaking anyhow.

"There must be some way to get word to my husband."

Angus, whose heart was smitten with love for her, and who could not immediately forgive her the bump on his head, coldly declared his inadequacy.

"I couldn't swim anywhere through the fog," he said.

For a moment he felt in himself something of the grandeur of an iceberg adrift. Then, at an opposite extreme, he turned and kicked the charred logs back into the fire.

He left her abruptly, and with no amenity, to wander; but his explorations were as futile as they were aimless. Land as well as sea was hidden in fog.

Back from the shore he came upon an impenetrable thicket of spruce. He gave up trying to explore further. He might easily lose himself in seeking for a trail, and she would then be worse off than ever. He smiled ironically, and to the dripping trees said audibly:

"Damnation!"

When he returned to the fire, she was not there. It was foolish to apprehend that anything serious could have befallen her; but very soon he began to call her name loudly. Presently she drifted into his vision out of the fog.

"I shall have to ask you to help me," she said.

He realized then that she was a little willful. It was in her voice, in the uppishness of her charming head.