

MAROONED ON A SANDBANK

The following is a transcript of an article written by Henry Stewart Rohu contributed to the "Wide World Magazine" May 1909 issue. In it he relates his extraordinary adventure among the uninhabited sandbanks of New Guinea. The story of a modern Robinson Crusoe – a man who, through the duplicity of his partner was left on a tiny sandbank in the Indian Ocean, with his dog and a few cases of provisions. For thirteen long months the poor fellow existed, sustaining life and reason Heaven alone knows how. The narrative of his long-continued ordeal is as graphic as any chapter from Defoe's immortal classic.

MR. HENRY STEWART ROHU, of Bournemouth, the subject of this story, first went to New Guinea, near the coast of which he was to meet with the terrible adventure here narrated, through a meeting with Colonel S - - -, who was taking over the administration of the country. Rohu, who is a member of the Linnaean Society, was appointed collector and naturalist to this gentleman

Towards the end of the year 1895 Rohu found himself completely stranded at a small village called Mohack, on the banks of the Fly River, his companion having decamped with the boat which contained their joint possessions, including a valuable collection of pearls and skins. To avoid the acceptance of charity and also by way of keeping himself, Rohu became chief assistant to Mr. Cowbing, the storekeeper.

A fatality for joining hands with "wrong 'uns", however – a former associate had also left him in the lurch – seemed to follow in Rohu's footsteps, and he soon got to know and ex-missionary, B - - - by name, whom he met while serving in the store. This man not only proved to be a most despicable inhuman wretch, but the means of ruining his unfortunate partner and nearly bringing about his death.

The partnership proved to be unlucky from the commencement. The business on hands was pearl-fishing, and boys were employed for diving, but the unsettled weather militated against their being able to anchor and fish on the most likely spots. Troubles of every kind were of daily occurrence, and it was finally decided that the partnership should shortly be ended. In an evil hour, however, they came upon a man who advised them to try for the turtle shell – just then fetching from fourteen to eighteen shillings a pound – on a sandbank about a hundred miles south-west of New Guinea, at the southern approach of the Gulf of Papua from Torres Straits. Fitting out a boat with a crew of four boys, provisions, cartridges, etc., Rohu and B ---- sailed for this desolate spot, which is logged in the charts as "Bramble Key".

From this point onwards Mr. Rohu will relate his own story:-

The island lies very low – only about four and a half feet above sea-level at high water – and consequently cannot be seen at any great distance. As this coast is known to be most dangerous, vessels of all sorts give it a wide berth. Nevertheless, the place has been the scene of scores of wrecks, as we found on examining it the day after our arrival. Little did I think as we wandered round, that it would be thirteen long months, before I again set eyes on a fellow-creature.

The place looked very promising for our enterprise, for the sandbank – it was nothing more – seemed to be the abode of countless turtles. The wreckage with which the shore was covered appeared to swarm with all kinds of shell-fish; in fact, we came to the conclusion that we had found an Eldorado! For some hours B -- - and I discussed the situation, building castles in the air, which, alas! had more flimsy foundations, so far as I was concerned, than usual. B ---- eventually refused point blank to remain, giving as his excuse the malaria to which he was subject, and which he said would inevitably carry him off if he stopped. All my arguments proved ineffectual, and it was finally arranged that I should remain on the island with two of the boys, whilst he went back to the town on the river from which we had started, returning in the course of five or six weeks with a larger raft and more supplies.

A quantity of provisions was landed from the boat, consisting of a bag of flour, half a bag of rice and some coffee, altogether enough for six weeks. Amongst other things were an axe, chisel, bucket, an old sail, two empty cases, and a few small tools, not forgetting my gun and about fifty cartridges. Then after a casual "So-long"! from B ----, the boat was shoved out into deep water, leaving me, my dog Crib, and two boys behind.

As soon as they realised that they were to be left with me on that desolate sandbank the two natives, without a word of warning, dashed off through the shallow water, wading out as far as they could and then swimming for all they were worth after the boat. Meanwhile B ---- and his two boys were busy hoisting the sail, and were as yet hardly beyond hailing distance. The breeze was so slight as barely to fill the canvas, and the progress was consequently so slow that the two swimmers were not long in catching her up. I watched them being hauled aboard one after the other, and waited with hardly a qualm for B ---- to put about to return to me and once more dump them ashore.

But was I dreaming, or what was the meaning of his action? The boys were on board, and the freshening wind drove the boat gently forward, but she showed no sign of putting about. Instead, while I ran wildly up and down, hardly able to believe my eye, she headed for the north and gradually became smaller to my view until she vanished from sight.

For some moments my bewildered brain refused to act – I was unable to think. Then gradually I began to suspect what had happened – my partner had deliberately left me behind! But was it possible that a man could be capable of such cold-blooded cruelty as to maroon another to die miserably like a rat in a trap on an uninhabited island, set in the midst of a dangerous sea where never a sail was seen. Surely not, I told myself, striving desperately to extract some comfort from the situation. Assuredly, after realising the boat and contents, which were worth at least seven hundred pounds, B --- would contrive to send for me. Buoyed up with this cheerful view, I settled down to make the best of things, during the six weeks I fondly believed would form the sum total of my enforced sojourn on the island.

As I look back on that awful time I shudder even now. How I managed to live through the interminable days and weeks and preserve my reason can only be explained by the fact that I must have had a constitution of iron and an adaptability to environment that was remarkable.

The first thing I turned my hand to was the construction of a shelter in the shape of a ridge-pole tent which I improvised out of the sail-cloth. Of the two empty cases I made a table and chair. Slings my hammock to the strongest parts, my shanty was complete.

My dog was vastly interested in everything. Poor old Crib! The mere fact of having something living with me, something I could speak to, greatly helped and comforted me. At times he was rather a trial, for he was excessively fond of turtle eggs. When he came across any exposed he speedily devoured them, and this often caused a shortage. But we had to give and take between us, and I am sure that it was his companionship that kept me alive and enabled me to retain my reason during the terrible months that were in store for me.

The first few days seemed to slip away in a sort of dream. I had not, I suppose, recovered from the shock of my partner's desertion. I tried to convince myself again and again that he would come or send for me, forcing myself to hope for the best; but always, at the back of my mind, was the haunting dread that he had marooned me intentionally and would never return.

The terrible wrecks which must have happened on the sandbank appalled me. One in particular held me almost spellbound in contemplation of the loss of life that must have occurred. The hull of this ill-fated vessel was completely buried in the sand at a point where the water was deep, but her bows were high in the air. Judging from her probable length and build, she must have been a vessel of nearly three thousand tons.

At first the question of food and drink did not trouble me much, but nevertheless I determined to be very careful of my stock of provision.

Six weeks passed – two months – and still, though I searched the horizon almost hourly, there was no sign of a vessel coming to take me off. My last faint hopes died away, and at last I realised the dreadful truth. My suspicions were correct. B---- had deliberately abandoned me to my fate, no doubt thinking it an excellent opportunity of getting rid of me.

Desperate though my position was, I made up my mind not to give way. I erected a flag-staff on a high point, with a tattered square of sailcloth for a flag, and daily I scanned the waters for signs of succour. But all in vain.

During the first few weeks of my captivity I found that turtles of all sizes abounded, some of them reaching a weight of several hundreds of pounds, and these I had the greatest difficulty in capturing. Eventually, however, I learnt the knack of turning them over on their backs. While the supply of turtles was plentiful I had ample food, but later on I found out that they only used the island at certain times of the year, probably for the purpose of laying their eggs. There is no food more nourishing or dainty than turtle eggs, and as long as they lasted I had no reason to complain.

The finding of turtles' eggs is by no means easy, as they are deposited in holes scraped out by the female and then covered over with sand in the most dextrous fashion. When the young are hatched by the heat of the sun they dig themselves out and make straight for the water. Many a time have I watched a female creeping from the water's edge and waited for hours until she had laid, this being much the easiest way of procuring them.

When, as the weeks slipped by, I found that the turtles were leaving me, I cured large quantities of their meat by threading portions on a stick and drying them in the sun. It was well I did so for, during the latter part of my existence in that solitary spot, I was often in such a condition of weakness and prostration that I had not even sufficient strength to look for food.

By way of occupation – although I had practically no hope of realising the results of my labour – I collected large quantities of shell. Here again I was the victim of the bitter irony of fate. I was the possessor of tons of stuff that had allured me for its value, and a rich man, could I have sold it. Yet I would have cheerfully have given it all for the sight of a sail or the sound of a human voice.

One of the first things I had done after landing on the island was to search for water which, fortunately, I came across in a fair sized pool, lying just underneath the highest point of the bank. On examination I came to the conclusion that it was a natural spring, but ere many weeks had passed I was to be rudely disillusioned on this point. The pool had undoubtedly been dug and fashioned by the hand of man, and many a time when gazing down into the water a tumult of fancy whirled through my mind. I saw before me the picture of the stranded vessel which had so fascinated me; I saw her strike the rocks which stretched out from the island; saw the passengers and crew washed overboard and driven ashore. Hurling forward on the beach, they struggled desperately for footing only to be dragged back irresistibly by the receding waves, until many were drowned or battered to pieces. Then in my mind's eye I beheld the survivors cluster round the peak of the island and, after realising their position, set to in frantic haste to discover a water supply and conserve its precious store.

I wondered if their lives were eventually saved and for what length of time they were prisoners in my little kingdom. Hardly a day passed that, in my ceaseless perambulations round the island, I did not search intently for human remains or some sign of human occupancy; but with the exception of the excavation for water, which I was certain was the work of men's hands, no evidence of previous habitation did I discover.

Only once was the island visited by a storm of any magnitude. The sky grew dark as night, the wind blew with terrific force and the sea rose in fury till presently, to my horror, great roaring waves were sweeping clean over it from north to south. Beside the wetting and discomfort, however, I suffered little loss as, by means of frequent alterations and repairs, my hut was now fairly strong. But, alas! when the tempest had subsided I discovered that the water in my pool was undrinkable and I was faced with the fearful prospect of dying of thirst – the most awful of all deaths! Then it struck me that if the water came from a natural spring, as I believed, the well would soon refill itself if I cleared it out. Seizing a bucket I baled and baled without ceasing until only a few inches of fluid remained. Then, all of a sudden I saw the remaining water disappearing through a hole in the bottom! It was no natural spring, but a mere cistern to hold rain-water, and now I had broken the puddling.

At this second stroke of misfortune my senses fairly reeled, and I felt that unless I could calm myself I should quickly become a lunatic. Luckily a few quarts of water were still left in an old oil drum in the hut, which I had filled merely as a matter of convenience, and by using this sparingly, I hoped to hit upon another source of supply before it was exhausted.

Suddenly a thought occurred to me – why not make a condenser? No sooner had this idea flashed through my mind than I set to work. I took a good many hours to contrive a funnel out of a sheet of copper wrenched from the wreckage, but I managed it at last. Then, with a saucepan as my boiler, and my billy as a receptacle, I completed the apparatus. To my intense joy I found it was effectual, though extremely slow but, still, time was nothing to me and here was a certain method of obtaining fresh water. Hope, that rose and fell like the mercury in a glass, was once more on the ascendant.

I made an excellent change in my daily menu by catching and cooking the beche-de-mer, a sea slug; but these also had their seasons of scarcity, and I never ceased to replenish my dried-meat store whenever I could.

I noticed fish of many kinds swimming around, breaking the surface now and again, and I obtained an extraordinary amount of pleasure from watching them. For some time I could devise no means of catching them, but at last I hit upon a plan of making a line out of the fibre of coconuts, and a hook of a sharp nail. The first part of this scheme was tedious beyond description, but I finally succeeded in making a line fifteen feet long and strong enough to hold anything I expected to catch. The fish took greedily and, in a day or two, I had caught so many that I had to cure and salt them before catching any more.

An incident now happened that once more stirred the springs of hope and sent my blood coursing swiftly through my veins. There was hardly a moment of my life, when awake, that I did not scan the horizon in all directions and many times I saw the masts, and sometimes even part of the hull, of vessels in the far distance but never had one come near enough to make me have even a fluttering hope that my flag had been seen.

One evening, about an hour before sundown, I sighted a vessel, apparently heading straight for the island. It was too dark to make her out, but it was clear to me that if she continued on her course she would inevitably be wrecked. If I lighted a fire it would give her warning and she would change her course, but then she might not think it worth while to ascertain who had started the beacon light and would sail away, leaving me in greater despair than ever.

For some minutes I hesitated in the grip of sore temptation. Oh, for the voice of a human being, for the grip of a white man's hand! And how delicious the provisions which would be handed for the ship-wrecked crew to taste! At last, flinging away all selfish thoughts, I rushed for coal and spars. I may mention here that hundreds of tons of coal were lying about the beach, evidently from the ships that had been broken up. Before long I had a blazing fire which I kept going for some hours and, in the morning, not a sign of the ship was to be seen. It is hard to describe the state of my feelings. However, I soothed the dreadful turmoil of my brain by dwelling on the fact that I had perhaps saved a good many lives.

I afterwards ascertained that the vessel belonged to Messrs. Burns, Philp and Co., of Sydney and traded between Deleana, Port Moresby and Yural Island, called at Port Moresby for sandal wood. The captain reported, on arriving in port, that somebody on an island had lit a fire just in time to save his ship from destruction, as he had been carried clear out of his course by the strong current and, at the moment of sighting, the beacon was holding dead on – as he afterwards discovered – to the rocks which run out about a mile from Bramble Key.

On the whole, after my excitement had abated, I felt more contented; I had at least done the right thing. It would have been wrong to endanger the lives of many for the possibility of saving one.

For many weeks now I had been constructing a rope from the fibre, and I was so afraid of losing any that I abandoned my fishing. This rope, I thought, would be my salvation. I was going to make a raft! I had managed, by dint of strenuous labour, to secure some spars and wreckage and hew the pieces into equal

lengths. The nails I found were all rusty and rotten, so I had to rely on my rope. At last my work was completed, and each day, as I inspected and admired my craft, hope grew stronger in my breast. It was a cumbrous-looking object, and its appearance very primitive. Often, as I finished operations on it for the day, I would say to my dog, "Crib, old man, we are going for a sail. Whatever happens, we will die together, for if I die first you will be left to linger and perish of thirst". So, cheering ourselves, we waited for a favourable wind from the south. About ten days after I had completed the raft and fitted it out with a mast and a piece of bamboo to act as a yard, I managed, by gradually moving it with my wooden spar, to float it. Although a trifle lop-sided, it rode the waves buoyantly. A good strong breeze was blowing from the south, and later I bitterly repented my folly in not embarking at once, but I thought I would spend one more night on shore and so have daylight to start. I had driven a stake firmly into the rock-strewn sand, as close to where the raft was floating as I could, and now I moored my odd craft and tied it with the remains of the fibre rope. Then, feeling the keenest joy at the thought that this was my last night of captivity, I turned in. I was up before dawn broke and, after having breakfasted on my usual fare of dried turtle, I carried the first consignment of my belongings to where I had tethered the boat.

But my raft had vanished! I carried my view from the stake out to sea, instinctively following the track I expected she would take had she broken loose. But my eye pitched on nothing. My last hope had gone beyond recall!

At this crowning blow I threw myself on the sand in helpless despair, and I must have lain there for some hours for, when I pulled myself together, the sun was blazing high in the heavens. I rose to find myself almost a raving lunatic. How I cursed myself in shouts of maniacal laughter! How I seized my poor dog and caressed him with hysterical tears; and, as I write these lines, I remember how I tore round the island, searching, with feverish energy, behind every little rock or mound of scrub that could not have sheltered a child's toy, let alone a great cumbrous raft. I remembered how I had set the bit of sail, ready for the morning, and to this I attribute her loss. She must have broken her rope and sailed away to the north.

It was almost dark before I became aware that the inner man had not been attended to. Fortunately for me, nothing had been put aboard so, with the exception of the cloth used for the sail, my stock of worldly wealth had not decreased.

I have read somewhere that "hope springs eternal in the human breast", and there must be some truth in the saying for, on the following morning I felt strangely buoyant. Two things seemed to me possible – the raft might be blown back again, or she might be picked up by some vessel whose crew would be certain to gather that someone was in dire distress, and thus the drifting raft might yet be the means of rescuing me.

It is difficult to relate in detail the weary monotony of my life as the months went by; it was made up of a round of petty trifles, incessantly tramping the island in search of food or scanning the ocean for sight of a sail. It was very clear to me that, unless I was soon discovered, I should inevitably die for lack of a change of diet. Vegetables were a terrible want. The best edible plant I could find was something resembling the leaf and root of spinach. When I first tried them whole they were tough and unpalatable, so I had to construct a grater by driving holes in a piece of copper plating. I found they caused me great thirst but, nevertheless, I believe they assisted to prevent a complete breakdown in my health.

Life, of which I seemed to have an untiring grip, now seemed to have little value to me and sleep, which up till lately had stood by me, was gradually being replaced by a sort of half-conscious stupor, in which dreams and horrible nightmares held high revels; my nerves must have been shattered by the desperate struggle for existence. My legs swelled from weakness, and it eventually became almost impossible for me to muster sufficient strength to condense the sea-water. The tropical rainstorms that burst over the island always refreshed me, however, and I managed to catch some water by fixing up the remnant of the sailcloth. Often I was obliged to crawl when gathering wood and coal for fires. Even the slight labour of obtaining a light by means of twirling in the hands a pointed stick, resting in the socket of a piece of wood – a trick I learned from the natives in New Guinea – tired me out.

My health was now so bad that I rather looked forward to my death; and, curiously enough, after making up my mind that the final summons was about to be given, I felt strangely happy and contented. As I lay

underneath the remains of my shelter a wonderful peace of mind took the place of evil dreams and half-conscious slumber. I thought of my your and its surroundings; I fancied I could hear my mother's voice as she counselled me to be of good cheer. Waking myself almost forcibly, I pointed a piece of charcoal with the intention of writing my epitaph!

The tablet I fashioned from the side of a small collecting-box that had up to then lain useless and unnoticed. This, as I lay on my side, I smoothed and polished by rubbing it with sand. When I came to write, however, I found I had forgotten the way! Not since I left the store in New Guinea had I even seen a sheet of paper.

Accordingly, like a child at school, I practised writing in the sand with a stick until I could recall the letters. Then with the pointed charcoal, I printed:-

H. ROHU

died 1896 on sandbank.

Please communicate with my mother, 3 Baynar Avenue, Dublin.

This done, I managed to raise myself up and, by means of driving the best of some rotten nails (collected long since), I contrived to fasten the board to the post which formed the stand of my hut. Then I lay down to await the journey to another world. But I was not to go yet. As I settled myself, turning my face towards the sea, it suddenly dawned on me that a vessel had anchored some four hundred yards off and a boat was making for the shore.

The joy and excitement of the discovery were almost too much for me, but I managed to crawl and stumble to the water's edge. Then I collapsed. When I 'came to' I was aboard the British New Guinea Government steamer "Merrie England", commanded by Captain Curtis, with an old acquaintance of mine on board – Sir Francis Winter.

It was twenty four hours before I became coherent enough to tell even my name, much less give details of my sojourn. Captain Curtis told me later that it was by the merest chance that my flag had been seen, for it was only at a certain angle that the piece of sailcloth tied to a stick could be viewed. From rumours spread by the crew of the vessel that had seen my fire, however, extra look-outs were kept and, in due course, my signal was seen.

Eventually I was landed at Port Moresby after some exasperating bother with my faithful friend and companion Crib, who had to be saturated in tobacco juice before being allowed on shore. A month a Port Moresby saw me sound and well again. And so ended my thirteen months enforced residence on Bramble Key.

No such experience as mine, happily, can ever befall another castaway, for all the islands in these lonely seas are now provided with supplies and regularly visited by patrolling vessel

NOTE: BONAVENTURE MARIE ROHU (he is mentioned on the headstone of his son John Vincent Rohu whose grave is in the Church of Ireland graveyard in Malahide) came to England after the disastrous defeat of the Comte d'Artois at Quiberon, Brittany. He was detained there, thus forfeiting extensive property in France. He subsequently married an English lady – Jane Searl of Plymouth – and had 3 boys and 2 girls. One of these sons was John Vincent who joined the British Navy. He subsequently was engaged in the Revenue Service at Donegal, Ireland. In 1848 he received a request to go over and live on the French property as Colonel Jean Rohu (his uncle) had died. He could not leave Ireland at that time but later took the opportunity to visit Pluharnel and Carnac to claim his father's property. He was offered one half which would bring in an annual income of about £20,000 per annum, provided that he became a Roman Catholic. Passionately loyal to the Reformed Faith he firmly answered "no, if France was a lump of gold, and you were to lay it at my feet, I would not turn my religion". The Crimea War saw him engaged in the Baltic and the Black Sea. 3 medals and two bars were the reward of his services here. He married Mary Anne Collicott of Devonport and die in Dublin in his 80th year. They had twelve children, seven sons and two daughters surviving into adulthood.. One of these sons was Henry Stewart who was marooned on a desert island and termed as 'Robinson Crusoe 2' Another son (brother of Henry Stewart) was Alfred – father of Charles Lindsay Rohu and grandfather of Roy Lindsay Clifford Rohu.