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*Strange Adventures on a Coral Isle That
Slid Into the Ocean One Night*

LITTLE ISLAND

By H. THOMPSON RICH

Author of "The Crimson Crucifix"

"BIG JEFF" RAWSON came to Little Island in the blackness of a furious night, when the rotten bark *Cordova*, bound out of San Francisco to Valparaiso with a cargo of lumber, picked up a gale in the South Pacific and flung herself to death on a shelf of volcanic rock. Captain and crew shared the fate of their ship, but Jeff toiled through the surf to shore.

All night he lay on the beach, just above where the waves roared, with the moan of a storm-flogged forest in his ears, mingled with the intermittent crash of heavy thunder; in his eyes, even with the lids down, the livid flare of forked tongues of tropical lightning.

Toward morning he slept, till the incoming tide sent a swift, venomous eddy of spume snapping at his feet. Chilled afresh by the sudden contact, he awoke and crawled painfully a little farther up the sand, and again slept. But again the tide found him, as an unusually high comber dashed itself almost upon him, wetting him thoroughly once more. Shivering with cold he staggered to his feet and ran from the hungry sea, sinking down in sheer exhaustion, far up the beach.

When next he awoke it was night again. His head spun dizzily. The whole island seemed to be swaying, swaying sickeningly. The storm had passed and a bright half-moon hung in the sky, amid a myriad stars. But

neither moon nor stars seemed fixed, gyrating grotesquely, describing unaccountable arcs—while a thin, dark line of horizon rose and fell obliquely. Jeff shut his eyes. But still he seemed to feel the swaying. Then he smiled and the island became a dream. He was on board the *Cordova* again. The shipwreck, the desperate battle with the surf, the fever, the thirst, the delirium—it was all a dream. When morning came it would all be right.

But when morning came and a hot sun burned down upon him, he awoke to the grim reality of his plight. He felt the hard sand under him, felt his stiff, aching body, and knew that after all it was somehow strangely real. His face burned and his throat was salt and dry. He must have taken in considerable sea water.

He had no hunger, but his thirst had become intolerable. So he rose unsteadily and set off up the beach to the forest that spread before his dizzy eyes like a vast green curtain, mercifully cool and beckoning irresistibly.

Some two or three hundred yards in he came upon a well-beaten path running through the hip-high undergrowth. Scarcely thinking at the time that this was an almost unmistakable indication of human habitation, he staggered along it till it terminated in an irregular clearing. On the far side a little spring dripped deliciously inviting water into a tiny pool formed of mossy rocks.

JEFF was about to make the few remaining steps and bury his burning face in that God-given pool and drink—drink endlessly—when of a sudden he beheld a sight that caused him to gasp with wonder. The undergrowth parted beyond the spring and a girl emerged, carrying in her arms a large jug of sun-baked clay. She was dressed in a skirt of brown serge, much patched and mended, and a waist of white linen, hand-made. Her hair, which was brown, and hung free, was caught half-way down with a makeshift clasp. Her eyes were purely, deeply blue. Her legs were bare. She appeared to be in her early twenties, a white girl—probably from the States, Jeff surmised as he gazed at her.

How she came to be there did not matter, for the present at least. He must have water, quickly, or die. With this in mind he started forward again, and reaching the pool, fell face forward into it. The water reached his parched throat and he swallowed, swallowed—until again he seemed to be striving in a sea that sought to overwhelm him. Blackness settled down. The ringing in his ears grew fainter. The racking tumult in his head subsided, and a green watery peace came over him. He had drowned, drowned after all, drowned in a pool two feet deep, when he had come safe through a raging surf studded with dagger-sharp rocks. It was the sort of irony that seafaring men come to expect. He smiled.

The girl, observing the smile, was relieved. After all, perhaps he would live. She had lifted his face out of the water and laid him gently down on the green moss by the pool-edge. Kneeling beside him, she loosened his shirt over his chest, so that he might breathe easier. Then, leaving him there, leaving the water-jug she had meant to fill, she raced back along the path she had come.

TEN minutes later she drew up at a clearing several times the size of the one at the pool, in the midst of which was a wooden shack, built out of the odds and ends of some wrecked vessel. At the door stood a slender, dark-haired, sullen youth, awaiting her approach. He had heard her coming.

As she crossed the clearing on a run, she called:

"Quick! Come with me. There's a man down by the pool, half dead of thirst and fever."

Was it a scowl that crossed the boy's handsome, wayward face? At any rate he made no move.

She had now come up to him.

"Well?" she asked, clenching her fists as if she longed to strike him.

A moment more he hesitated, then silently moved off toward the spring, his jaw set. She followed a few steps behind. They left the clearing and turned into the forest.

"I told you a vessel went ashore night before last," she said quietly as they moved along. "We should have circled the beach yesterday, as I suggested."

"If you think I'm going to walk ten miles every time you get a notion there's a ship ashore," he snapped at her without turning around, "you're damned mistaken!"

She blushed.

"You needn't swear, anyway," she remarked.

Then she lapsed silent and they walked along without further words—the boy with his hands deep in his trousers of sailcloth, his head stiffly up; the girl with her bare arms and legs swinging whitely through the green undergrowth, her eyes lowered.

They reached the well, found the man still living, carried him to their shack. There he hovered for many days on that mysterious borderline between life and death, that strange land where day and night, sleeping and waking, space and time, are one.

But through it all there was the saving presence of a bare-legged, bare-armed, blue-eyed girl with a face the gentlest he had ever seen.

SO JEFF RAWSON lived.

Then one morning the dreadful veil of delirium passed and he saw the face clearly. The fever had gone. The pain had left him. But the face remained, that sweet, beautiful, almost childish face.

The girl leaned closer.

"How does 'Big Jeff' feel this morning?" she asked, smiling.

He turned over on his side and regarded her steadfastly.

"I feel as if I could eat," he answered simply. "How did you learn my name?"

"Oh, you told me that and much more in your delirium. You were the mate of the *Cordova*, from San Francisco. You were the only one that didn't drown. You can see the wreck at low tide every day, on the rocks at the west shore of Little Island."

"What island?"

"Little Island; that's this island we're on."

"And why do you call it Little Island?"

"Because it's so tiny—only about three miles across and ten miles around."

Jeff hesitated a moment, then asked the question he most wanted to know of all:

"How'd you get here, you and that chap with you?"

A look of remembered pain and terror came into the girl's clear eyes.

"We were wrecked in my father's yacht, seven months ago," she said quietly. "The *Tasmanus*. Perhaps you've heard of it." Then, sadly: "Father and mother and Clarence's brother were drowned. Clarence and I were able to get to the island. Clarence is my cousin."

"And were the crew drowned too?"

"All but the engineer—and he died two months ago. We buried him under a big palm tree. Since then Clarence and I (did Jeff fancy she shuddered?) have been alone. Fortunately there are no savages on the island, and few dangerous animals, so we have been able to get along. But we couldn't save much from the yacht, for it broke up so soon. One of the small boats drifted ashore practically whole, and the engineer helped us fix it. We've got that, but I don't see what good it is going to do us. Mainland must be a hundred miles away, at least. Perhaps we may *have* to use it some day, though," she finished, growing very serious.

There was something in her tone that made Jeff ask what she meant.

"Little Island may not be here always," she replied.

"What do you mean?"

"Do you remember the night you swam ashore, and the next day and night, while the storm lasted?"

"Not very clearly. I was too dizzy and sick to remember much. The wonder is I did not perish."

The girl smiled a little wanly.

"It wasn't altogether dizziness. That night the storm shook Little Island to its foundations, snapped the coral moorings that hold it to the reef, and lifted it out on to the last shelf of rock. So you see, what you took for dizziness was partially the swaying of the island itself. We are now insecurely wedged between two volcanic mountain tops that show just a bit out of the water. The next storm is very likely to lift us up and out into the deep sea. Then we shall surely sink."

Jeff listened in amazement, and his mind reverted with clarifying vividness to that night when the moon cut arcs across the sky and the horizon heaved and fell like a ship at sea. It was all plain now.

For a while he lay silent, thinking of the extraordinary predicament they were in.

"Have you made any efforts to signal passing ships?" he asked at length.

"Yes," she answered gravely. "We have a distress flag flying from the tallest tree on the island, but not a ship has passed this way since we've been here. You know, it's out of the regular lanes. Ships seem only to come this way when they are blown here by storms. Once we saw smoke on the sky-line, but whatever ship it was must have been too far off to see our signal. Sometime, of course, we'll be rescued, if we can manage to keep alive. But it may be years."

There was a reminiscent look in her eyes as she spoke. She was thinking of the States, of New York and Palm Beach, Rockaway and Newport, the society she had known, her friends, all that old life, so oddly different from this one.

"I suppose most everyone I know will have gotten married by the time I get back," she smiled a little wistfully. "And there'll be all sorts of changes. Just fancy, if we were here for two or three years! All the little girls I left in short dresses would be out—and I'd be a wallflower!"

Jeff laughed at her whimsical mood and chatted with her lightly, trying to brighten her up.

"By the way," he said suddenly, "you haven't told me your name yet."

"It's Janice," she replied.

"And your last name?"

"Hampton."

"Then your father was James Hampton, the manufacturer."

He stated it positively, for he saw now, remembered the name, in connection with the missing *Tasmanus*. James Hampton had been a big man back home. The disappearance of Hampton and his party and yacht had caused quite a flurry, he recalled.

Jeff fell silent. A wall had suddenly risen between them, a wall of

position, of wealth. When next he spoke, he called her Miss Hampton.

"You may call me Janice," she said quietly. "I intend to call you Big Jeff."

It was at this moment that Clarence came into the shack. He heard her words, and a dark frown overspread his too handsome young face.

2

AS TIME went on, Clarence came to hate this "intruder" with a cold, murderous hate. He was too much in Janice's company and she showed all too plainly her preference for him. Whenever they were together his eyes followed them. He became convinced they were more than friendly.

Slowly the poison of hate spread through his blood till his veins, his very brain, seethed with it. It was driving him slowly but surely to the point of mania. Then one night he crept after them to the beach, where they had gone to sit in the moonlight—and he saw them in each other's arms. At that, something in his brain snapped. The frenzy to kill took possession of him. Thereafter all his thoughts revolved around that idea.

How thin is the veneer of civilization! Under it, always, in every society, through every stratum of humanity, the primal savage lurks. A thousand years produce a cultured being—and a few months of reversion to primitive conditions strip the culture from him and leave the aboriginal man.

Day by day Clarence went about his work with growing sullenness, planning how to rid himself of the intruder who had taken what he had intended to have for himself. But his strength was puny beside that of Big Jeff. In a hand-to-hand contest he could not possibly hope to win. How then was he to slay?

Scheme after scheme he weighed and rejected. Then, one morning,

quite by accident, he hit upon what is always the weak slayer's way—the surprize attack. Jeff was seated on a high rock overlooking the sea, fishing with improvised tackle. Clarence saw him from afar, and, the idea born full-fledged, circled around two miles and came up behind him noiselessly.

"There are plenty of fish down there!" he snarled—and pushed him off.

Jeff fell the full sixty feet into the boiling surf before he realized what had happened, and Clarence stood looking down with a burning light in his eyes. But fortunately the land gave off abruptly at that point and the water was deep, with no deadly rocks. So presently, to his dismay and terror, Clarence saw the man he had sought to slay rise up and start swimming through the torturous water to shore with mighty strokes. Fascinated with dread of the aftermath, he watched till Jeff had regained safety; then, with fearful fright clutching inside him, he turned and dashed into the forest.

Jeff dried his clothes in the sun, smiling a grim, unpleasant smile. But when he went back to Janice that noon he made no mention of the incident.

That night Clarence did not show up. Janice became alarmed and begged Jeff to go out and make a search. Still noncommittal, Jeff did so. But no trace of Clarence was to be found.

For three days the mystery continued. Janice gave her cousin up for lost and was greatly grieved.

Then, on the fourth morning, purposefully lying in wait at the spring, Jeff trapped him as he came to drink.

"You fool!" he cried, snatching him by the arm in a steely grip. "Did you think this island would be big enough to hide you, if I really wanted to catch you? Return to the shack and say nothing. Janice doesn't know."

Clarence stood there shaking in terror, scarcely believing what he heard. He was speechless.

"Go back," reiterated Jeff. "But I warn you, keep clear of me in the future—or I'll break your woman's back with my two hands!"

Clarence shuddered, and with thanksgiving slouched off. Jeff stood gazing after him. A look of pity and disgust slowly came to his hard, tanned face.

3

BIG JEFF left Little Island two months later in the blackness of as furious a night as the night he came—when another such gale as had piled the *Tasmanus* and the *Cordova* on the vicious reef swept up out of the south.

The three of them were huddled in the little shack. Outside the wind roared and great sheets of rain whipped through the sky, cut by long, blinding forks of lightning. The thunder, like the cannonading of a great battle, was almost incessant. In the interims, from the forest came the moan of tortured trees. An ominous odor pervaded the air, a salt dankness mingled with something burnt and something very earthy and terrible.

They sat silent, tense, waiting—Clarence in a corner sullen and alone, and Jeff and Janice together. Every instant it seemed as if the fury of the tempest must lift their puny shack from about them and carry it away. Or worse—what they feared—the island itself— . . .

Then it happened. Slowly the earth under them quivered and shook. Then, taking on an irregular swaying motion, it rose and fell sickeningly, with an occasional unsteady lurch.

"You see," whispered Janice, "it is as I told you. Only the reef is holding us. If we are lifted over that last line—"

Even as she spoke the ground heaved up at a grotesque angle and they were all spilled upon the floor of the shack. The lamp fell from its shelf and shattered. They were plunged in dizzy, swaying darkness. But the gigantic roller that had passed under them, under the island, failed to dislodge them, and presently they settled back upon the reef with a dull crash of splintering coral. From the forest came the sound of falling trees knocking against one another.

In the inky blackness there, all three of them realized that the hour they had dreaded was at hand. The lightning flared and the thunder crashed with increased violence. Then, between flashes, there sounded a scramble of feet, followed by the sudden opening and shutting of the door. One of them had gone.

The next lightning flash told which one. Only Jeff and Janice remained.

Clutching his arm, Janice whispered, "Why do you suppose he left?"

"God knows," muttered Jeff, "unless—"

He did not allow himself to finish, and a moment later another giant roller, passing under the island and lifting it dizzily up, carrying it breathlessly forward, removed all thought of conjecture from his mind. Then again, after a moment of dead silence, came that splintering, rending crash, as the whole island settled back upon the reef.

JEFF felt for Janice in the darkness and put his arm steadily about her.

"We must get out of here," he cried.

"The boat!" breathed Janice, as they made their way to the door. "The little boat down by the beach! Oh, if we can only find Clarence!"

A bitter smile came across Jeff's face, but of course in the dark Janice could not see it, and there was no re-

vealing flash of lightning at that moment.

He grasped Janice more tightly, bent his head, opened the door—and they passed out into that frantic night. Stung and lashed by wind and rain carrying bits of sand and all manner of loose chaff and forest wreckage, they made their way stumbly forward. A ten minute battle brought them to the beach. Then they paused, Janice aghast, Jeff smiling grimly.

The boat was not there.

"It must have been carried away," she sighed, her last hope vanishing.

But Jeff had seen the human foot-prints there. He said nothing to Janice, but led her away.

They started back to the shack, to face their fate. But they were destined never to reach there. On the way back along the winding path through the forest, the final chapter in the history of Little Island was written.

They had traversed about one-half the distance—when without warning a titanic roller swept under the island, lifted it high over the outer reef and deposited it upon the tossing breast of the deep Pacific. It floated there a moment, aghast at its own fate. Then, careening loggily, with a majestic calm it proceeded to tilt up on end and slide into the depths, much as some giant liner that has received a torpedo in its entrails.

Jeff and Janice, racing along the narrow little path, paused when they felt under their feet the motion of doom, and stood there. Both were stoical, but Janice could not altogether check the tremor of fear that swept over her.

"Jeff," she sobbed, clutching him tightly, "we're going to die. I suppose. But oh, I don't want to die! I so want to live!—for—for, Jeff. I must tell you something—how very, truly much I love you—and that it has been—everything, all my dreams,

this little time with you here on this tiny island."

She was crying now, softly and brokenly. Jeff felt a sudden panic of terrible tenderness surge through him. Here was the woman his cynical heart had long told him he would never find, in those dead years before the sea had become his *Lethe*—the *one* woman of all. And he was not to have her, except in death! Again there came to his lips that strange, ironical smile of the seafaring man.

Suddenly the water was about them and they were fighting in a tangle of plants and trees and serpents—hideous things that writhed among them but did not sting, more terrified even than they, instinctively thinking the one primal thought, salvation.

Choking, gasping, stunned, blinded, somehow Jeff managed to keep Janice beside him. And then, as suddenly as it had begun, it ended—and Little Island was no more.

Jeff found himself swimming in a morass of forest ruffraff, using only one arm, bearing up the now unconscious Janice with the other. He did not know whether she lived or not, but he clung to her desperately. Once he grasped and hurled from her a huge snake that had crawled upon her to save itself.

Then, when the first ferment of the waters above the sunken island had subsided, he looked about for something to cling to, in that inherent will to fight to the end which is one of

the wonders of mankind. And presently his search was rewarded. A giant palm came drifting by. He caught it as it rose on a mountain-high billow and lifted Janice upon it. Swimming beside it, he held her there.

Presently her eyes opened, and Jeff, seeing she lived, was warmed through and through with a mighty happiness. He silently vowed he would play this game with fate till fate sat beaten.

Other trees and pieces of trees came drifting by, and before morning Jeff, by an almost superhuman exertion of his great strength, had managed to interlace four or five of them into a makeshift raft, binding them with ropelike strips of bark, so that, when the sun rose, they rose, insecurely, on the subsided swells of a calming ocean.

And there to the west, well within view, was an oncoming ship.

Huddled close together on their shaky raft, Jeff and Janice looked into each other's eyes. Then they laughed and their lips met. But it was a prayer.

A HALF HOUR later, when they had been picked up and stood upon the deck of the rescuing steamer (it was the *Rochester*, bound for New Orleans) Jeff pointed off across the water toward the direction where Little Island had been. Janice looked.

On the rolling surface of the so-called Pacific rode a small boat, bottom-side up.

