

from 'Turtle Dreams'

I had always suspected that sailing at night, blind, so near this land was to gamble on our destruction. I was amazed at the stupidity of it – risking all. He was not stupid. Nor someone who did not value the life of even his most menial crewman. He was not a man to knowingly take us into mortal peril. Since finding this land his resolve had hardened and his determination to know it, every possible inch of it was all consuming. He was starting to take greater risks, and this night-sailing was foolhardy and dangerous.

However, he was not a man to argue with. He was a most peculiar man, quite unlike any I knew. My station, my references, the authority given to me by the Society mattered naught to him. To give him his due, he appreciated my enthusiasm and hard work. However, in matters of the ship he was totally answerable to his own judgment, the Admiralty and his maker – in that order.

I believed at any time we could crash into these massive coral reefs; an almost impenetrable fortress with which God guarded this country; and be utterly lost. We should have the ship dashed to pieces on these huge living battlements that rose out of the water on low tide and caused breakers, leagues out to sea. With the ship in pieces our hopes of ever returning would be completely lost, regardless of whether we could scramble into the smaller boats. We would be stranded in his strange land with no way of ever getting home.

The reef was populated with the most astounding array of coral colours, shapes and sizes and fish of seemingly infinite variety.

How peculiar to sail north, in front of the wind, to warmer waters. The weather was also very different particularly now we had moved into tropical waters. Huge storms seemed to stretch the length of the continent, rising out of the ocean to the southeast, not little squalls you could see coming and going. These ran the length of the horizon, and the winds they whipped up! Earlier I had seen three waterspouts torn up out of the sea as if by God's very hand.

The lightening from these storms hewed into the hills as the clouds crossed to the land setting fires as they went. These burned furiously.

I could also see fires the entire length of the land. Lightning could not have started all of them. There were men in this land burning it for purposes of their own.

The Bark continues to plough sluggishly through the water. I have advised the Captain what has slowed our progress; tropical water creatures had made their home on the hull of the ship under the water and it needs to be cleaned to allow a faster passage.

Yet more reason to find what eluded us, a place to beach and clean her. A time when my Swedish companion and I may occupy ourselves in climbing the hills to discover what lies over them or to shoot birds or one of the huge bounding dog-faced creatures.

The night it happened was not extraordinary. It was as any other night had been since the beginning of our journey. Soundings were steady, there was plenty of water underneath and the Captain had gone to bed. We were pulled along by the warm persistent Trade Winds.

There was nothing to suspect that we faced our most perilous night. I was below deck working on a wood duck dissection until after midnight.

Suddenly the ship gave a mighty lurch and scream and a cracking of timbers as we struck rock in full sail. The ship rolled from side to side stuck fast on the reef, wriggling like a beetle on a pin.

The Captain raced out in his nightshirt, immediately barking orders. Water poured into the hold by the barrel. Men rushed around below deck to man the pumps and pump for their dear lives. Not all the pumps were working. It was feared all would be lost. There were no boats ready, those that were had holes and we were twenty leagues from shore at the last reckoning. All men that knew how, or could spare the time to do it, were praying most desperately to God. The Godless were cursing their own bad luck. None blamed the Captain except me. What good was exploration if the explorer and his scientists drowned or were swallowed by the sea or its creatures?

By morning the worst of the holes could clearly be seen and there were four feet of water in the hold. Live coral poked through the timbers. We were stuck hard. With the falling tide the water level in the ship dropped as she settled on the reef.

Every soul knew that if we did not get off with the next high tide we would all be lost. That tide came and went. The ship was held fast. Our worst fears were realised.

The Captain never wavered. He was doing battle with the reef. He ordered anchors attached to the reef, the ship was lightened and those boats that could be floated attempted to haul the ship off the reef. Guns, provisions, ballasts, casks, hoops, oil Jars were all ordered overboard. I feared for my equipment and supplies. At almost the height of the next tide that night the ship raised itself up, free of the reef.

The water poured through the hull as before but the Captain had the Lieutenant prepare a fothering from a sail, and dung from the ship's goat. The fothering was dragged over the side and the Lieutenant dived under the hull dragging it across the breach of the hull. The suction brought it in and sealed the hole, at least enough to stop the flood of water in.

Finally, the pumps gained and our efforts were rewarded.

We cheered til we were hoarse, and then thanked God with all out hearts.
